



Chapter One

THE REDEX TRIALS



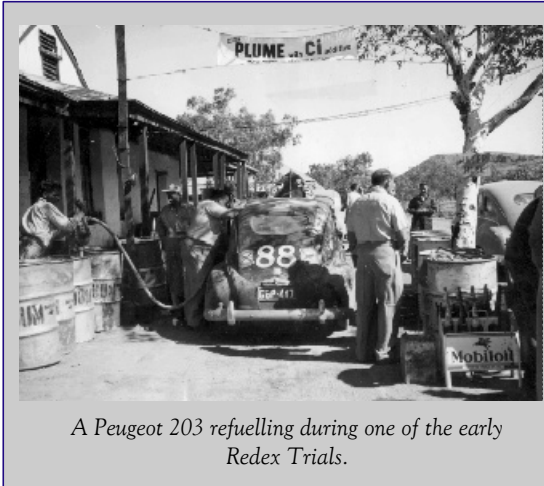
It was September 1953 and Australians were in the grip of Redex Trial fever. The newspapers and radio stations were bringing to a spellbound public terrific tales of daring driving, bush-bashing, high speeds, crashes, hardship and amazing ingenuity as 187 cars tried to conquer the harsh Australian outback.

Aussies all over the country were following blow-by-blow radio and newspaper descriptions of the long-distance reliability trial that had almost stopped the nation. The event was receiving huge media coverage of the kind that's today seen only on rare occasions; such as the opening of an Olympic Games or a World Cup final. Except that the Trial lasted 14 days, not a mere few hours.

A crowd estimated at 50,000 had jammed Driver Avenue outside Sydney Showground on August 30th to see the cars off. A further 150,000 lined the streets through Sydney's northern suburbs to Hornsby to watch them whistle by on the early stages of their hectic motoring adventure.

Great excitement had been generated prior to the Trial because life in Australia was finally returning to normal in these early post-war years. Additionally, the competitors were driving standard cars the public could relate to. Holden and Ford supporters were already locked in the fierce rivalry that continues to this day. Chryslers and Plymouths were entered, as were Jaguars and Humbers, among many other big cars.





A Peugeot 203 refuelling during one of the early Redex Trials.

The general feeling was, then as now, that you needed a big car to conquer a big country, but there was a good number of small cars as well. Austin and Morris models were relatively popular, there was even a contingent of MGs and a Porsche.

But the number-one choice among small-car adherents was a French machine - the Peugeot 203. A modern post-war design

using Peugeot's first monocoque body, the 203 already had a reputation for strength and reliability on rough Australian roads. No fewer than eleven Peugeot 203s were entered; only Holden with 23 of its 48-215 sedans and Ford with 12 Customlines had bigger representations.

Most people thought the small European cars were just there to make up the numbers but, 14 hard-driven days later, they were to be proven wrong.

The first breakdown was a Jaguar Mark VII that died near the Hawkesbury River bridge just 52 kilometres from the start. At that stage the four-cylinder 1.3-litre Peugeots were cruising along comfortably and getting into their stride, their drivers well aware they had more than 10,000 kilometres of hard work ahead.

Wherever the Redex cars went, the competitors were treated like celebrities. Seemingly the entire populations of country towns turned out to witness the daring drivers in their low-flying machines. There were even reports of the police being called in to stop fights between rival garage owners competing for petrol sales and publicity.

Most of the big names in Australian





motorsport were competing, including Peter Antill, Jack Brabham, Lex Davison, Clive Gibson, Jack Jeffery, Stan Jones, Frank Kleinig, David McKay, 'Gelignite' Jack Murray, Eddie Perkins, Tom Sulman and Des West. It's interesting to note that sons and/or grandsons of many of these drivers are carrying on their families' motorsport tradition.

Radio personality Jack Davey was another starter and he gathered crowds wherever his big Ford Customline stopped. He broadcast on local radio stations along the route and was a popular choice with the Movietone News crew who followed the trials and tribulations of the Trial.

No one paid particular attention to an entry crewed by driver Ken Tubman, a local chemist, and his navigator, Victorian John Marshall. The two had previously met over a beer or three in the Maitland golf club. Marshall had already organised the entry of a Peugeot 203 and was looking for an experienced rally driver because his original partner had dropped out. Tubman, aged 37, had plenty of race and rally experience behind him, including racing an MG K3 at Bathurst. He was keen to enter the Trial but admitted to having some doubts about using a small car instead of a traditional Australian six or an American V8. He soon changed his mind.

In turn, it seemed Tubman and Marshall had paid little attention to the event. Their preparation had consisted of giving their 203's engine a valve grind, greasing the suspension, loading up a few spare parts - and finding a place within the car for the beer and wine donated to them by a local publican...

Their Peugeot 203 carried a NSW black-on-yellow registration, plate number AFN-864, and bore Redex Trial number '48' on its flanks.

The 1953 Redex ran mainly on sealed roads for the first two days but the cars ran into real Aussie bush on the third day, after turning left at Townsville in northern Queensland. They struck corrugations, culverts, cattlegrids, washaways, dry creek beds and much else that the vast, hot, harsh continent could throw at them.

The phrase "horror stretch" entered the Australian vocabulary when reporters began sending back details of the ongoing automotive battle with the roads and elements, as well as the



Ken Tubman (left) and John Marshall with their 1953 Redex Trial winning Peugeot 203.



The early Redex Trials were tough, competitive and extremely popular as this series of photographs indicates.

competition between drivers. Reading between the lines it seems there were also harsh words spoken between competitors and officials, and even between drivers and navigators in the same car - nothing has changed over the years!

Things were already tough enough when a misunderstanding dramatically changed the face of the Trial. The Redex sponsored event was intended to be a reliability trial not a race, with one point to be deducted for every 15 seconds a car was late into a control. Thinking ahead, the organisers decided that if any cars were to finish on equal points, their quickest times on certain sections would be used to determine overall placings.

On hearing of this, competitors reasoned that the less time they took on each section the better their chances of winning. The Trial quickly turned into a road race and it was on for young and old. Engines died as they were thrashed beyond endurance, cooling systems boiled, suspensions cried enough, tyres blew, wheels split, hubs stripped, chassis cracked - mechanical mayhem ruled in the Australian bush.

In true-blue Aussie fashion temporary repairs along the way included suspension systems held together with fencing wire and damaged wheels reinforced with mulga wood.

Cars crashed and competitors were taken to hospital, but there were no serious injuries.

Only the toughest cars and drivers kept going - and these included the game little Peugeot 203 carrying



Ken Tubman and John Marshall. They still hadn't lost a point despite the battering their car was taking.

Serious drivers went ever faster, but some of the more sensible souls decided enough was enough. One competitor, after a high-speed run into Mount Isa, said, "Only a madman would continue," and promptly pulled out. Others agreed - and enterprising cabbies at The Isa bought some very well priced cars to use as taxis or spare parts.

Darwin had always doted on people willing to have a go and whose lives were on the eccentric side, so it opened its arms to the Redex field. When the hotel beds were full, private citizens threw open their homes to the competitors, mechanics and ever-growing press contingent. Garages remained open all night as mechanics sweated frantically over repairs.

The 1953 Redex wasn't a true Round Australia Trial because the next leg had the cars heading south, through the centre of the continent, via Tennant Creek, Alice Springs and Kingoonya. One of the Trial favourites, Tom Sulman in his Humber Super Snipe, was fastest when he emerged from the desert and drove south to Adelaide. Amazingly, he hadn't lost a single point to that stage.

Also running a clean sheet as it headed into Adelaide was the Peugeot 203 of Tubman and Marshall. So confident was Tubman of his car that he boasted he was prepared to, "Drive round and round Australia until all the others drop out."

The Peugeot's only problems to that stage had been a blocked fuel filter caused by dirty fuel from a bush petrol station, four flat tyres - and a coming together with a wild pig.

The cars proceeded from Adelaide back to Sydney by way of Melbourne. They travelled mainly on sealed roads and the police were getting uptight about them driving at crazy speeds - so the organisers threw in a special section utilising a stock route between Marulan and Bowral to stop the drivers becoming complacent.

So difficult was the special stage that several cars were swept downstream at a crossing at Paddy's River and became bogged in mud. Most drivers stopped before entering the water and fitted some sort of protection in front of the radiator grille. Tubman elected to keep right on. His Peugeot ploughed through the water but the engine stalled part way. A pull of the starter knob, the engine fired up immediately and the 203 was on the move again. In hindsight, Tubman said this was probably the most crucial moment in his entire run. He and Marshall kept hammering their Peugeot 203 hard but Tubman knew how to get the best out of a car without pushing it beyond its limits. So hard was this section, that the Peugeot 203 with number 48 on the side finally lost some points.

After completing that special section - which can be regarded as a forerunner to the special stages now an integral part of modern rallying - Tubman



drove steadily but speedily back to Sydney where the gruelling Trial finished. Peugeot number 48 was at the front end of the leading group, but the contest had been so tight that the competitors had to wait five hours for an elapsed-time count-back before the results were officially declared.

Tubman and Marshall were announced as the overall winners of the 1953 Redex Reliability Trial.

Driving their tough French Peugeot 203, they had dropped only 19 points in 14 days of competition. That was just one less point than the 20 lost by the second placed British Humber Super Snipe of K. Robinson; Peter Antill in an American Plymouth was third; Lex Davison, in the first Aussie Holden home, came fourth. It was truly a cosmopolitan ending to one of the hardest motoring events the world had ever seen.

The relatively small, four-cylinder Peugeot 203s had proven ultra-tough machines, capable of taking on everything the harsh Australian continent could throw at them. Incredibly, all eleven Peugeots finished, with J. Jeffries' 203 being placed ninth overall.

So delighted were the Peugeot importers – Harden and Johnson Ltd – that they gave Tubman and Marshall a brand new 203 each.

That first Redex Trial has gone down in the annals of automotive history, indeed, into the mythology of Australia, as one of the harshest long-distance motoring events ever run. It had everything: controversy and crashes, heroism and hedonism, mechanical magic and mayhem.

The Peugeot 203 had certainly made its mark, no fewer than 31 (that's right, 31) started in the 1954 Redex Trial, this time on a full Round Australia course. The 203 crewed by G.W. "Bill" Patterson and Harry Russell finished second. A 203 was fifth in the 1955 event. A re-run of the famous Trials was held in 1974, with Ken Tubman taking a narrow overall victory from 'Gelig-nite' Jack Murray (Murray had won the 1954 Redex in a Ford). Tubman also took part in a 30th anniversary publicity re-run in a Peugeot 505 during 1983.

Tubman kept on competing in rallies until he was into his sixties. He passed away in his Maitland home in May 1993. Peugeot's director for the Asia Pacific region, Philip Mead, said in his tribute, "Today's racing and rally drivers could learn a great deal from Ken Tubman. He didn't have the option of turning up the boost on the turbocharger, or having parts flow-in by helicopter. He won through sheer ability and a great understanding of his car and his country."

Most of all, it put Peugeot firmly in front of the Australian motoring public. Yet, by 1953, the name Peugeot had already been around for a long time. In fact, an extremely long time, so let's take a 500-year trip back to the beginning...