

# PILOT

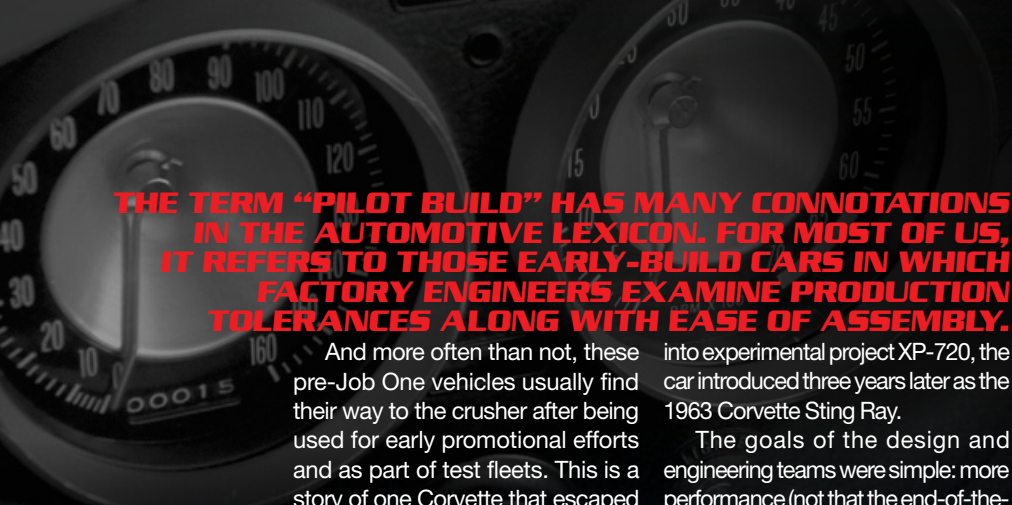
WITH THE INTRODUCTION OF THE 1963 CORVETTE STING RAY, AMERICA'S FAVORITE TWO-SEAT SPORTS CAR FINALLY CAME OF AGE. THE ALL-NEW STING RAY OFFERED A COMBINATION OF PERFORMANCE AND SOPHISTICATION THAT WAS UNSURPASSED, EVEN WHEN COMPARED WITH HIGHER-PRICED CONTEMPORARIES FROM EUROPE.



# BUILD

**RICHARD TRUESDELL** TELLS THE STORY OF THE RAREST OF THESE RARE VEHICLES, A PILOT-BUILD CORVETTE THAT ROLLED DOWN THE ST. LOUIS ASSEMBLY LINE SIDE-BY-SIDE WITH THE LAST OF THE FIRST-GEN 'VETTES. PHOTOGRAPHER **DARIN SCHNABEL** DOCUMENTS ITS UNIQUE PLACE IN CORVETTE'S NEARLY 60-YEAR HISTORY.





**THE TERM “PILOT BUILD” HAS MANY CONNOTATIONS IN THE AUTOMOTIVE LEXICON. FOR MOST OF US, IT REFERS TO THOSE EARLY-BUILD CARS IN WHICH FACTORY ENGINEERS EXAMINE PRODUCTION TOLERANCES ALONG WITH EASE OF ASSEMBLY.**

And more often than not, these pre-Job One vehicles usually find their way to the crusher after being used for early promotional efforts and as part of test fleets. This is a story of one Corvette that escaped such a fate. If you have a great relationship with your banker, or a million-dollar credit line to tap, you could add the car to your personal collection this August.

The story of this particular Corvette begins in the summer of 1959, when the Corvette brain trust – Bill Mitchell, Zora Arkus-Duntov and Larry Shinoda (who penned the car’s now-iconic silhouette) – started thinking about the replacement for the first-generation Corvette. In its basic form, the car was already seven years old.

Numerous concepts had been floated, influenced by Chevy concepts like the CERV-1 (Chevrolet Experimental Research Vehicle), the Q-Corvette and the Stingray Special Racer (note that Stingray was written as one word at that point). All these elements would coalesce

into experimental project XP-720, the car introduced three years later as the 1963 Corvette Sting Ray.

The goals of the design and engineering teams were simple: more performance (not that the end-of-the-run first-generation Corvettes were lacking in this department), combined with more refinement in the ride, handling and interior-accommodation departments. The teams did consider some radical concepts, including a rear-engine design that would piggyback on the design of the revolutionary 1960 Corvair and the inclusion of a rear transaxle for better weight distribution.

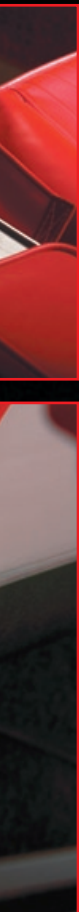
In the end, however, they decided the second-generation Corvette would build upon the strengths of its predecessor. A mid-front engine/transmission layout with an all-new independent rear suspension – all mounted on a unique-to-the-Corvette ladder frame – would allow the driver and lucky passenger to sit lower, between the frame rails rather than atop a space-robbing X-member.

As 1960 progressed, the styling



of the coupe was locked in place by the end of the first quarter. By November, the interior package was all but finalized. It was at this point that the designers started work on the companion convertible, less than 24





months from the first production car.

(In an interesting historical side note, a 2+2 Corvette Sting Ray with a wheelbase stretch of 10 inches was considered, largely in response to Ford's wildly successful four-passenger Thunderbird. The idea was reportedly discarded after Chevy President Jack Gordon got into the backseat of a prototype, and the seat would not release for him to get out. Engineers actually had to remove the

front seat – and there ended the idea of a back seat in the Corvette Sting Ray.)

During the development process over the next 24 months, designers and engineers refined the overall shape, going as far as to evaluate both the convertible and coupe designs in 3/8th scale in the Cal Tech wind tunnel, a first for the Corvette.

While the new ladder frame was heavier and more robust than the frame used on the 1958-1962 Corvettes, the weight increase was offset by a reduction in the thickness of the Corvette's fiberglass body.

Overall, the new coupe weighed a bit less than the

outgoing roadster.

The new coupe was marked by its one-year-only trademark, the controversial split-rear window – a styling device insisted upon by Bill Mitchell and first seen on the 1956 Oldsmobile Golden Rocket Motorama concept car. Arkus-Duntov opposed the styling element on functional grounds. He said it restricted rear visibility. Under Mitchell's influence, it stayed, only to be eliminated for the 1964 model. The reason? It took a beating from the automotive press, and we assume from some owners, for poor rear visibility.

As the summer of 1962 approached, the final 1962 Corvettes were scheduled for production, with much of the final tooling then in



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place. A run of a reported 25 pilot-build cars was scheduled to be built alongside the last of the outgoing 1962 models. These 25 vehicles would be essentially hand built, as the engineers examined potential assembly issues.

While they were close to production-spec, some details, especially fit and finish issues, hadn't yet been finalized. This distinction is what makes them extra special, especially in the eyes of the Corvette faithful, more so for fans of the so-called midyear (1963-'67) 'Vettes.

The car presented here is one of those 25 pilot-build Corvettes, and it will be a featured attraction of this summer's RM Auctions Sports & Classics of Monterey event on August 13-14. This stunning pilot-build 1963 Corvette Sting Ray roadster was one of between eight and 11 pre-production 1963 'Vettes that escaped the crusher's call.

To get a better fix on the unique provenance of this particular Corvette, *Chevy Enthusiast* was fortunate enough to speak with one of the car's previous owners, noted Corvette collector Joe Lukason. In a wide-ranging spring 2010 phone interview with Lukason, he said that of the many cars he's owned since his first Corvette back

in 1962, this is one of two that he truly regrets selling.

One of the car's many distinctive elements is its color. Lukason notes that it's a 1962 not a 1963 color – Roman Red, rather than Riverside Red. And the carpets are a 1962 color as well.

The bodywork, typical of early-build units, is hand-laid fiberglass, according to Lukason, who adds that, especially in places like the doorjambs and under the convertible top, it is of a rougher, almost unfinished texture.

Other fit and finish elements, such as the inner fender liners, also lack the finesse of production-level cars. We discussed the fact that like other early-build 1963 Corvettes, this car has the deeper dish floors to accommodate the power-seat option that never materialized.

As pilot build number 15, the car is one of just four known to still exist. It is equipped with the legendary fuel-injected, 360hp, 327cu small-block V-8 mated to a four-speed manual transmission. Options include power windows, two-bar knock-off wheels and the AM/FM Wonderbar radio, which was state-of-the-art at the time.

Lukason has owned dozens of Corvettes over the years. His 'Vette

affliction began with his first car, a Honduras Maroon-over-Almond-Beige 1962 convertible. He quickly traded it for a Saddle-Tan-over-Almond-Beige 1963 split-window coupe that better fit his six-foot-two-inch frame (he'd hit his head on the '62 when the hardtop was in place). Lukason began collecting Corvettes in earnest after returning from Vietnam in 1967. While he worked for three years at General Motors as a production manager, he has spent most of the years since pursuing various entrepreneurial endeavors, not all that unusual among Corvette enthusiasts.

Lukason actually tried to buy this car in 1984 as it was going into a restoration, but a collector in Illinois snapped it up. Lukason was persistent and kept tabs on the car, finally buying it in 1993 and owning it until about five years ago.

One of the urban legends that has surrounded the car, from the prior owner, is that it was shipped to Europe to serve as the Paris Auto Show car in 1963.

Our thanks also go to our friends at RM Auctions, especially Amy Christie and Donnie Gould, who were instrumental in helping *Chevy Enthusiast* bring this very special Corvette to our pages, and to Darin Schnabel, who provided the stunning photographs. Even though this particular Corvette is far beyond our modest means, we'll certainly be watching its sale in August to a new owner who fully appreciates its spot in Corvette's illustrious history. ■

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