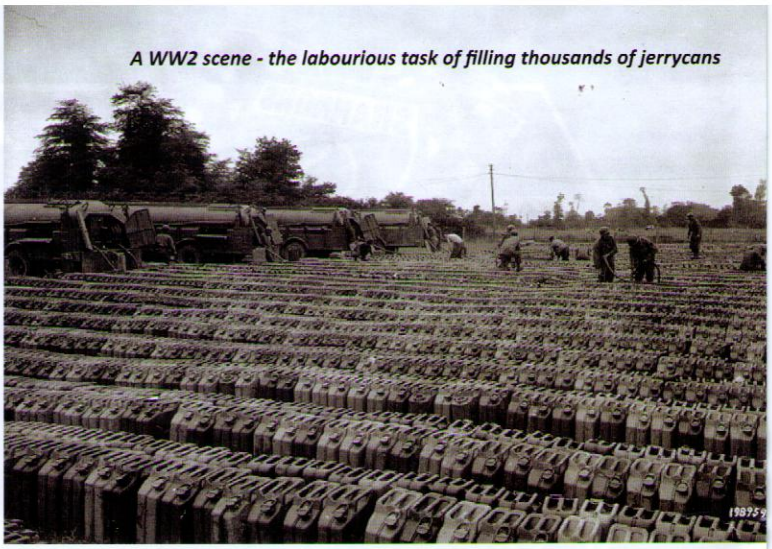
US troops unload jerrycans or jerricans



A WW2 scene - the labourious task of filling thousands of jerrycans

The remarkable history of the jerrycan by Nigel Mason

In the early nineteen-thirties the German army reasoned that if they were going to fight a mechanised war they would need a far better fuel container than any of the current types. Most contemporary fuel cans were made of thin tinplate, frequently merely soldered together. This made them fragile and easily damaged by rough handling. They also often had screw-on caps that could get lost and needed a special spanner to loosen. The cans were often an odd shape that made them hard to stack and awkward to carry, would not pour without sloshing and gurgling, which meant that you usually needed a large funnel or at least a separate spout, and last but not least, if they were filled right up and left in the hot sun the petrol would expand and burst the can.

The Germans came up with a design that was made entirely of steel plate and was essentially pressed in two halves. The halves were welded together and the weld was inside a sunken gutter that protected the weld from damage. The flat sides of the can were stamped with a deep, large X shape to stop the sides from bulging. The bottom corners were well rounded to minimise damage, the can was narrow so that it did not bump the legs when being carried, was tall enough to not require excessive stooping to pick it up and was rectangular in plain view to make them stack side by side efficiently. The cans were designed to hold twenty litres of petrol and to weigh twenty kilograms when full. This made life easier for the loadmasters!

Originally, the insides of the cans were coated with a plastic compound developed for beer containers. The idea was that the cans could be rinsed out and used for water, but this did not prove a success and instead cans for water had a large, white cross painted on each side.

The can has a spout that is designed to allow pouring without the need for a funnel. The cap is fixed on a hinge so that it cannot get lost. The hinge is designed to allow the cap to stay open without being held, thus freeing up both hands to hold the can while pouring. The cap is opened and closed by means of a lever device that can be quickly operated with one hand. The lever enables the cap to be tightly closed.

There are three handles on the top, which at first glance, looks to be two too many. The can is normally carried with the centre handle while the outer handles allow a can to be carried between two people. If two empty cans are placed side by side they can be picked up with one hand by grasping the two adjacent handles. So one man can easily carry four empty cans, two in each hand. If he was a burly type, he could carry four full cans! But the main use of the outer handles is that they make it very easy to pass the cans from hand to hand. So a line of men can set up a 'bucket brigade' and quickly move hundreds of litres of fuel. The handles also make convenient tie-down points.

The handles are made from the same steel as the main body of the can and they are rolled to make a handle of comfortable diameter. Anyone who has carried one of the old four-gallon kerosene tins with the handle seemingly made from coat hanger wire will appreciate that particular design detail!

Behind the handle the top of the can rises to a distinct hump. This creates an air pocket that ensures that the can cannot be filled completely up. Inside the spout is a breather tube that leads into the air space and prevents gurgling when pouring. The air pocket makes a chamber to allow the petrol to expand if left in the hot sun and stops the can from bursting in the heat. The air space also means that when the can is full of petrol and falls into water it will float!

The Germans mass produced the can in secrecy by the thousands and stored them in a guarded hangar at Templehof airport.

In WW2 the British first came across the can in the Norway campaign, quickly saw that it was much superior to their own and collected up all they could find for their own use. British soldiers usually called the Germans 'the jerrys', so the German can quickly became the jerrycan. The British quickly began to mass-produce the jerrycan, essentially identical to the original German design. After a couple of false starts the Americans also started to make it, again to the original design. In preparation for the invasion of Normandy the British made literally millions of jerrycans.

Just after D-Day President Roosevelt went before Congress and said:

> "They were among the first supplies landed on the beaches of France. When the US 1st & 3rd Armies broke out of Normandy it was in these jerricans that the petrol our tanks and lorries needed to keep going was sent forward. Without these cans it would have been impossible for our armies to cut their way across France at a lightning pace which exceeded the German blitz of 1940. Cargo planes and even combat planes were loaded with them & carried them forward to airfields. Lorries of every size, jeeps, armoured cars – everything that rolled on wheels – loaded up with jerricans & rushed them to the front lines. They were tough enough to be dropped off lorries in motion without bursting open. They could even be dropped from the air into rivers & streams, or they could be dumped overside from ships, because they have air pockets at the top which make then float even when filled."

At the end of WW2 it was estimated that about twenty-one million jerrycans were scattered around Europe.

Today the jerrycan is made world-wide (my own was made in Croatia!) and is the standard issue for NATO countries, the Israeli military, many African countries and many of the former Warsaw Pact countries. It is still made essentially to the original design, eighty years later.

So next time you are down at Super-Cheap and you see jerrycans on display and you don't already own one, buy one, even if you don't need it. You can put it in your garage and tell yourself that you own an iconic piece of history. A classic piece of twentieth-century industrial design.

The jerrycan has stuck to its original design