

PRIVATE LABEL

WILLOW 300 turbo

Wind in this Willow doesn't whisper

By Christopher A. Sawyer



Christopher A. Sawyer photo

Murphy's Law may have an upside if the first Willow 300 turbo is any measure.

Brian Murphy has been working on Mercedes for over 10 years. At 19, he began Willow Automotive, a Deerfield, Ill., shop specializing in Mercedes and BMWs—and got married. "I guess you could say that I like working under pressure," he deadpans. Now 28, Murphy has added Mosselman turbocharger systems to his repertoire, and, although he still has work to do to adapt the Dutch kits to U.S. models, the early returns are promising.

"What Brian has done is fantastic," says Willy Mosselman, owner of Mosselman Turbo Systems in Holland, an aftermarket specialist in turbocharger kits. "His car is faster to 60 and 100 mph than ours."

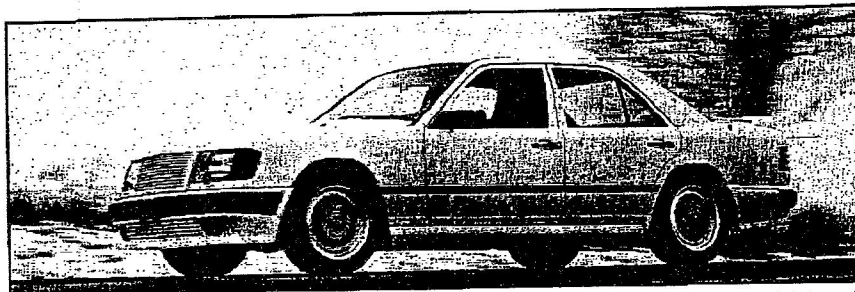
It is certainly fast. We saw 0-60 in 4.96 seconds, 0-100 in 11.98. Not bad for an unfinished, first generation car with automatic transmission, air conditioning, the same boost and 200 more pounds to trundle around than Mosselman's Euro version—and Murphy claims his car is emissions legal. (It also has a high-acceleration 3.64:1 rear-end ratio versus the stock 3.07:1.)

Without brake torquing, Willow's 300 launches into hyper-space without the expected twin rubber streaks. At the 1-2 and 2-3 shift points, though, it lays rubber quite efficiently—almost as if to tell the rest of the world that, yes, you *were* there. And, except for the tach needle's rocketing around its dial, all is relatively calm. Only the rear's slight initial step to the right, and the sudden blurring of roadside scenery stand in testimony to the acceleration rate.

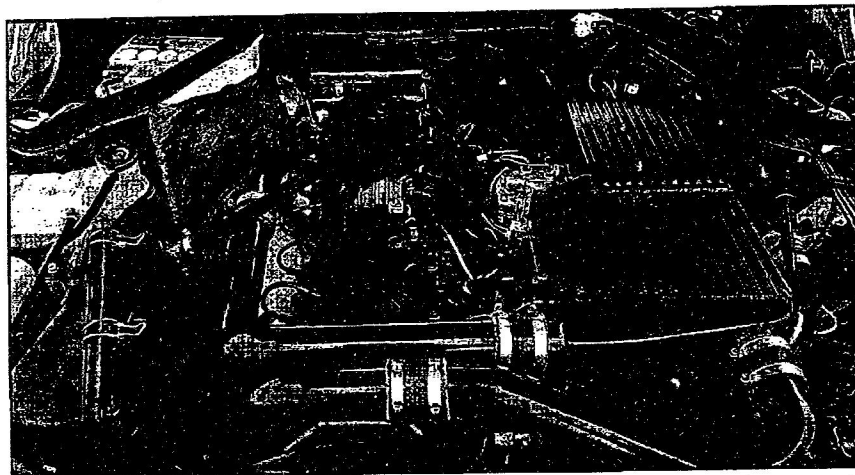
Lest you think that this drive to achieve earth orbit happens only from standstill, think again. Power comes on smoothly and cleanly, and the ready availability of boost usually keeps the transmission from needing to downshift.

However, if you have a bit of the devil in you, do what we did on the way back to Detroit. Wait until curious people in small cars catch up to you on a lonely stretch of highway. Kick the trans down and the boost up. Slow when you reach warp speed, and wait for the stragglers to catch up. Repeat until either they—or their cars—give up. (Sincere apologies to the owner of the Seneca whose motor gave up in spectacular fashion after one such chase.)

The twin turbos are so neatly assembled that they look factory-spec. At the front of the engine compartment sits a large air-to-water intercooler that handles the intake charge from the 900 rpm onset of boost to



Body panels add visual excitement (top), visceral excitement comes on the road (above)



Twin turbos help 3.0 liter six produce approximately 310 hp, installation looks factory-neat

redline. Fuel (super premium) is sent into the engine by way of a modified Bosch fuel injection system. "We worked hard to get the injection and fail-safe system to work properly," Brian states, "yet remain emissions legal."

On the road, the 300 draws more than its share of gawkers. The bodywork is from Lorinser, the largest maker of aftermarket body panels for Mercedes-Benz models in Germany. BBS wheels and pearlescent paint round out the visuals.

The fancy clothing can be deleted. What you shouldn't do without is the lowered suspension. "I wanted to cut out the 'blue sky' above the tires," says Brian, "but I wasn't about to sacrifice either ride comfort or handling." He did this by developing special (uncut) springs that lower the car 1.5 inches, and adding a pair of stabilizer bars built to his own specifications (unavailable at test time) and special Bilstein gas shocks.

We expected the Willow—lowered and asked to transmit approximately 310 horsepower through its 225/50VR-16 Goodrich Comp T/As—to ride like a dime store rocking horse. We were *wrong*. Under most

conditions the Willow 300 handled with assurance and confidence. Patchy pavement, common in the salt-stained Midwest, was swallowed up and spit back out with only infrequent reminders of the modified suspension underneath. Only when the last bit of suspension travel was called into play did the ride become objectionable.

We found one fault with the handling—a reluctance of the rear end to follow the front's lead—a trait quickly apparent to the sensitive driver. We attributed this to the absence of the special anti-roll bars.

And Murphy still has some work to do on driveability. We found that an overly rich injection system hampered cold starting and contributed to poor trailing throttle engine response. Murphy believes he'll cure these problems by replacing the standard analog fuel computer with a digital design.

Just how much does all this fun cost? About \$65,000 should get you a car like the one we tested. Or pick what you want from Brian's list, pay the price of admission and wait for it to be rolled out the door.

Just don't come running to us when you can't control yourself anymore. ■

R.L. Montgomery photos