



OKA faces uphill battle

WA's OKA Motor Company makes gritty four-wheel drive vehicles for tough conditions. And, says **Lyn Mitchell**, the company has also had to face some hard going.

ASK anyone who's driven an OKA four-wheel-drive and they'll tell you just how good the vehicles are. They were designed specifically to handle Australia's rugged outback terrain — and that's where they excel. But they perform just as well on the bitumen.

The OKA Motor Company has found that developing and producing a unique range of heavy duty off-road vehicles has been relatively easy. The hard part has been securing enough orders to keep the company viable.

Since floating on the Australian stock exchange in December 1994, OKA has faced problems including production delays, technical difficulties and a model change, which have attributed to the company recording serious losses.

For several weeks earlier this year, staff were laid off and the factory lay idle while the directors tried to solve the financial problems.

In April, one of OKA's biggest shareholders, Bondshaw Holdings, advanced the company \$3.5m to pay out debts and provide working capital. Since then, operations have been reviewed and staff numbers reduced to 40. The company is now building vehicles again, but on a far more modest scale.

"We've recently exported \$500,000 worth of vehicles to the United States and Asia. We're also negotiating with a US company to secure an order for 20 cab/chassis vehicles which will be used to house mobile satellite communications equipment," said Mr Walker, OKA's group chief executive officer.

All OKA's models have a standard cab/chassis, but several different modular body styles are available for the vehicles, such as single cab, dual cab, multi cab, van and coach.

Prices range from \$83,000 for a utility to \$123,000 for a 14 seater-bus. Since the company began production in 1992, more than 400 vehicles have been built. Many are in operation with the military, tour operators, police force, fire and ambulance brigades and the mining industry.

Because the vehicles are made from modular components, it takes just four hours to assemble



an OKA from start to finish. In a dust-free room at the company's factory in Bibra Lake, the bell housing, starter motor and other parts are fitted to the four-cylinder, 110hp Perkins turbo diesel engines.

OKA designed and built the box section chassis which is used for all the models. The chassis is coated in rust proofing and painted in the company's paint and spray room.

When dry, the chassis is taken to the production line where it is fitted with long-travel, high-ride suspension, rear springs, power-assisted disc brakes and wheels.

OKA make the body panels, doors, door skins, seats, dashboard and all the interior fittings, except for the steering column and steering wheel. Eighty per cent of the vehicle's components are Australian made.

The engine is mounted in the engine bay between the driver and passenger seats and the electrical wiring is installed. The interior of the cab and the dashboard are fitted and finally the body module is bolted to the cab/chassis.

OKA also recently supplied four specialist vehicles to the Australian Defence Force. The military plan to transport the OKAs to various destinations in C130 aircraft to provide mobile radio communications.

Mr Walker said the company was forced to seek export orders from overseas military groups because in Australia, only 2 per cent of military orders are sourced from WA.

About 80 per cent of OKA's future sales are expected to come from overseas. To avoid the high import tariffs of up to 200 per cent in some countries, the company produces semi or complete vehicle knock-down kits.

Joint ventures are being sought with Malaysia, Africa, Indonesia and Ecuador to assemble the vehicle kits there.

● **TOP:** Mike Walker with an OKA vehicle.
ABOVE: Perth tour company Safari Treks uses OKA vehicles on Pinnacles tours.



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