

INTERVIEW

TEXT: LISA MIKULSKI
PHOTO: CHRISTER EHRLING

“The press test team is nothing short of amazing. Their roles go way beyond doing just a normal job. They wear the hats of engineer, professional driver, technical trainer, logistics manager, presenter, PR rep and diplomat... all in one day”.

JEFF BIRD, Press Test Director EMEA

JEFF BIRD AND HIS PRESS test team play a crucial role in the public relations and communications for Volvo trucks. This is especially true after this last year's launch of a completely new range of products.

He and his staff are busier than ever organising challenging, pleasurable test-drive events for hundreds of international journalists. The behind-the-scenes activity is fraught with challenges and cultural mores and is navigated with passion and a wealth of experience.

With an extremely intensive travel schedule, Bird still finds time to pursue his love of Harley-Davidson motorcycles and embrace his family life. Sitting over coffee, Jeff talks about his passions and his philosophy on and commitment to the quality of Volvo trucks.

Jeff, what does your press test department do?

“The press test department at Volvo Trucks EMEA is a small team of only five people. What we do is demonstrate and show the latest Volvo truck prod-

ucts to the trade press journalists for review and evaluation. The press test department covers every aspect of the business. We are directly involved in truck purchase, maintenance, logistics, driver training, demonstration and performance testing and evaluation.”

This past September, a driving impression event for 180 international journalists was held in Gothenburg, Sweden.

What is a driving impression?

“A driving impression is where we invite journalists to come to a specific location. It could be Gothenburg, or anywhere in Europe, and the journalists test-drive the trucks. Not only do they get to experience the latest technological features, but they also get in-depth seminars and a host of product information. Having this experience gives the journalists a real feel for the product and what the real benefit is to the customer.”





Facts: Jeff Bird

Age: 59

Education: Automotive Technical Engineering

Career: Started as a technical service engineer at a Jaguar/Land-Rover company. 1974-1978 started family transport company. Joined Volvo Trucks in Scotland in 1978, moved to the Warwick, UK, headquarters to run the demonstration department. 2002 moved to Sweden to manage the press test operation for Europe.

Family: Married to Myra Bird.

Leisure: Harley-Davidson motorcycles. Jeff has been riding Harley's for thirty-three years and travelling to explore new countries with his wife.

Hidden talent: Voice-overs and video productions, apparently it is the smooth Scottish voice.

Jeff Bird on...

... ON TEAMWORK

It's not just another word. It's crucial. If we can't work as a team, it's not going to work at all. And that applies not simply to our department, but to the entire organisation. Sweden is a wonderful country for teamwork. There are no heroes. Teamwork is the key to success."

ON BEING AN EXPAT...

... "I had some wonderful advice when I first came to Sweden, 'If something happens and you don't understand why, just remember, it's not right or wrong. It's just different'. If you embrace that and accept it, it can be great fun. That's the way to be an expat."

ON PASSION...

... "If you don't have passion for the job, then you are just another truck manufacturer. Passion and pride makes Volvo something special. The press test team are special people, and I admire their loyalty, stamina and passion immensely."

"We also perform what are called press tests. This is when we take the trucks to various areas in Europe and the journalists test-drive the products on their own turf in their own country. This allows them to make comparisons between all the different brands and then write their articles with their own evaluations and reviews."

What is your role as Press Test Director?

"Quite a few things, actually. My job is to help guide and manage the press test function. I package what we will test for the year, how we will test it, where we will test it and how to meet the requests and demands from the journalists and give them a pleasant driving experience."

"I must say my team is nothing short of amazing.

They perform so many different roles - and, at the same time, their office is the latest Volvo truck rolling through Europe!"

This last year has been a very intense period for your department. Can you tell us about that?

"In less than a twelve-month period, we've renewed the entire range of Volvo trucks and the reaction from journalists has been nothing short of amazing. The innovations which we have built into our new products have taken heavy-truck function and design to a new level."

"While the whole range has a new look, it's not just about branding. It's also about efficiency, design, technological innovation, and sharing those components and innovations across the entire line."

"There are plenty of challenges involved in what we do. No two days are ever the same. The traffic situation changes. The weather pattern can change. The truck product is changing. You're meeting new people. The foundation of the tests is always there, but what happens on any given day can change dramatically."

You liaise with a large number of international journalists. How do you navigate all cultures, languages, and requirements of your network?

"It's actually very easy. I've met most of the journalists many times over the last ten years and when we meet it's not so much as a guest and a host. It's like old friends meeting up again. There is a lot of backslapping going on, but, at the end of the day, they are here for a job and they are here for information."

"Regardless, this all needs to be done in a very open, friendly, and honest way. If you can do that, and have some fun, that makes it a successful activity. As for any language barriers, we always have a translator, so that solves that. But hand signals and smiles work wonders."

Can you share your most memorable story?

"Part of the new press industry is the ability that, at any time, a journalist can whip out his smart phone and do an interview with you. This means that you might have to be ready to do an on-the-spot interview for YouTube, for the web magazine...or for anything really."

"At our new Volvo FH driving impression last September, a Dutch journalist said to me, 'Jeff, would you

mind having a quick discussion with my colleague on the telephone? He's very interested in what we are doing here'."

"Of course, I was happy to do so. But, when I put the phone to my ear, the words I hear are, 'Hey, Jeff, good morning. You are live on Netherlands Dutch Truckers Radio'. It was a live interview and it went out all over Europe."

"In this type of situation, you have to switch immediately into show mode and your passion kicks up to maximum. You explain exactly what you are doing. You explain the benefits. And you give a good representation."

This is the new industry and it makes things very exciting... The ability to respond and adapt instantly. I really like that."

Tell us about the personal things that keep you grounded and fulfilled?

"The job is a big part of my life, but what really keeps me grounded is my wife. We have been married for 37 years and she understands exactly what the job means to me. When I come home, I'm still on a high from the activity. But we enjoy a dinner or night together, and this allows me to land a bit. And she knows when to say 'Let's go for a ride on the Harley'."

"The trouble is that I then get into my other passion which is Harley-Davidson motorcycles and my high goes right back up again. I call this the recharging of my batteries. When you have had a long-term event, it takes a lot out of you. We have to be able to come down, recharge, and then get ready for the next event. And there is always a next event."