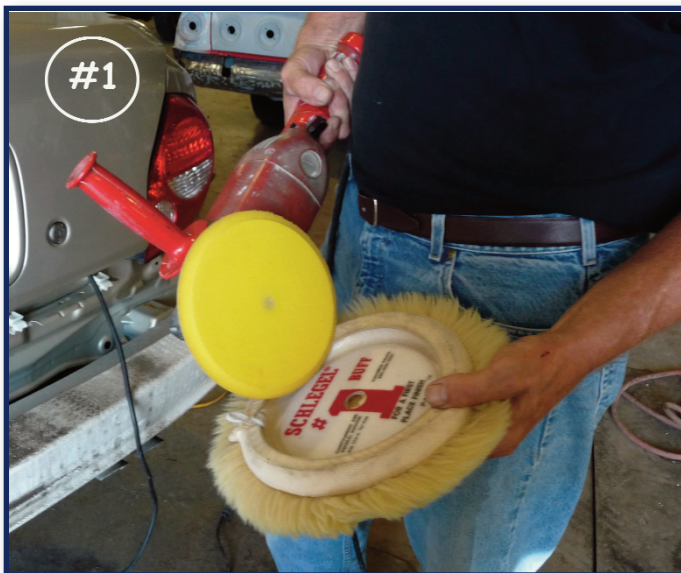


the care and feeding of commander gelcoat

by Dick Morland

Much has been written about buffing /polishing / waxing Commander gelcoat in the past, and much will surely be written in the future as new tools or product evolve. Thinking of gelcoat as Polyester paint helps one understand why gelcoat degrades and oxidizes over time. The opinions in this article are just that, opinions. As such, they are of course subjective, and certainly subject to the author's personal experience and prejudices.

Power tools are a good starting point, as most Commanders are pretty large for hand polishing or waxing. When I spend money for power tools, I generally research to ascertain what professionals or people who make their living using a given type of tool use. When it comes to power buffers, what better place to check other than an automotive body shop? Just about all body shop personnel use Milwaukee or Makita buffers. **Picture 1** shows a Milwaukee with a



highly recommended hook & loop compounding bonnet. **Picture 2** shows my 6'6" tall body shop owner friend buffing a *jacked up car*. My friend is so damn tall, he usually is buffing down, and hence he's not bothered too much by the Milwaukee's weight.



Commander owners who buff hulls, especially that miserable (from a buffing standpoint) flare in the bow are working with a buffer over our heads, and this is where the Makita 9227 CY really shines due to it's being one of the lightest buffers made. This is not a cheap tool, being in the \$200 range. I purchased mine in 1990, and have since then worn out two cords and one set of motor brushes. My Makita gets a LOT of use, and it is a quality item. I have consistently recommended this tool to club members, and never once have I heard anything but praise for this tool.

Some people attempt to buff and wax Commanders with one of those rotary orbital buffers you see at auto parts and hardware stores for \$40 - \$80. Save your money. These generally do a good job on automobiles with clear coat, but we are dealing with oxidized polyester paint (and a lot of it) on our Commanders. When I see a vintage Commander with original gelcoat glimmering and shining, I can almost guarantee it was done with a serious 7" buffer such as the two already mentioned.

Picture #3 shows my Makita with a yellow polishing pad. The white pads are compounding pads. The small buffer is actually a sander I bought at a garage sale and converted to a small buffer. Note the inline switch, allowing me to turn it on and use one hand for really



automotive clear coat, recommended this. I used it for the first time on the bow area of Patty wagon last weekend and was very impressed both with the speed it cut through the oxidation and the resulting shine. However, this is a VERY aggressive compound, and I want more experience with it on gelcoat before I recommend it. I am going to try it on the cabin roof this weekend! The three 3-M products have been around for a long time and are proven performers. The cleaner wax is available for light, medium, and heavy oxidation.

hard to reach areas. You **NEVER** want to use one hand on the larger buffers. These require 2 hands for safety. Note the knot in the cord of the Makita and the extension cord. This prevents the buffer from becoming unplugged, but more importantly, if you also knot the extension cord at the other end where you plug it in, you'll be able to fish your expensive buffer out of the drink if it ever gets away from you and goes overboard. No, it's never happened to me, but a dock mate lost a borrowed Milwaukee into the drink one time, and he was not knotted. Cost him a



Once you have a nice shiny gelcoat, the light version is the best from a gelcoat removal standpoint. The Finesse-It products are a pretty fine compound, and a finishing material generally used after compounding that gives a “wet look”. This last one is a little “cranky” to use, usually requiring a power buffer to remove and develop the shine. Next are my favorite two waxes, Collinite 885, and Collinite 476S Detergent Proof. Independent magazines such as Powerboat Reports and Practical Sailor test various waxes for shininess and longevity, and Collinite 885 is usually the clear winner. It's a pure Carnauba wax with no cleaner at all in it. Your gelcoat has to be clean and shiny BEFORE you use this stuff. The Collinite 476S is ostensibly “Detergent Proof”, but I have been testing this stuff on my cabin roof for the last 8 weeks. **Pictures 5 & 6** show the results. After 8 weeks in the sun and 6 washes with Dawn dishwashing liquid soap,

little over \$200!

OK, materials: What is the “Holy Grail” here? **Picture #4** shows the stuff I am currently using. I can recommend everything here except the Malco “Tru-Grit”. My body shop friend who tells me despite its very obvious grittiness, he can even use it on



Picture #6, taken 7/26/08 (8 weeks), after 6 washes with Dawn dishwashing soap. Still a little shiny, but no longer beads water.

50% of the shine is still there, but it no longer beads water. Rick Traskos tells me I'm nuts to be using Dawn, and he's probably right. I'm going to do this roof again this weekend, this time with Malco True Grit and Collinite 476S again, as I really like the shine. This time, I'm going to use West Marine Citrus Boat Soap and see if I can get more than 8 weeks out of it. However, I have yet to see a wax that outshines or outlasts either Collinite product on aged Commander gelcoat!

OK, techniques! Here we really get subjective. First step is to clean the surface we are going to buff/wax. There is no such thing as too clean! The cleaner the surface, the cleaner the buffer pads will stay and the longer they will last before needing laundering. Yes, you heard me correctly. My buffer pads come home for a trip through Patty's washing machine and dryer. Sometimes on a heavily oxidized surface, I'll even scrub the gelcoat with "Mean Green", a very caustic and powerful cleaner, using it full strength. This actually removes most of the oxidized materials.

Picture #4 shows the application pads I use. I swipe these from Patty's galley, and use them dampened. Obviously I use the foam/sponge side, but if I need to remove a slight dirt problem, careful usage of the Scotch Brite side comes in handy. For both compounding and waxing I apply the material to the pad, then rub it onto about an 18" square area. For compounding, I use a generous amount of compound,

as it's what's doing the work, and then I obviously use my Makita with a clean compounding pad. I keep the buffer speed very low, 2 or 1 on the speed dial. Excessive speed slings the compound all over the place, and worse, can create enough heat to actually burn the gelcoat a light brown L. Movement speed, application angles, and applied pressure are all things that have to be learned either by experience, or observation of someone with experience and proven, observable results. As you compound buff, the pad will load up with old compound and oxidized gelcoat that has been removed. A loaded up pad creates much more heat than a clean pad. Also, a loaded up pad makes the buffer difficult to control. The buffer will start to "dance and jump around" when it's loaded up. The cure is frequent "raking" of the pad. You can buy a pad rake, but I use a small stubby screwdriver that I carry in my pocket. My screwdriver/rake is shown in Picture 4. Note how polished & radiused it is.

Once you use one for buffing, don't ever try to use it for a screwdriver again! Toward the end of a compounding session, I usually rake the pad after every 18" square section I buff, mostly because I'm getting tired and too lazy to change to a clean pad. Very frequent raking prolongs the interval between washing and helps prevent gelcoat burning. Rake often!! Don't over buff. Once you can't see any compound on the fiberglass you're pretty much done, as it's really the compound that is doing the work. Some people try to keep buffing until a nice shine appears, and with a fresh clean pad this is pretty easy. As the pad starts to load up & gets a little damp, developing that shine takes longer & longer. I stop and use a terry cloth towel or rag to wipe the slight compound residue off instead of just going over & over the area with the buffer.

OK, OK, we're now clean & shiny! If we've used a one step product like the 3-M Cleaner/Wax, we're done and can have a cold adult beverage and admire our work. However, we're Commander owners and we want the very best for our pampered "Cruel Mistresses"!! Let's wax, using our choice of Carnauba wax. I'll use the Collinites, 476S being my current favorite as I think it has slightly better shine and will

last a long time if I put the damn Dawn soap away! I use the same kitchen pad applicator as I do for compound. I keep the pad damp and swirl it around inside the wax can to get a fair amount on the pad. I then apply it to again about an 18” square area using first a circular motion, then back & forth to make sure I’ve covered the entire area/ Move sprightly at this point as we don’t want this stuff to dry. 885 warns about letting it dry, but 476S says to let dry to a slight haze, then buff it off. HOGWASH!! Rob Cutchins nailed it when he said that if you let Collinite dry on the surface you would think Satan himself formulated this stuff! This applies to both Collinites. Get it off quick. I don’t use the buffer for this step. I use 2 terrycloth towels or rags and take it off by hand. I use the first towel to get most of the wax off and it really starts to shine at this point.

Now, still moving as sprightly as my three score & ten years allow, I grab the finishing towel and rub vigorously, all the while admiring the gorgeous shine coming up in front of my eyes. I know it’s hard to believe, but I can actually hand wax faster than I can using the buffer to remove the wax. This is due to the frequent pad loading up and raking required. Another reason is that this is the home stretch, and even the Makita feels as heavy as a 427 block!

A final word of caution on waxes & cleaners. There really is no easy way to a really great long lasting shine when you are dealing with elderly gelcoat as we are. Some “miracle products” contain petroleum distillates and will shine like crazy with little effort, but the sun dulls these up in a matter of days. Save your money & effort, and definitely don’t fall for one of these wonder coatings that are a kissing cousin to the Future floor wax Patty uses behind our rec room bar. These pop every year or so under different names, and the results are always the same, disappointment.

OK, now for some history & humor. When I first acquired my Makita buffer and posted to the club my delight with this great tool, club co-founder Todd Heinrich berated me in one of his posts, saying I shouldn’t be using such an aggressive tool on Patty Wagon’s hull. I listened to his words of wisdom and

formulated a plan to address that issue. **Picture #7** shows my solution. Doesn’t look like a real happy camper, does she? J J



Postscript - 8/05/08

As mentioned above, after this article was written, on Aug. 2 I redid the cabin roof of PW, only this time using the Malco Tru-Grit compound quite aggressively, followed by a hand wax of Collinite 476S. See the pictures for results. My dock mate, Joanne Holcomb, came walking down the finger pier, took one look at PW’s roof as I was buffing, and said “Holy Sh—!!” And this was just with the Tru-Grit and before the Collinite. Seriously, this is the best PW has ever looked, and I’ve been trying products & techniques for years. PW’s gel coat is 40 years old and to the best of my knowledge, she was only under a covered slip for about 3 years. The rest of the time it’s been in the sun, and outside, but covered, winter storage. I don’t think the cabin roof looked any better when she was new.

Bottom line – Am I ready to endorse & recommend Malco Tru-Grit? Yes, but with a **BIG** caveat. This stuff is, as one website supplier wrote: “The most aggressive compound we sell”. If you consider yourself pretty good with a real power buffer, are willing to experiment, and understand that if you burn through your gel coat it’s no one’s fault other than yours, this might be the stuff for you. Remember, this

stuff is formulated primarily for automotive body shops and you use it at your own peril. If I haven't scared you yet, the stuff I'm using at my buffers lowest speed is Tru-Grit 120032. A Google search will result in a number of vendors, or perhaps your local body shop can tell you of an area distributor. "Res Ipsa Loquitur!!" (The thing speaks for itself) or "Caveat Emptor!!" (Let the buyer beware)

Dick Morland
Patty Wagon
1969 38' Sedan Bridge
Original 427's



Getting the ultimate shine through Tru-Grit 120032