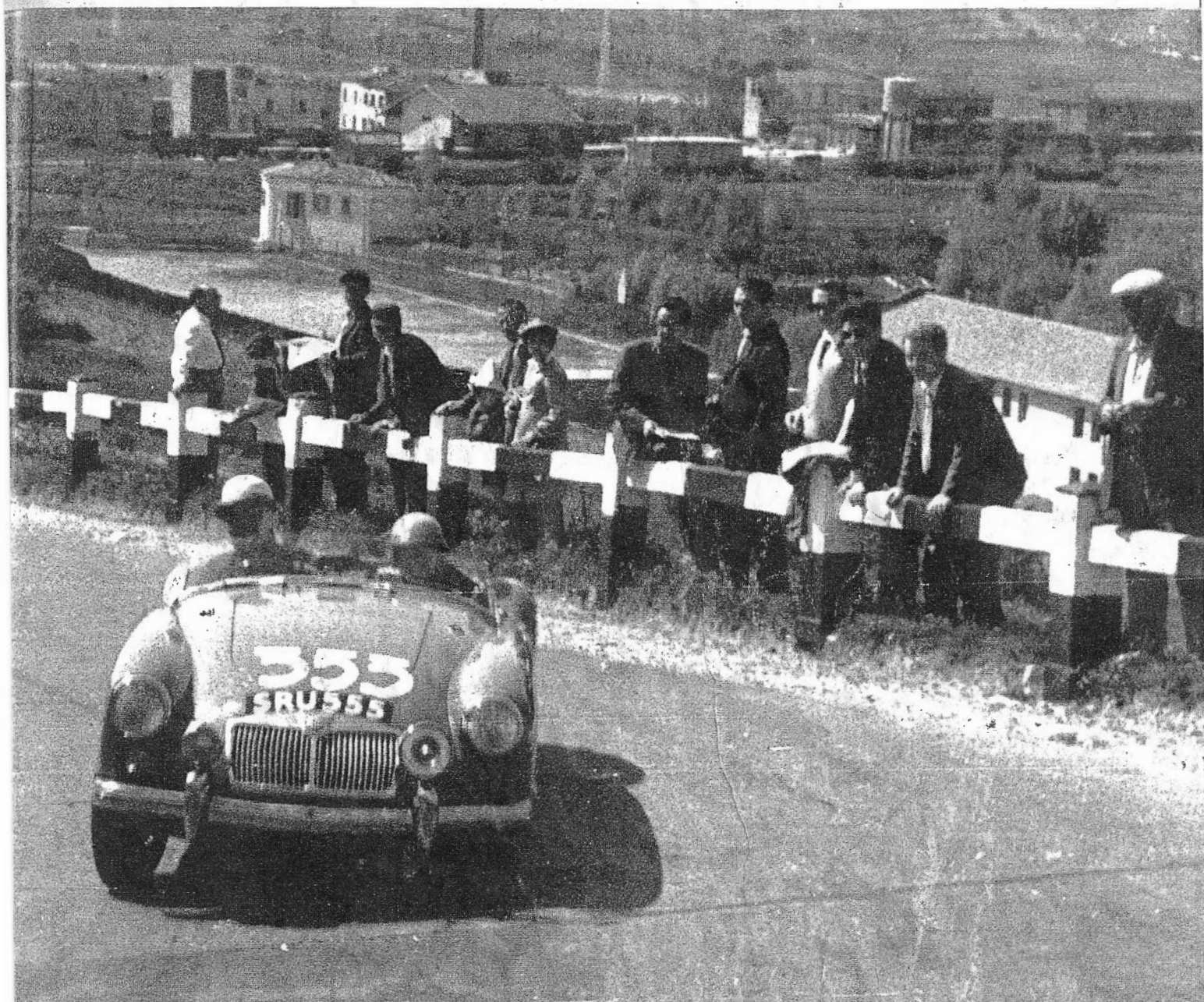




# The 24th and Last Mille Miglia—1957

By Michael Reid





It seems like only last Thursday that Jeff Sparrowe and I were sitting over coffee discussing my idea of trying to enter the Mille Miglia. Yet, it was over 41 years ago—if we'd had less beer that evening, we might have had more sense.

Our entry was confirmed only ten days before we had to leave, and my hard-used MGA was in no state to go anywhere. I had ruined the bearings during a particularly hectic race at Goodwood the previous weekend, the clutch was shot and 28,000 miles of rallies, racing and business use had taken their toll on a lot more. We used the ten days remaining before the event to install a new crankshaft, clutch and oil cooler. Race rubber consisted of 60-spoke wire wheels shod with a set of five RS1 Dunlops, while an old R1 crisscross pattern racing cover on a 40-spoke wheel made an extra spare. We had no time to fit a larger-capacity 20-gallon fuel tank, which we were later to regret.







names and an official rushes up with a telegram from Barry Price back in England which says VERY BEST OF LUCK. PLEASE DO NOT BEND.

Renzo Castagneto, the Father of the Mille Miglia, wearing his famous brown bowler, is in charge of the start. The seconds tick by, the flag is down and we are off the ramp and accelerating away through a sea of faces into the darkness. Stomach muscles lose their tightness as the adrenaline drives away tension. Lamp posts, buildings, crowds rush past in the cold night air and, for the first time in days, we feel fit, even exhilarated. The engine misfires a little due to oiling of the hard plugs, but this soon clears and the harsh, even exhaust note and squealing tires are like music as we rush away through the dark outskirts of Brescia as fast as we dare.

Nearly 400 cars are entered in this race, with the smaller classes starting before midnight at half-minute intervals and the

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well as four mountain passes—the Antrodoco, Radicofani, Futa and Raticosa—plus all the towns, villages and undulating roads which we have not even seen. I have worked out five refueling points and driver changes because of our small fuel tank.

I feel it is wiser for Jeff to do the first leg, since he has at least driven some of it in the dark. The outskirts of Brescia are a bewildering blur, gone in a flash, and we are heading out along twisting roads through very agricultural country, judging by the

out and get oil out of the trunk, throw in half a gallon and we're moving again. A large crowd claps, shouts and waves. I hadn't noticed them before. There is oil all over the underside of the car. I hope it doesn't get on the tires or we shall leave the road in a big way.

Our average is over 70 mph so far. Jeff is using all the revs and oil pressure is normal, but the engine feels harsh and it won't quite pull 6000 rpm in top. This is depressing: We can't afford to let up or spare the motor. It will be flat-out every inch of the way to make up for the time spent pouring oil in—always supposing we manage to catch the needle dipping before the bearings go. We had discussed going gently at first. We just didn't know what we'd be up against.

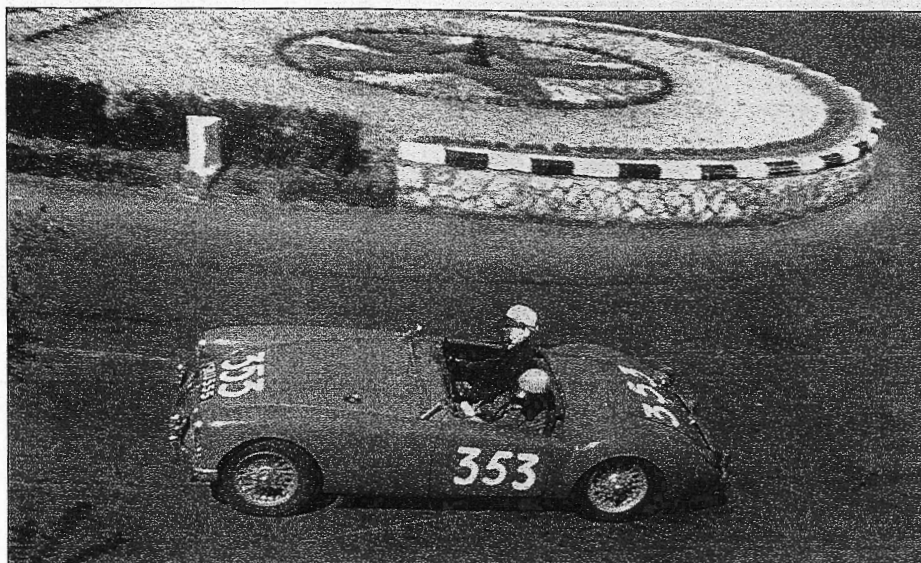
A few more villages are left behind. Thousands of spectators pack the bends. The bigger the crowd at a corner, the bigger the accident potential. We treat density of spectators as a shunt meter and use the loud pedal with more caution. Many young Italians don't. The bigger the crowd, the harder they drive and the more glorious their accidents and the deeper the scars for them to boast about for years after. Mind you, some of the cars they use stand no chance of getting to the finish anyway, so they have to get their glory where they can.

Perhaps we shall make the halfway mark before she bursts. Out in the country again and there is an Alfa on its side in a ditch pointing the way it came, headlight glass all over the road. Two fierce black marks farther on show where another car has left the embanked road and landed in an apple tree. A Maserati appears in my mirror and I signal Jeff. He nods and moves over a little.

Another car rushes past at about 140. If only we had more revs we might be able to take it easier over the cobbles and in the narrow lanes of towns, but instead we have to drive like maniacs over bumpy streets between buildings without knowing what's round the next bend, nor with any certainty about which way it goes.

My turn to drive. We have averaged 72 mph so far, including stops. Down the street and round a straw-baled corner on the road to Pescara. Difficult to get used to racing in the streets. "Avanti!" cry the townspeople, so avanti it is. One of the adages of the Mille Miglia is that you must have the courage to go slowly; to finish you must stay on the road. This constantly-changing road, varying from smooth fast highway to cobbles, now twists and turns inland to Forli then back to the coast at Rimini and on to the stretches beside the shimmering blue Adriatic where the faster cars touch 180 mph-plus.

I am grinding the throttle pedal hard to the floor until my leg aches, but still can't coax more than 5600 rpm from the engine. To sit on these fast stretches at our maximum of 110 mph for 20 minutes on end



larger cars at minute intervals; the Moss/Jenkinson Maserati is last at 5:37 am. We are racing against the clock and each other—amateur, professional, famous and infamous. More than ten nations are represented, as is nearly every make of car, from tiny 600 and 1100 cc Fiats, OSCAs and Renaults to a Salmson, various Citroens and Fords, right up to the four-liter Maseratis and Ferraris.

Half the starters will not finish. There will be many disasters, many crashes. It is a mad race. The public roads over which this race will travel are supposed to be closed but not for nothing do the regulations say that "Chickens, children and dogs must watch the race from upstairs windows" (my translation). To qualify as finishers, our class has to cover the 1000 miles in three minutes shy of 16 hours, which is 62 mph and seems easy before you consider the stops we have to make for refueling and driver changes, as

smells hanging in the damp night air. It is foolish to drive hard too early and we are already coming across people who did. All the same, we have no time to lose in case we have unscheduled stops to make up for. Before long, countless nameless villages become covered ground.

As the road opens up before us, so it seems to close up behind. It is difficult to remember where we have been and the trip recorder is the only thing which tells me where we should be arriving. Daylight has come and we hardly notice. The road ahead is what matters—that, the rev counter and the oil gauge.

The oil gauge! It suddenly reads zero; we are out of the race so soon? No, the needle flicks back to normal. We look at each other in horror. Oil surge on a fast bend! We are coming into Rovigo. Another fast left-hander and the needle zeroes again. Jeff slows and, before the car is stopped, I leap



is infuriating because if we had just 20 mph more we could take fewer risks on the difficult stages. I thought that this race, so far as we are concerned, might be like a fast rally. It is NOT. It's flat-out all the time on the straights, on the limit in the swerves, and maximum revs in all the gears to get back to flat-out again as soon as a corner is negotiated. There isn't room to run out of tarmac, especially with spectators lining the escape roads. Whenever we are forced to slow, we stop to put in more oil; better to have the rocker box awash than the oil pump starved. The trouble with oil is that it spatters your face, your hands, your feet, and gets on your visor and spectacles. You can't get rid of it except from where you want it to stay. Somehow we have lost the dipstick already.

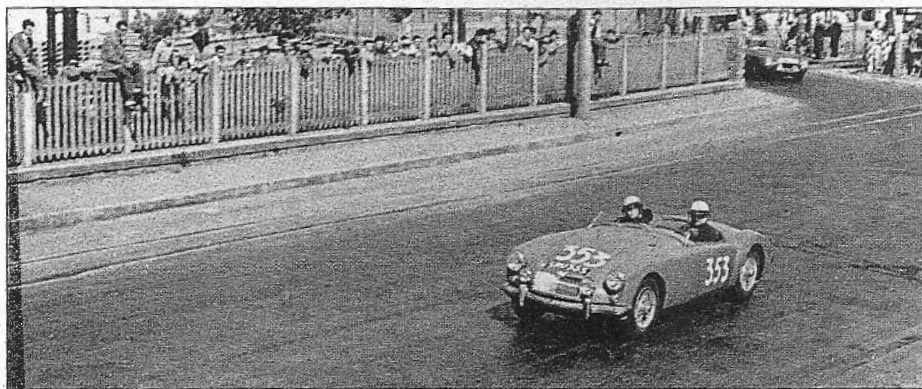
Ancona ahead. The approaches to bad corners and big towns are well-marshaled. There are warning signs showing the severity of the corners, but the populace stands in front of them. The flag marshals are magnificent and know their jobs. At 400, 200 and 100 meters from bad corners, these gentlemen stand holding out square white flags with a red Z. If the corner has claimed enough victims, they look at you in great agitation. If you are going a little too fast, they wave their flags. If you are going much too fast, they literally dance a fandango—especially the chap at the 100-meter mark. At very dangerous corners, there is a man with a red flag and he never stops waving it even as he jumps for his life!

If it were not for these marshals, very few cars would finish at all because, even if you can practice, which we couldn't, it is impossible to learn 1000 miles of Italian road by heart. Moss and Jenkinson came nearest, when, in 1955, they recorded the whole route on a roller map with pace notes and won the race, a feat never achieved by a British driver. But they are believed to have done 30,000 miles of practice and written off two Mercedes race cars (and, I believe, several sheep) in the process.

We leave town without hitting anything, and, out in the country again, there is level crossing ahead. I am not wasting time slowing for this—the others were alright and we can't afford to cut our speed. Suddenly the rev counter registers 7000 rpm and we are airborne and dropping. CRASH! The chassis member under the gearbox takes a tremendous bashing and the car bounces but

still points in the right direction. The story goes that patriotic crossing-keepers leave the gates open for Italian racing red, even if there's a train coming. We can't afford one moment to stop so, foot flat on the boards, shut your eyes; no, leave one open—missed him by 50 yards at least. What lunatic let trains run TODAY? A few more villages rush past and suddenly I'm near heart failure as I see the oil gauge registering zero. Have I cracked the sump? The needle flickers around feebly and we stop and throw in another half gallon, screaming off through the gears, rejoicing in 80 lbs of pressure once again, but depressed at the thought that the engine can't stand much more of this punishment.

The next worry is fuel. The road is now straight and smooth and it seems like we've had 5600 rpm on the clock for hours, sometimes 6000 downhill. The petrol gauge





says zero. We can't be far from our refueling point. But the engine cuts and we coast to a stop, pull out the spare gallon can and, in no time, we arrive in Pescara, cutting it a bit fine nevertheless. As we slow for card-stamping, two officials rush up, one on each side, but each thinks the other is seeing to us and they both rush past to Peter Collins' Ferrari and another car which have just roared in.

We shout and curse, and with hard-won minutes wasted, finally get the card stamped and rush on to the Shell pit stop down the street. As Peter Collins is in the lead on time elapsed, he gets priority, and the other chap is Italian and so we are getting nothing. I grab a man with a churn of petrol and into the funnel goes five gallons, but it trickles into the tank agonizingly slowly because we only have the standard filler. Another churn of fuel is tipped into the funnel, but a man who thinks we've finished pulls it out and five gallons is spilt all over me, in the gutter and everywhere. I push the idiot away, who falls backward into a stack of oil tins, ram the funnel back in—a policeman is pointing a fire extinguisher at my chest—and I fill the spare can. One spark now and we will be thoroughly toasted—not to mention that the refueling pits will probably explode.

We lost the oil filler cap at that stop. Oh my, what next? My trousers are soaked in gasoline. I have fuel up my sleeves, in my eyes and in my mouth. Jeff is pressing on—I hope he doesn't go too near a spectator smoking a cigarette. We soon recover from

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fact that we could possibly make up time on the smooth and very fast Bologna/Mantua/Brescia stage. Apart from keeping up our speed, we have to keep the car on the road, and it is now becoming increasingly evident that many more people have found it difficult to do that. We keep coming across grass, earth and stones all over the tarmac and usually a very bent car abandoned nearby, if it hasn't fallen over a precipice.

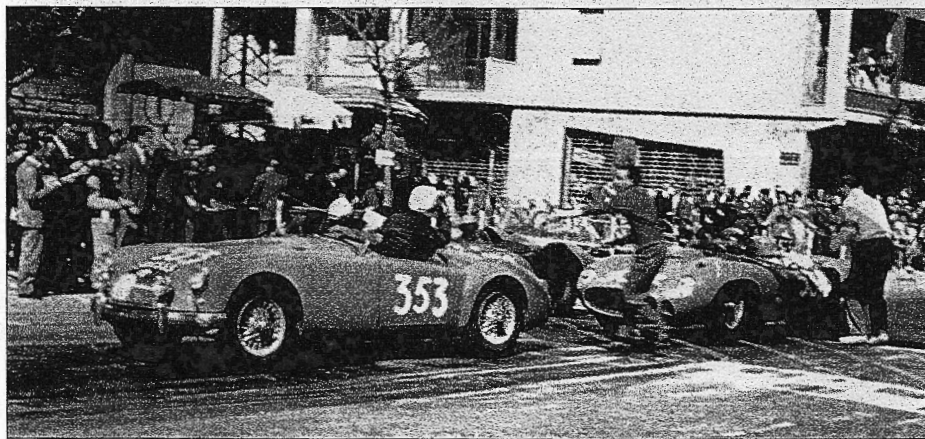
Another Ferrari appears in my mirror and Jeff pulls over. I wave him on and, as comes by, I see Taruffi is the driver; it is a few seconds before he is safely in front and I wish I had a camera. I shall never forget this famous veteran with every fiber so utterly concentrated, hunched over the wheel, his begoggled and sooty countenance focused on his speed of arrival at the next bend, at the same time giving us plenty of room, not forgetting to raise his hand in acknowledgment and finally pulling in front

The car is being hurled this way and that, tires screeching on the shiny Italian tarmac, transmission whining. I hang on to the door and grab-handle and watch the road, signaling any bends which look deceptive. They all are. The sun is hot, the gearbox hotter. The left front brake is grabbing badly and every time Jeff stomps on the middle pedal he has to steer away from the violent pull. With the engine not developing full power and the bad oil leak we could do without brake trouble—and now the clouds over Rome are as black as ink. The Antrodoco is soon behind us.

At Rome our average is still over 70. We refuel, top off the oil, and I slide down the bank behind the pits into someone's garden to spend a penny. Jeff falls after me amid a shower of stones and we laugh and wonder if we would have been better off at a British hillclimb. There is another old saying: "He who leads at Rome never wins the race." This shouldn't bother us. We are leading nothing except the index of oil consumption.

A quick look at the tires and I take over. Arrivederci Roma! I must stay longer than three minutes next time. Jeff shouts "watch the brakes" as we rush away. There are butterflies in my stomach and I am wondering if I shall be able to keep the car between the ditches for the next 227 kms through Viterbo, Montefiascone and the foothills before Siena as expertly as Jeff has for the last difficult stage. It is more hilly than mountainous, except for the Radicofani pass of 2600 ft—not as difficult as I had imagined, but now it's raining and I am driving like a cat on hot bricks. I shall never forgive myself if I shunt it after we have come so far. More cars have left the road and we now come across a concussed Fitzwilliam, crash helmet off, going slowly in a badly-bent MGA. He apparently went through a big wooden billboard which then fell on him. Our turn soon, no doubt. The water just does not drain out of the tread of these RSIs. I hope we don't have a puncture; the only spare we have left is too small and about as useful as a pork sausage for wet conditions. Even at slow speeds, the tires are losing their adhesion on the shiny, treacherous surface and the grabbing brake means the brakes are of no use at all while it's raining, so we have to use the gears. But injudicious deceleration causes the rear wheels to lose adhesion and the back end to waggle like a duck's. The spectators hurl oranges at you if you don't get a move on.

All is not lost. The rain is stopping and the surface improving, but our high-frequency horn is on the way out as we seem to have been using it since daylight. Spectators tend to wander on the road, but if you let the car weave under braking and make the tires howl, they leap for cover on all sides. After a horrible moment when a



being a fire hazard and I calculate our average with pencil and paper (we have no Halda average speed clock) to be nearly 80 mph. But we have another 600 miles to do, including the most difficult roads yet, and four mountain passes.

Inland now, over the Abruzzi mountains to Rome. Jeff is attacking the twisty road with gusto and the tires are constantly squealing. Our average is bound to drop steadily however, all the way to Bologna only 200 miles from the finish. If we arrive at Bologna with our average below 62 mph, we shall not qualify as finishers despite the

of us while clearly making certain that he does not carve us up.

Onwards and upwards, to mountain goat country. The other Ferraris and Maseratis which started after us begin to go past; von Trips, the Spanish Marquis de Portago, Gendebien. Of Moss and Jenks there is no sign. I feel half stupefied from the gasoline fumes on my clothes and the high-octane fuel is burning the skin off my knees. L'Aquila is soon reached, the card stamped, and we make an unscheduled visit to the Shell pit for more oil.

Jeff presses on up to the Antrodoco pass.

brake locks and I nearly spin it on a hairpin with a 100-foot drop on the wrong side, and yet another stop to put in oil, we come into Siena for card-stamping and refueling. Jeff is driving now, bound for Bologna 177 kms away via Florence and the Futa and Raticosa passes (3400 ft). Jeff likes mountains; he made very good time on the Coppa Della Dolomiti section during an Alpine rally some years before. I do not like driving fast up and down mountains with a passenger, nor do I like being driven fast up and down mountains, now that I think about it. Our average is still above 65 mph in spite of all our stops, the bad brake and the rain. The car is standing up to barbaric treatment amazingly well, but I dare not think of whether we shall actually get back to Brescia. We are now running fast down the valley in which Florence lies. In town, we hear that Collins is still in the lead, but his rear axle is expected to seize at any moment. The white-haired Taruffi is second and moving up; this may be his last Mille Miglia—he has promised his wife he will retire from racing if he wins. So would I.

Now the Futa Pass; climbing steeply bend after bend, tires squealing monotonously. The brake is still locking, but Jeff keeps the MG moving briskly. As the descent commences, we weave around the side of the mountain, the brakes continuously grabbing, trying to hurl us over the edge. In my mind, I devise a plan to heave on the grab-handle and jump when the car goes over, but we are still on the road and rushing into Bologna fast.

As I hurry us out of Bologna after a driver change, Jeff seems busy tidying up. Cheese, banana and oil smell very odd when mixed so the whole lot goes overboard into the crowd and I laugh so much I nearly collect a concrete bollard. We now have three hours in which to cover the last 200 miles to Brescia, routed through Mantua in honor of Nuvolari, whose birthplace and final resting place is the last check stop before the finish. We only need to average 67 mph for the rest of the race to qualify as finishers, and with straight dry roads this looks easy. But any hopes of an easy finish are suddenly banished by black clouds immediately ahead, so we carry on flat-out to compensate for the inevitable rain and for the next scheduled stop, as well as any others not yet planned.

The road through Modena to Brescia is wide and smooth, and, in memory of Nuvolari, special awards are given to the drivers putting up the three fastest times overall and the fastest times in each class on the last stage covering Cremona/Mantua/Brescia. It is said that Fangio nearly achieved one of these awards in 1953 with the steering only working on one wheel.

We have now been on the road for over 12 hours and each place seems much the

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same as the next one or the one before. All I can think of is the oil pressure and the road ahead. It has been raining on and off since Rome, and we now come to a veritable cloud burst. I can't hold 5500 rpm under these conditions. Water is streaming up one side of the low Perspex windscreen and down the

bearings, it could just as well be 6000 so we race on, watching the oil gauge—mesmerized by that trembling white needle. We are getting hopeful now, but this could be dangerous. A few miles further on, all elation vanishes in sick horror. There has been a terrible accident. A Ferrari lies torn in half in the ditch near a broken telegraph pole. The bundles of rags laid out by the road soon take the shape of people who have seen their last Mille Miglia. We continue at a slackened pace and the oil pressure is dropping. The mountains beyond Brescia come into view, and in the distant haze we can see the town as we pass a few more cars, many of them creeping along the last few kilometers to the finish.

It could have been ten minutes or a month ago since we left the Via Rubuffione, but it was actually 15 hours and 24 seconds. As we turn into the finishing straight, I floor the throttle and rush over the finishing line, disbelieving we've arrived. The oil gauge needle finally dips and rests at zero. We shake



other, my visor is smeared with oil and dead insects, and my spectacles are misted up.

The tires must have little tread left but we come out of some hairy waggles and slides still pointing more or less in the right direction. The brakes cannot be touched in the wet because they would cause us to immediately gyrate and clobber one of those squat stone posts spaced along 20-foot intervals along the roadside. It is difficult to stop your foot from instinctively punching the brakes and I am convinced that, even now, after having come so far, I shall put it in the ditch. Racing on your own, there is no responsibility for anyone else. If you kill yourself no one minds, but, on the Mille Miglia, you have to consider your co-driver. I have never concentrated so hard.

Still on schedule but soaking wet, we safely reach Mantua. As we slither and slide over the cobbles Jeff shouts "press on," meaning he doesn't want to change over. I see, he wants me to have the accident. The card is stamped for the last time and all we have to do is the last 66 kms. But, without

hands incredulously and walk back to the timing box to hand in our travel-stained card, stamped in every square. Then, pouring in all the oil we have left, we motor gently to the *parc ferme* inside the big Fiat garage on the Via Aprile, where we have to leave the MG for the night with all the other finishers. Many are bent and travel-stained, a door missing here, a bonnet gone there. A crumpled roof, missing windscreens, bent wheels, torn paneling, finishers nonetheless. Most of these cars were brought on transporters and will certainly need them to get home. Pausing a moment in that vast and silent garage one is conscious of a terrific spirit of endeavor heightened by the smell of hot machinery and the occasional "ping" of contracting metal on cooling cars in fitful sleep.

Soaked and filthy, we get a lift back to our hotel, but it is some while before the roaring and screeching in the ears dies down, followed by the bewildering, flat feeling of returning to reality. We never thought we'd



even get to Rome, but, unbelievably, here we were back in Brescia. Some say we might even be placed in our class. Our little adventure may not be quite over—we have to drive 800 miles home on very little money and we don't even know if we have any crankshaft bearings left.

Although there are many private parties in Brescia tonight, the main reception is canceled because of that ghastly Ferrari accident, in which the Spanish Marquis de Portago, his American co-driver Eddie Nelson, and eleven spectators were killed as a result of a collapsed rear wheel. I shall never forget what I saw as I drove past. We hear that Portago's mechanics had noticed a damaged rear wheel at Bologna, but if he was to have a chance of winning there was no time to change it. No time...it broke up at 150 mph on a fast curve.

Peter Collins' works Ferrari led for most of the day but went out near Modena with transmission trouble and Taruffi, with his Ferrari, realized a lifelong ambition to win the Mille Miglia. The German von Trips was second and the Belgian, Gendebien, was third, both with Ferraris. Portago was slowly catching them when he crashed less than 30 miles from the finish, which left the Italian, Scarlatti, fourth in a Maserati. Stirling Moss, in his Maserati, suffered a broken brake pedal at high speed only 12 kilometers from the start and managed to stop only by his superb driving skills.

## CONCLUSION

Of nearly 400 cars which started only 163 finished, entitling the drivers to life membership of the Club Mille Miglia. Some were barely moving as they triumphantly

crossed the line. We were 134th in general classification and received two silver cups for a 1.5-liter class placing. We were soaked by rain, and my knees were raw thanks to the spilt fuel at Pescara. The car was splattered with oil, insects and filth, and so were we. Looking at the burnt oil on the exhaust pipe and the soot and burnt paint on the surrounding area, we must have been on fire at one point. I had seen smoke in the mirror at times.

Three drivers, a policeman and 11 spectators were killed, adding sadly to the long list of fatalities throughout the history of this race. During the months that followed, there was much bitter argument and finally the Italian government banned the race due to the casualties resulting from the impossibility of spectator protection over a thousand miles. We were privileged to



have been able to take part in the last of the real road races but shocked by the awful toll. ALEUM INVENIT DAEMON! "The devil invented dicing."

We averaged 67 mph, including 15 stops instead of the planned five. Fuel consumption was 20.5 mpg. We used 4.5 gallons of oil due to a crumpled sump gasket. The grabbing front brake was caused by a hub oil seal failing, resulting in a messy porridge of grease and brake dust which kept trying to stick the brake shoe to the drum. Apart from this, there was nothing wrong with this rugged little car which had served us so well. I continued to race it for several more seasons, before moving to lighter, faster cars which were towed behind the MG at speeds of 100 mph and more. Forty years later, I still have the car in good running order with more than 600,000 miles behind her.

Jeff and I went back to Italy 25 years after our initial Mille Miglia with the same car to do one of the retrospective runs, but that is the subject of another story.... ♦