

1989 Mercedes Benz 560SEL

By Peter W. Pandolfi

Whether you are in the car hobby or not, most everyone has owned a vehicle sometime in their lives. In fact, most of us have probably owned several vehicles. Of this list there is sure to be a standout, a favorite vehicle. The reasons are many and varied in earning this status. It could be a car that your parents owned, or one that you met that special someone in, or perhaps it was your first car. Of all the vehicles I have owned, this one ranks as a favorite and not for the reason you might expect. This is the car that saved my life. More on that later.

I have always been drawn to large, luxurious cars. Years earlier I owned a 1987 Mercedes Benz 420SEL and I loved the comfort, handling and, yes, even the prestige of owning such a high end vehicle. Stupidly, in 2004, I traded it in for my new SUV I was going to use to tow my Model A Ford. For years I regretted this decision, then in 2013 an opportunity arose unexpectedly. I had decided to sell my Model A as my physical condition did not allow me to drive it safely and my wife has long since given it up when she got her Corvair. When I purchased the Model A from Tom Mack in Charlotte, NC, he asked that if I were ever to sell the car to give him first chance at it.

Perusing Tom's website, I noticed he had a 1989 Mercedes Benz 560SEL going to auction. I quickly called him and said that if the car did not sell at auction, I would be interested in working a trade deal with the Model A. He immediately said to forget about the auction and we quickly agreed on a deal where he would get the Model A back and I would receive the Mercedes plus some cash. When he came to deliver the Mercedes and pick up the Ford, I could not believe what was now parked in my driveway.

This Mercedes was the absolute top of the line Mercedes of its day and it was all original. This one had only a little over 60,000 miles on the clock, the leather was immaculate and the wood was superb. The big 5.6 liter V-8 looked like it had just rolled out of the factory. Even though this car was going to be my daily driver, I realized that in the next year it would be classified as an antique in Virginia and by AACA. Visions of HPOF status began to loom large in my head, and I thoroughly enjoyed driving it.

As a flagship car for Mercedes, it was loaded with just about everything you could think of in 1989. Along with the V-8 engine, it had an automatic transmission, power disc brakes on all four wheels, air conditioning, power windows and even dual air bags. It had intermittent windshield wipers and washer/wipers on the headlights. The seats, front and back, were covered in leather and were heated. Both front seats were 8-way power adjustable with power adjustable headrests. Being an SEL, this was the long wheel base model boasting a wheelbase of 120 inches. This car even had two sets of horns, one for in the city and one for out in the country. Mechanically, the car needed nothing. It ran great and had the typical tight Mercedes road holding ability. I will confess it was a bit of a gas hog, sucking down a gallon about every 15-16 miles. I was so content with this car that when I compared it to a 1984 Rolls-Royce Silver Spur I was test driving I could detect no discernable difference in the ride and comfort of the two cars.

In the Mercedes, I knew I had found a car I would keep for the rest of my life. Or so I thought. After using the Mercedes daily for about seven months, on a Tuesday night about 9:30 pm, I was given the opportunity to experience one of the other well-known Mercedes features. That was its

safety cage. While returning home from a meeting at my fire station, two illegal aliens with no driver's license ran a stop sign and turned into my lane at high speed. Both people in the other car had been drinking since noon that day and they plowed into me head on. I was going about 50 miles per hour as were they. The resultant collision was at an estimated combined 100 miles per hour. Of course, my air bags deployed and as my car came to a stop, I opened my door and got out of the car. I could not see anything as the impact threw off my glasses. A witness to the accident told me that the people in the other car were running away.

When the police and fire units arrived, I told them what had happened and they immediately began a search using the fire department's thermal imager. I felt okay and even was able to call my wife and tell her what had happened. I was put in an ambulance and taken to the hospital just in case. The other two were found hiding in the grass about 100 yards away and good thing too. They were both so injured that they almost died at the hospital. I guess the adrenalin combined with the alcohol was enough to allow them to run a short distance.

To make a long story short, both arrested and recovered from their injuries. The court convicted them of felony hit-and-run plus felony maiming due to my injuries. After three years in prison, they were deported. I on the other hand had suffered a fractured rib, sternum and right lower leg (tibial plateau).

All things considered, my injuries were not that severe. I could have easily been killed and in a lesser car might have been. My car was totaled and my HPOF dreams vanished. I will never forget that car and sadly I will never be able to replace it even though they are available. It just would not be the same. I guess I had better go buy that Rolls!



Pete's ill-fated dream car, his 1989 Mercedes 560SEL



Somewhere down there lurks a big brute of an overhead cam V8



Seeing this iconic front-end in your rear view mirror leaves no question about what's following you



Disaster strikes. Pete's M-B on right, perp's car on left



Airbag deployment is the only hint that something bad has happened to Pete's precious Mercedes.



The 120 inch wheelbase affords plenty of legroom in this lap of luxury