

T3 Syncro Pop-Top

a new lease...

Story & Technical Peter Coe

Our Syncro came off the assembly line in August 1988 and was imported into Australia. It was converted into a campervan by the Sydney firm Suncamper. The Syncro was first registered in Victoria in early 1989 and had two previous owners before I bought it 11 years ago.

Over the years I have maintained the van with many modifications such as new Schwenk springs, bilstein shock absorbers, installed a decoupler, had the gearbox overhauled and numerous modifications to the internal fit-out such as a house battery and inverter and better internal lights. The old two burner gas stove and gas installation have been removed and replaced with a simple two burner butane stove that we use under an awning. The old three way fridge was removed and replaced with a modern Waeco 65 litre compressor fridge.

The pop-top was looking very tired and in need of a repaint, but because of all the other work required, it was put on the backburner. However, there was a persistent leak in the front passenger corner of the van which remained even after a new windscreen and rust removal around the frame was done. The crunch came when the van was parked slightly uphill at a camp in January 2022 in a Victorian National Park. We had a substantial downfall of rain, and I detected a leak right over my head while sleeping in the van. This was stopped by putting a tarp over the front of the van which led me to investigate further on our return home.

At home, I removed part of the headliner above the passenger seat and took out the blank where a passenger side light would be in a Caravelle. To my horror I found a substantial hole and rust in the side of the vehicle inside the pop-top. Instead of running down the rain channel, water had been coming inside the outer skin of the old roof. The only option I could see was to have the pop-top removed and the rust hole repaired.

Luckily, I found an amazing young guy, Matt, running a business near a town called Rossglen, south of Port Macquarie where I live. Matt is skilled at fibreglass work, welding, and spray painting. I removed the rear half of the cabinetry, the curtains and rails and all the headliner to enable the pop-top to be taken off. The existing canvas had to be removed as well and this was an opportunity to get this replaced - after all it was 33 years old and looking rather tired.

Matt lifted the pop-top and called me down to have a look. It was not good at all. Where I thought there was one hole, there were in fact three substantial holes and rust all the way down into the passenger side A-pillar and along the rain channel. Water had been getting in for some time and had caused considerable damage. Luckily the rust had not gone too far to the rear of the vehicle.



The damage had been caused by a previous owner pop riveting along the passenger side of the pop-top base through the fibreglass into the body of the roof of the van. The rivets were aluminium and of course through a process of electrolysis had caused the rust problem.

There were no rivets along the driver's side of the van and no rust at all. I can only assume that the rivets were put in because the van used to have a very agricultural side awning and brackets. I removed this in the early days of ownership and replaced it with a canvas awning and rope track.

The pop-top was attached at the factory, with rivets on the top and you can see from the photo where these rivets were located. There was no rust around any of these rivets because water could not get up to this position.

There was no option but to commission a full refurbishment of the pop-top including repairing all the holes and damage to the pop-top, removing all the rusted metal, welding in new sections and rebuilding the rusted-out rain channel. Matt put in extra ribs in the pop-top and did a full repaint. In the process Matt recommended some changes to how the pop-top was attached to the van. As there are now modern adhesives that are well suited to this work, Matt recommended that the base of the pop-top be glued to the metal of the van and in the process he put in a silicone seal around the whole pop-top so that there is no chance that rain water can get into the van. I also had wiring put in for a ceiling light.

When finished I had new canvas installed by a firm in Coffs Harbour and they did a very professional job as you can see. The next step was the headliner. I used a very good tradesman in Port Macquarie who specialises in automobile and marine upholstery. We removed the pop-top and I put in a 3mm plywood ceiling which was then covered in new fabric. Headlining was done to the rest of the van and I replaced the old sun visors with new ones. I also installed new lights in the side and ceiling of the cabin.

The end result is quite stunning and I am very pleased with the quality of the work and the excellent workmanship of Matt and the upholsterer in carrying out this very difficult job. The photos show the results of this most difficult and costly project, but I am very pleased that the van is now waterproof as much as possible and we can look forward to keeping dry while exploring more of this wonderful country in a VW classic van.

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