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In 1959, a Swedish engineer at Volvo patented what would become one of the greatest inventions of all time

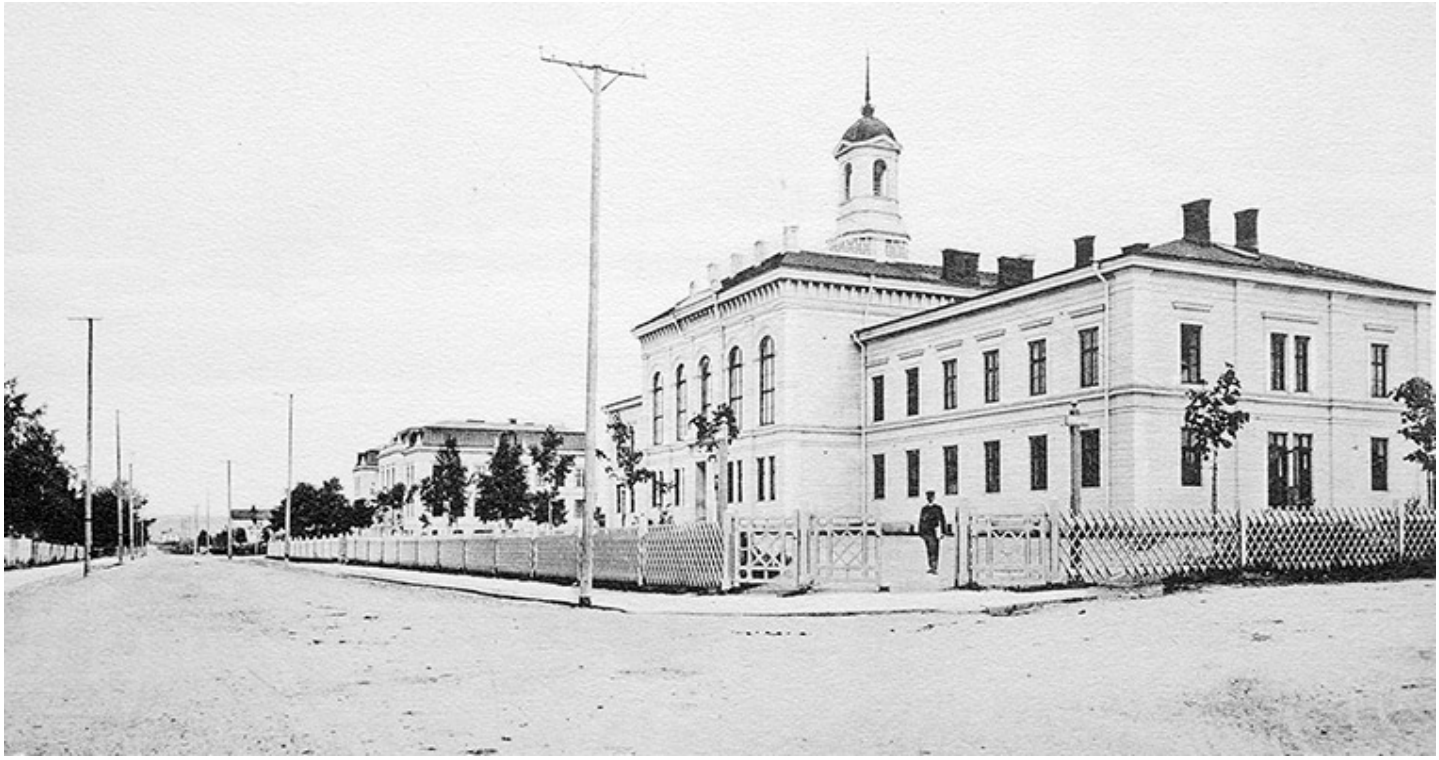
Volvo stood to make billions

But after a meeting with Volvo's President, he decided to give it away for free - and it changed the world

Here’s how that meeting went ■■

1) After receiving his mechanical engineering degree from a University in his hometown of Härnösand, Sweden, Nils Bohlin joined aircraft maker Saab to work on ejector seats.

For 16 years, he continued to focus on safety and was eventually designing complete pilot rescue systems.



2) Nils was anchored to the idea of safety above all else, and brought this same mentality to a welcoming team at Volvo.

There, he focused his attention on all the driver and passenger safety systems, starting with seatbelts.

3) Seatbelts weren't a standard feature in cars at the time. Upgrading would get you seatbelts consisting of a simple lap band, like those used in airplanes today.

While better than nothing, these two-point seat belts didn't adequately protect the human body in collisions.

4) "I realized both the upper and lower body must be held securely in place with one strap across the chest and one across the hips"

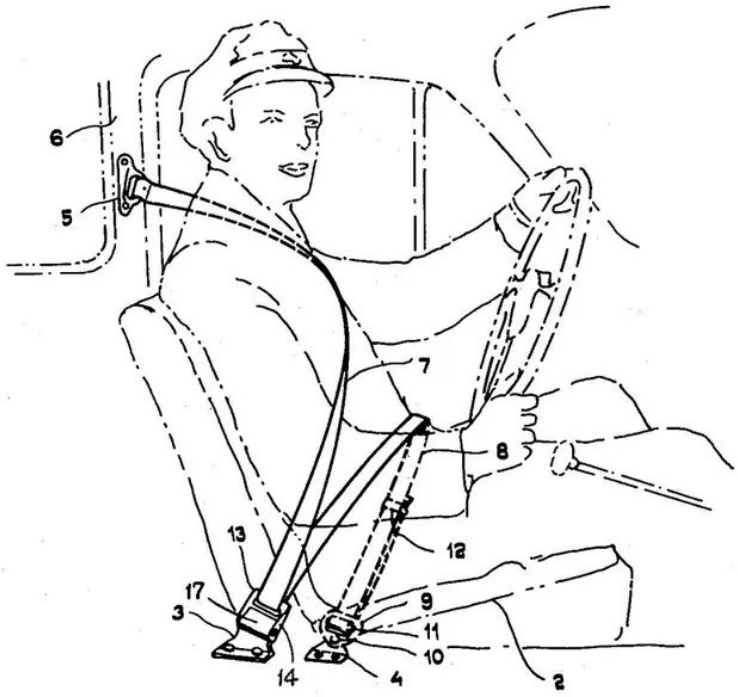
In just one short year of applying his aircraft safety experience to cars, Nils invented the V-Type three point safety belt.

5) Following standard company procedure, Nils applied for a patent. As the US Patent Office took time to review his work, Nils didn't stand idly by.

He worked with the rest of the Volvo team to get these new seat belts into their cars as fast as possible.

6) On July 10th, 1962, the US Patent Office granted Nils patent #3043625 for the three-point seat belt safety design.

Volvo now had to decide, how was it going to use this patent?



7) In a management meeting, Nils and the Volvo's President at the time, Gunnar Engellau, looked over the numbers.

Volvo could keep it to themselves.

These seatbelts could join their arsenal of safety features and win consumers over to the Volvo brand.

8) They could also license the patent and collect royalties from other manufacturers making their designs.

Or, they could manufacture these seatbelts themselves, and sell them to every other car maker in the world.

9) Each option was extremely lucrative.

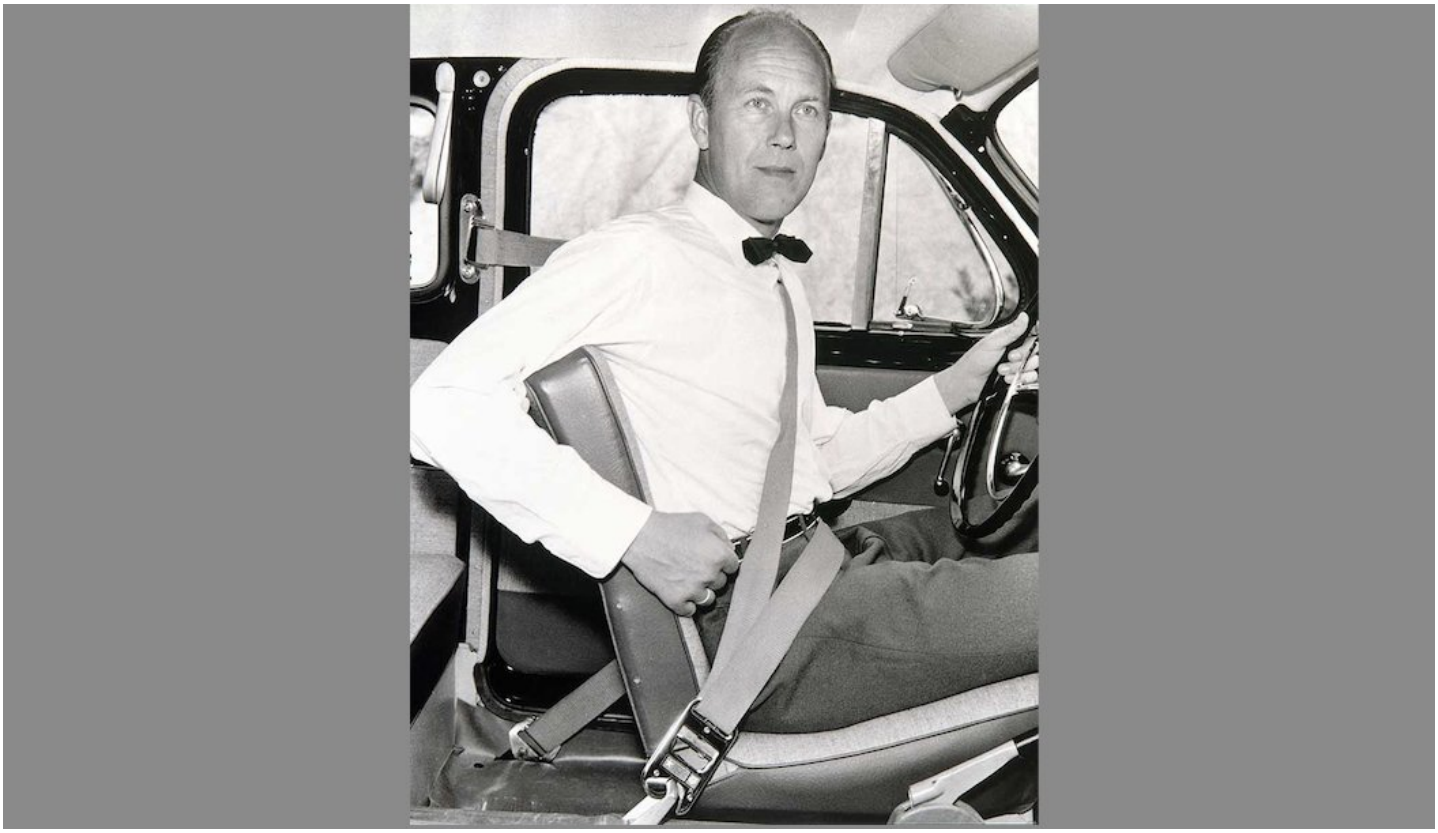
Volvo would easily net hundreds of millions in revenue and dominate the competition.

But before deciding, they did something else.

10) Volvo had already been using these seatbelts in their cars for 2 years. Nils and Gunnar poured over the data on their effectiveness.

The results were remarkable.

The new seatbelts were multiple orders of magnitude more effective at preventing injury and death.



11) Nils began to articulate an option to give the seatbelts patent away for free, and Gunnar began to smile.

Years ago, Gunnar had lost a family member in a traffic accident, partly because of the shortcomings of two-point seatbelts.

This was what Gunnar wanted all along.

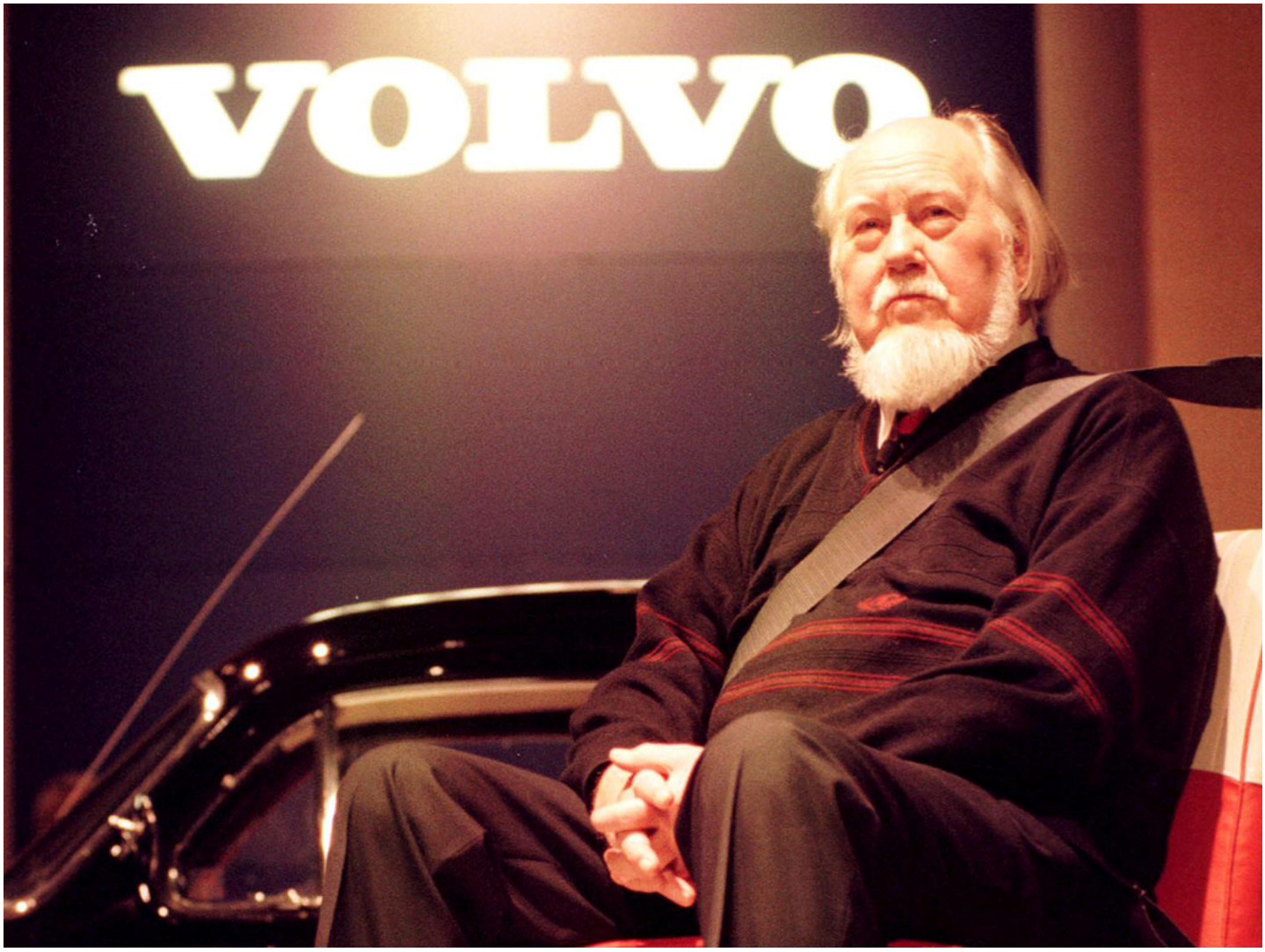
12) It was decided. Volvo gave away the patent for Nils’s three-point seatbelt design.

Their seatbelts would go on to become the industry standard and, in doing so, save millions of lives.

13) Nils and Volvo chose the greater good over profit.

For his contribution, Nils received a gold medal from Royal Swedish Academy of Engineering Sciences. He was later on inducted into the Automotive Hall of Fame.

“There’s a little bit of Nils Bohlin in every car.”


VOLVO