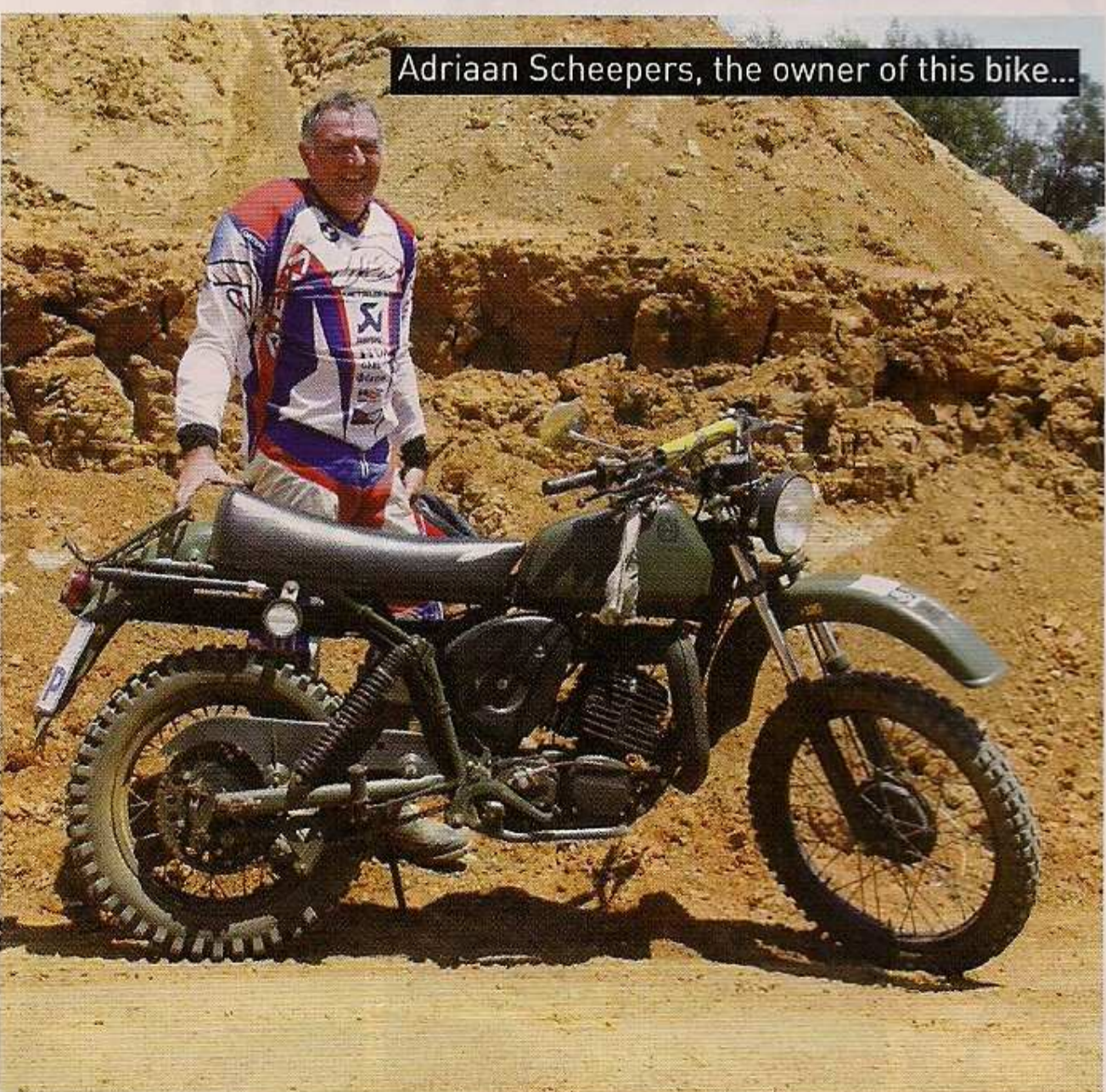




Automatic left hand kick start - 250 cc 2-stroke engine.



Adriaan Scheepers, the owner of this bike...

successfully with steep, loose slopes, the suspension's effectiveness (it didn't bottom out once) and the firmness of the elongated military saddle. Blasting this valuable bike through glutinous mud or cross jagged rocks was out of the question, so we decamped to a dry sand quarry, where I was able to get a feel for the bike over fifteen minutes of careful riding.

Riding position, seat height and braking all felt typical for a dirt bike of its era, but it was immediately apparent that this was no sports bike. Acceleration was muted and by wheeling impossible because the autobox was designed to prevent traction loss by changing up, which makes perfect sense for a fully kitted soldier carrying a similarly equipped passenger. Aviate the front wheel, loose control and you'd very likely have the muzzle of his rifle in a very personal space on touching down- so better stick to keeping both wheels on the ground and moving safely forward, if you want to keep your good service record and anatomy intact! Pointing it at a steep slope and using moderate acceleration soon revealed the autobike's secret weapon, however. In essence it's simply impossible to stall, because for as long as its rider gives it enough gas it simply changes down seamlessly and keeps going, having been designed to climb slopes of up to 45 degrees. A relatively light dry weight of R130kg and a tight turning circle rendered it nicely maneuverable, but the real key to understanding this bike's value came when I rode it across some erosion gullies and washouts.

On a conventional offroader I would have had to decide which gear to use, select it and then balance throttle and clutch, whilst steering the right line and paying attention to how well the rear wheel was gripping the terrain. In essence the MC250MP reduces these tasks to just choosing a line, accelerating on to it and steering, with its autobox taking care of everything else. Not very challenging or exciting maybe, but infinitely less tiring and much easier than riding a normal bike - which is exactly what the Swedish army wanted. A soldier tired out by riding is of little use in combat, while keeping the duration and cost of rider training down with an easy to ride bike makes sound economic sense, so in theory this bike should have been a massive hit with armies world wide. The fact that it was purchased in limited numbers by only Scandinavian and American armed forces was probably due to a number of factors.

Locally its detuned for reliability 250cc engine was judged not powerful enough for Namibia's deep sand, which might also have scored against it in Australia and the drier parts of South America. Cost could also have been a factor as Husqvarnas have never been cheap, but I suspect that geopolitical reality was what actually sunk this interesting military milebuster. During the 1980s the only really significant military conflicts were in Afghanistan, Namibia, Ethiopia and Iran versus Iraq - all fought by regimes which the politically correct Swedes would not have supplied. In Europe the fat NATO order that Husky needed for this bike to sell in really big numbers never materialized, because countries like Italy, Britain, Austria and Germany supported their own manufacturers. For countries without bike makers Japanese trailbikes were freely available and relatively inexpensive, so the MC250 MP's demise became inevitable despite its autobox advantage. Nowadays the Swedish military uses modified KTM enduro bikes and Husqvarna is owned by BMW, the world having moved on from the days of favoring local manufacturers, but that wasn't so thirty years ago.

Riding Adriaan's carefully preserved bike gave me just a hint of what it must have been like to blast across a desert or the wilds of Lesotho on one of its enduro stablemates, so I had to wonder why its effective mechanical autobox wasn't retained and developed by Husqvarna. Talking to a couple of my VMX friends revealed that the much greater power outputs of the big bore enduro bikes created setup and maintenance problems which were never really resolved, so many potential buyers stuck to conventional bikes instead. By 1990 all Huskies also used manual gearboxes, but the concept lived on in a new generation of entry level kiddies automatic dirtbikes, which launched many an offroad career. Nowadays hordes of scooters are equipped with more sophisticated autoboxes, but I doubt that their Chinese and Italian makers have ever thanked the Swedish Army for their pioneering work thirty years ago!

Thanks to Adriaan Scheepers for loaning us the bike and the literature I used to produce this article, Glenn Foley for wielding his camera and Robbie Wicks and David Haines for information about Husqvarna's automatic enduro bikes.

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