

15:03 That car by the bear ain't got no fire; or, A Sermon on Alternators, Voltmeters, and Debugging

*by Pastor Manul Laphroaig,
who is not certified by ASE.*

Dear neighbors, I have a story to tell, and it's not a very flattering one.

A few years back, when I was having a bad day, I bought a five hundred dollar Mercedes and took to the open road. It had some issues, of course, so a hundred miles down the road, I stopped in rural Virginia and bought a new stereo. This was how I learned that installing a stereo in a Walmart parking lot looks a lot like stealing a stereo from a Walmart parking lot.⁴



I also learned rather quickly that my four courses of auto-shop in high school amounted to a lot of book knowledge and not that much practical knowledge. My buddies who bought old cars and fixed them first-hand learned—and still know—a hell of a lot more about their machines than I ever will about mine. When squirrels chewed through the wiring harness, when metal flakes made the windshield wiper activate on its own, when the fuel line was cut by rubbish in the street as I was tearing down the Interstate at Autobahn speeds, I often took the lazy way out and paid for a professional to repair it.

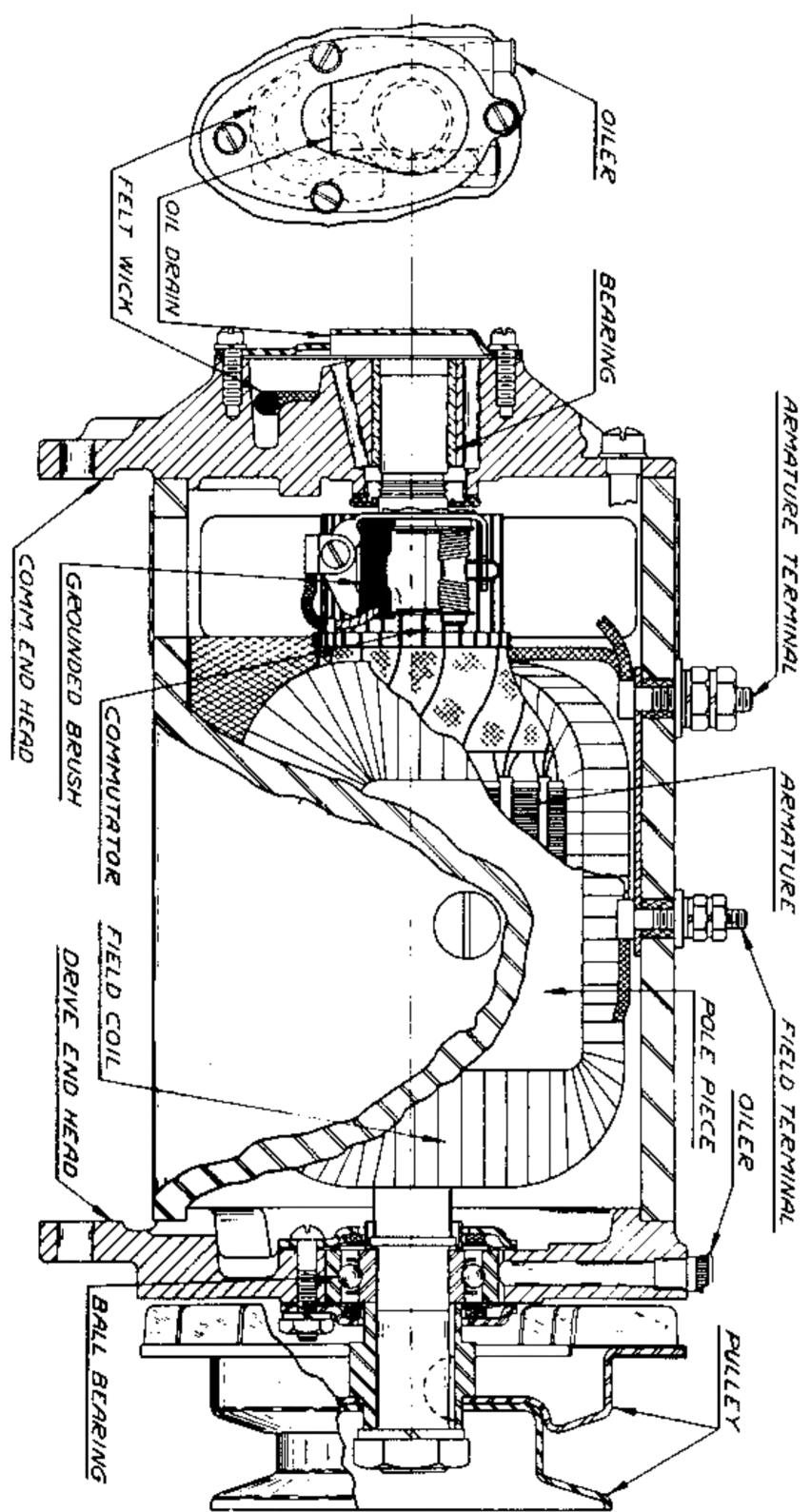
But while it's true that you learn more by building your own birdfeeder, that's not the purpose of this sermon. Today I'd like to tell you about some alternator trouble. Somehow, someway, by some mechanism unknown to gods and men, this car seemed to be killing every perfectly good alternator that was placed inside of it, and no mechanic could figure out why.

It went like this: I'd be off having adventures, then drop into town to pick up my wheels. Having been away for so long, the battery would be dead. "No big deal," I'd say and jump-start the engine. After the engine caught, I'd remove the cables, and soon enough the battery would be dead again, the engine with it. So I'd switch to driving my Ford⁵ and send my car to the shop.



⁴The fastest way to clear up such a misunderstanding, when confronted by a local, is to ask to borrow some tools.

⁵In auto-shop class we learned that FORD stands for "Found On Road Dead," "Fix Or Repair Daily," or "Job Security." Coach Crigger never mentioned what Mercedes stood for, but I expect it depends upon your credit, current lease terms, and willingness to take a balloon payment!





The mechanics at the shop would test the alternator, and it'd look good. They'd test the battery, and it'd look good. Then they'd start the car, and the alternator's voltage would be low, so they'd replace it out of caution. No one knew the root cause, but the part's under warranty, and the labor is cheap, so who cares?

What actually happened is this: The alternator doesn't engage until the engine revs beyond natural idling or starting. The designers must have done this to reduce the load on the starter motor, but it has the annoying side effect of letting the battery run to nothing after a jump start. The only indication to the driver is that the lights are a little dim until the gas is first pressed.

I learned this by accident after installing a voltmeter. Setting aside for the moment how absurd it is that a car ships without one, let's consider how the mechanics were fooled. In software terms, we'd say that they were confronted with a poorly reproducible test case; they were bug-hunting from anecdotes, from hand-picked artisanal data. This always ends in disaster, whether it's a frustrated software maintainer or a mechanic who becomes an unknowing accomplice to four counts of warranty fraud.

So what mistakes did I make? First, I outsourced my understanding to a shop rather than fixing my own birdfeeder. The mechanic at the shop would see my car once every six months, and he'd forget the little things. He never noticed that the lights were slightly dimmer before revving the engine, be-

cause he never started the car at night. To really understand something, you ought to have a deep familiarity with it; a passing view is bound to give you a quick little fix, or an exploit that doesn't always achieve continuation on its target.

Further, he never noticed that the battery only died after a jumpstart, but never in normal use, because all of the cars that he sees have already exhibited one problem or another and most of them were daily drivers. Whenever you are hunting a rare bug, consider the pre-existing conditions that brought that crash to your attention.⁶

Getting back to the bastard who designed a car with a single idiot light and no voltmeter, the single handiest tool to avoid these unnecessary repairs would have been to reproduce the problem when the car wasn't failing. Rather than spending months between the car failing to start, a voltmeter would have shown me that the voltage was low *only before the engine was first revved up!* In the same way, we should use every debugging tool at our disposal to make a problem reproducible in the shortest time possible, even if that visibility doesn't end in the problem that was first reported.

Paying attention to the voltage during a few drives would have revealed the real problem, even when the battery is sufficiently charged that the engine doesn't die. For this reason, we should be looking for the root cause of *EVERYTHING*, never settling for the visible effects.

We who play with computers have debugging tools that the best mechanics can only dream of. We have checkpoint-restart debuggers which can take a snapshot just before a failure, then repeatedly execute a crash until the cause is known. We have `strace` and `dtrace` and `ftrace`, we have disassemblers and decompilers, we have `tcpdump` and `tcpreplay`, we have more hooks than Muad'Dib's Fedaykin! We can deluge the machine with a thousand core dumps, then merge them into a single test case that reproduces a crash with crystal clarity; or, if we prefer, a proof of concept that escapes from the deepest sandbox to the outer limits!

Yet the humble alternator still has important lessons to teach us.

⁶Some of you may recall the story of World War II statisticians who were called in to decide where to add armor based on surveys of damage to returned Allied bombers. The right answer was to armor not where there were the most bullet holes, but where there were none. Planes hit in those areas didn't make it home to be surveyed.