Detroit and the Diesel

MTU has a long history full of many interesting twists and turns. One of the most interesting phases started in the early 1990s. The Cold War was over, defense budgets were cut and the effects of globalization did not spare the diesel engine industry. MTU engines were being used all over the world, but the company sold most of its engines within Europe. In order to grow, MTU had to extend its international reach and develop new products. One of the key steps to achieve these aims was the start of a collaboration with what was then the Detroit Diesel Corporation in 1994. Together, both companies developed new engines. In addition, Detroit Diesel took over the sales of MTU engines in the US, Mexico and Canada as well as in some South American countries. Today, the company is part of the Tognum Group with its core brand MTU. Detroit Diesel, however, has a long history of its own.

It all began in April of 1937, when General Motors began putting together plans for a new engines division and developing plans for a two-stroke engine. In 1938, exactly 75 years ago, the GM Diesel Division was born and ground was broken on a manufacturing facility in Redford, Michigan. Later that year, the plant began producing the 2-Cycle Series 71 engine family, so-called because each of its one to six in-line cylinders had a displacement of 71 cubic inches (1.16 liters).

At first, the engines were built for GM’s own vehicles, but before long, World War II took center stage and GM Diesel engines were put to use in support of the war effort. The compact, lightweight engines were ideal for combat vehicles, landing craft, road building equipment and standby generators to support the Allied forces. GM Diesel produced 9,000 engines in 1941 and 62,000 engines in 1944. By the end of the war, the company employed 4,300 people, including more than 1,400 women.

Distributors form the backbone

After the war, GM Diesel began expanding into the domestic and international truck markets. Bolstered by their success in war conditions, they also began exploring off-road opportunities for the engines. To do all of this, GM Diesel built a network of independent, authorized distributors and dealers. Many of those distributors still form the backbone of the MTU service network in North America today, providing an unmatched wealth of experience with both legacy Detroit Diesel 2-Cycle products and modern MTU engines.

New 2-Cycle series and the first four-stroke engine

In 1957, GM Diesel introduced the Series 53 engine (8.71 liters per cylinder), and V-configurations of its popular Series 71 engine family. GM Diesel started to gain a reputation for excellence and reliability in the industrial and oil industries. The heavy-duty Series 149 (2.44 liters per cylinder) was introduced in 1974. Shortly afterwards, in 1987, Detroit Diesel released its first four-stroke engine, the Series 60, which was the first production engine in the world to have integrated electronic controls as a standard feature.

Detroit Diesel Corporation goes public

The following year, a joint venture between Penske Corporation and General Motors created an independent company called Detroit Diesel Corporation or DDC for short. Under Roger Penske’s leadership, the company continued to find success and in 1993 went public.

Cooperation with MTU Friedrichshafen

During this time, the company generated two-thirds of its revenue from diesel engines for on-highway applications. In 1994, looking to expand its off-highway engine business with a new partner, the Detroit Diesel Corporation entered an agreement with MTU Friedrichshafen to develop the next generation of large high-speed diesel engines for the off-highway market: the Series 2000 and Series 4000. The cooperation proved to be successful and both companies grew into one. When MTU’s parent company, DaimlerChrysler, bought Detroit Diesel Corporation in 2000, off-highway operations for the two companies were merged into a single, global organization.

Part of Tognum since 2007

The off-highway division of DDC was renamed “MTU Detroit Diesel” and in 2006 it was spun off as its own company, along with the 2-Cycle division. Today, both MTU Friedrichshafen as well as MTU Detroit Diesel are subsidiaries of Tognum AG. In 2005, DaimlerChrysler sold its company shares to an investor who merged all companies and divisions into the Tognum AG which went public in 2007.

Today, the former MTU Detroit Diesel is known as ‘Tognum America’ and is headquartered in Novi, Michigan. Its Onsite Energy operations are based in Mankato, Minnesota. In addition, the company has built a new manufacturing facility in Akron County, South Carolina. This is where Series 2000 and Series 4000 MTU engines are being built. But if you walk the hallways of the headquarters in Novi, you will still see “GM Diesel” and “DDC” and “MTU Detroit Diesel” logos and apparel on the desks of the senior employees – proof of a fascinating history.

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