



introduced to Tankrod. It's a 20-foot aluminum-framed roadster with shaved Goodyear garbage truck tires with two comfortable seats located behind a small oil refinery. It looked dangerous and expensive, a shambles with headlights. We knew right away that we had to tell him about it. That's what we had to run against. That's what we had to develop a storyten. A few surveys revealed that the car is not the work of Jesse James, Boyd Coddington or even ExxonMobil, but one randy grubb, a glass artist from Grants Pass, Oregon. Grubb informed his wife one day in 2001 that he took exactly one year off from earning \$10,000 in antique-style French paperweights to realize a vision that was forming on his head around the approximately 2,000-pound Continental AV-1790-5B. It is specifically an aluminum air-cooled 1792 cubic-inch V-12, which makes 810 horsepower and 1,590 pounds of torque. Doesn't the bell sound familiar? Uncle Sam ordered thousands of motor moms in a 51-ton M-47 Patton tank, the nation's first line of defense against communists, aliens, Bub, everything that threatened America in the '50s. Initially, gasoline-powered engines were quickly converted to diesel when gasoline turned

out to be low in the presence of explosive projectiles. Inspired by a friend's hot rod and its 1,000-cubic-metre fire engine, Grubb located a stash of gasoline-AV-1790s off the coast of Oregon. He christened the project Blastolene Special - a made-up word sounded cool as he umpered in his garage using scrapy car parts and a greyhound bus transmission. Grubb says: I knew from the start that I would eventually sell the car to Jay Leno. Luckily, I have enough of Jay's money to build another car and make glass. Grubb's guessing he made \$25 an hour in 5,000 hours of work. You count it. We have a tanker car invented by a glass artist owned by a celebrity with a world-famous jaw. Here were the features of a high concept as good as Gigl. We just needed something. Something and explosions. That's when we called the army. Danilo Gannod answered the phone at the U.S. Army National Training Center in Fort Irwin near Barstow, California. Gannod was the first to hear a story involving a big star, a tank-powered M1A1 and a dramatic rivalry between the two. He laughed and asked, Really? Fort Irwin is top gun tank school. During the 28-day rotations, visiting American armored units battle mock battles on a 768,000-acre playing field overseen and managed by a giant supercomputer. Fort Irwin's motto is Death before he's removed. Temperatures can cook up to 130 and plunge below freezing at night. Squirming dust cakes on the tongue and drying saliva. At times, the huge migrations of tarantulas turn into a grey carpet that trembles on the desert floor. If visiting soldiers are lucky, they will quickly die in a hail of simulated depleted uranium. When the army was ready to offer a few M1A1s, the only real problem was that the idea required research into the impact on desert turtles - we called Leno at his Burbank office and made a big pitch. That's how I race with a tank? he asked. Yes. And where is it again? Barstow. How far is it? Not too far. As we wait three hours' drive from Burbank for Leno and his crew, we go on the M1A1, stand out of the hatch, waist-deep in 67.7 tons of steel and Kevlar composite pans - 24 inches thickest. After signing the recruitment registers, incoming army recruits are directed to the service's career paths. The armor video shows the M1 jumping berms, cutting trees, shouting bad guys with hellfire and usually kicking ass. Other videos show the GI nostrder deep in the muck and wiring circuit boards. It's a video that gets you, said Spec. Tyler Thompson, a loader in a tank named Hail Mary spray painted on a barrel. It gets everyone. If you want to drive an M1, slip into a narrow cab right in front of the tower. The seat is almost horizontal, like sitting in a 68-tonne Lamborghini. The controls affect the cod: some pedals, a few clutches and selectors, and a two-part steering stick with motorcycle-like gas. It's all exposed metal and bare boltheads. The turret is not much more luxurious when the commander sits almost on top of the shooter, just to the right of the rudder of the main gun. The loader gets a small chair and the most space, but it must be careful not to reoiling the cannon. Stand in the wrong place, and the term thin fast gets a new meaning. The tank goes almost anywhere you point, the suspension sucks in the ointments, boulders, buildings, almost anything with just a gentle swing and a surprising stealth. Chukka-chukka of engine and rubber padded tracks blow Wind. It's easy to see why dictators collect tanks. We were warned not to expect record speeds from Fort Irwin's high mileage training units. The new, faster M1A2s work with carbon-face in places like Korea and Iraq. Still, under the command of sqt. 1st Class Victor Bridges, hail mary's crew gamely developed launch technology: Stomp the brakes, choose to drive a four-speed Allison automatic transmission, replace the Lycoming-Textron double compressor turbine from a standard 950 rpm idle to its 1,500 rpm tactical idle, and twist the throttle while releasing the gas. Do it right, and Abrams rocks back into his trunk and lungs, at least 10 mph, sparking in 1.4 seconds. The 20 mph mark travels in 6.4 seconds, allowing seismic sensors to begin twitching in L.A. Acceleration slows down considerably at 30 mph (15.5 seconds), and a quarter mile hits only 32.1 seconds at 38.8 mph. It takes about nine hours to drive at that speed from Kuwait City to Baghdad, maybe more if someone shoots at you. Under blessed cloudy skies, Death Before Dismounts shake hands with more money than brains. Leno meets maybe 500 new people every day, and he's a professional running from one group to another, saying, How are you? Image? Sure! He can't be stopped. In 20 minutes, he's befriended half the army. Finally, the M1 and Tankrod lined up, the tank in the dirt, the car with a 400-metre stretch of torn pavement. We thought a 17-second lead on the M1A1 would create a photo finish based on some preliminary runs with Tankrod. They showed Leno's rod hitting 60km/h in 6.2 seconds and a quarter mile trap in 14.7 seconds at 93km/h. That would be close. Or maybe not. I got tired of my friends saying, 'Why don't you take a hot rod?', says Leno, as we show up at his stable a few days later, separate from the race, to drive a Tankrod. Turn two large hands on the dashboard to start the double magnets on the nose, then press the starter. An exhausting concussion is a huge, thundery, like a locomotive running Flowmasters. It's strange that there's a little legroom for a 20-foot car. The accelerator and brake pedals are round rubber cups that are worked with separate legs because there is no room under the steering column to mix. Passengers regularly dent elbows and there is no glove compartment or trunk, even though the coin holder exists. Where Leno drives Tankrod, he's the star of his own comic book. As we roar in the driveway, he shouts, Here we go - two criminal fighters saving the city! Cooling fans are swinging a 6-in-10 oven explosion on our faces, and the V-12 backfires on every elevator, like Wyatt Earp unpacking his six-part set. An 8,900-pound car lifts a ramp like a tank. Flooring the accelerator will speed up deafness, but causes the motor to rotate any faster. Sumo-sized pistons and the rods are simply not rushed. Continental holds 1,500 rpm, reluctantly rises to 2,800 rpm, and that's it. Allow the gearbox to change gears so it can go faster. From lock to lock, the steering has 11 laps, so any turn starts with a few car lengths in advance. Threading through traffic takes nerves; Although the ride is relatively calm, the large body can bend a few meters in each direction to the pit. People who are used to driving a school bus from the back seat feel at home. Tankrod wasn't always this pleasant or reliable. On one of Leno's first trips since buying the car, a loosely attached oil line exploded. The engine smashed the entire oil tank on the highway. All 17 gallons. The 1,000-pound crankshaft stuck solidly. The wrecking drivers looked at the car once and drove on. The second engine was secured, and Leno's crew spent seven weeks rebuilding the car and improving its electrical system, brakes and suspension. Later, Leno replaced the startling bus dispatch with a six-speed Allison machine. Instead of 2 or 3 mpg, Tankrod's mileage rose to about 5. You know, says Leno, it's Southern California. If you want to do what you can for the environment, he'll notice the gas station. We climb out, we both step carefully so as not to liquefie the limb in the exhaust pipe. In Barstow, the army invites the whole team to shoot a few rounds. A 120mm computer-controlled cannon can track items while the tank is in motion and calculate trajectory based on every variable conceivable: wind speed, atmospheric pressure, current state lottery jackpot. Just aim for red sights on the shooter's digital video vision between enemy sparrows and FOOOM! The armor-piercing sabot - a 10-kilogram ultra-hard fin of depleted uranium moving at 1,500 meters per second - does not scrape the spongity. However, it punches a baseball-s size hole through a stack of manoes of well cover, so you don't just want to swing it around. Race? The tank exploded as Leno went on an unofficial, hand-timed 12.99-second quarter mile. It wouldn't be a Hollywood sales pitch without a predictable ending. 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