

AN INTERWOVEN TALE OF MOTOR RACING, FILM MAKING AND A BIZARRE WAR STORY

The fourth chapter of a five-part series by André Loubser



BUD Rossler's next film was *Le Mans* produced by Steve McQueen's Solar Productions. Prior to the 1970 race - around which the film centred - the crew converged on the town of Le Mans and stayed for three months.

An enormous amount of planning was required: 28 cars were borrowed from factory teams and privateers, 45 well-known drivers were hired and over 20 000 items were assembled, ranging from high-priced watches worn by the drivers to banners, hoardings and smaller items. McQueen, a racing driver in his own right, was adamant about 100% authenticity.

With its dramatic setting, the film

could have been an epic but sadly the opportunity was missed. It lacked a plot, romance and intrigue all of which make for a juicy film. It dragged on, just like the real thing!

A friend of Bud's, Robin Ormes, had acquired a Lola T70 that he hoped to hire out to the film makers. As luck would have it a Lola T70 was required and Bud was asked to maintain the car during the making of the film.



David Piper and Steve McQueen with the Lola T70 that Bud Rossler was asked to maintain on set.

Steve McQueen directs operation sitting on the track. A smiling Bud Rossler can just be glimpsed on the right.



Let the cameras roll!



Steve McQueen with a genuine Ferrari 512 in the pit lane.

South Africa's answer to McGyver

However, he soon became involved with other projects and McQueen and his fellow producers spotted the South African's diverse talents. In fact the film gave Bud the opportunity to display and utilise his unique abilities. As he commented, 'Being a film special effects man makes you improvise. In the end you think even faster than McGyver.'

Although shooting genuine high-speed sequences in the race and blending them in with the film was easy, creating the accident sequences was another matter and this is where Bud stepped in. Two Ferrari 512 prototypes and a Porsche 917 were to be crashed but as the originals were priceless and rare, three rather tired Lola T70s with stock block Chev engines, much cheaper and more expendable, were used. It was simply a case of fitting replica Ferrari 512 bodies and a Porsche 917 body on to

the Lola rolling chassis. Bud was tasked with radio controlling the cars and producing dummy drivers. Separate clutch, throttle and steering activators were fitted.

For the first sequence the 'Ferrari 512' was sent on its way along the main straight between the pits and the grandstand by two remote controllers one in charge of the steering and the other working the clutch and throttle. Then at about 140 km/h disaster struck when the car suddenly veered left and demolished itself against the Armco barrier in front of the main grandstand and virtually opposite the black plaque with gold lettering commemorating the horrendous 1955 Le Mans accident in which some 80 people were killed the worst accident in the history of motor sport. However, the dummy survived to drive another day.

After some thought, Bud figured out that the problem lay with the steering. The remote control gave fixed directions with no human

intervention to make constant corrections to suit road surface or camber. Bud recalled having seen an electro-magnetic clutch that controlled rotating reels on a computer. Eureka!

As Solar Productions kept its own light aircraft parked in an airfield behind the grandstand, Bud requested a flight to Paris. McQueen immediately agreed, assuming the South African McGyver had a plan. In central Paris, Bud found what he was needed, and back at the circuit he sawed the steering column of the now mechanically-repaired Ferrari /Lola in half and installed the clutch drive. A new set of 512 body panels was fitted and the outfit was taken to the airfield where a real driver (Bud himself) took his place behind the steering wheel to override the controls in the event of a mishap. Voilà it worked perfectly.

With everything working properly, the team moved to the Indianapolis corner a left-hander that heads towards Arnage for the shooting of a spectacular accident sequence. A concrete launching bank, disguised with sand and leaves, had been built on the apex and that part of the circuit had been drenched to depict a wet scene.

Radio controllers were placed on plinths behind the car and a water truck about 20m in front of it the plan being that the truck would precede the car and action would begin as soon as the truck disappeared from view around the bend. But disaster struck again! With 17 cameras to record the shunt nobody had given thought to the dry section between the front of the car and the rear of the truck. Action commenced, the 'Ferrari' began to roll and its rear tyres bit into the dry surface. When it entered the wet section it suddenly veered violently to the left, clouted the Armco with an almighty bang and was written off.

A new car was built but this time, with lessons learnt, the sequence worked perfectly. The car was loaded with explosives to ignite the petrol and the crash worked almost as planned although one camera man had a narrow escape from his position behind some railway sleepers in the forest. His job was to film the car crashing through the trees towards him but when the car flew much further than planned and landed about a metre from him he kept cool and kept the film rolling.

The next accident involved the



The wreck of the radio-controlled 'Porsche 917'. Thanks to the missing rear clip, the Lola T70 MKIII B chassis, stock block Chev V8 engine and Hewland LG600 gearbox can be seen. Oops!

Porsche 917 (remember, a Lola T70 in drag). The car was to crash at White House Corner (Maison Blanc) and two Frenchmen were positioned on a raised platform in a field inside the bend to radio control the car. One was in charge of the throttle and the other the steering; but as the car started rolling and gaining speed the throttle man got it wrong and gave it too much power. The car slid across the circuit and clouted the Armco, tearing off the radio aerial that was taped along the long tail. The 'Porsche' now out of control veered from side to side bashing into Armco on both sides. Fortunately the sequence was so perfect that the unfolding saga remained in the film.

David Piper loses a foot

It was during the filming of Le Mans that veteran driver, David Piper - six times winner of the Kyalami Nine Hours and the moving spirit behind his classic series - lost his right foot. He was motoring through White House Corner at some 200km/h when a rear tyre deflated and his genuine Porsche 917 hit the Armco on the right, shot off to the left and broke in half (pictured right). Piper was strapped to the rear section with his severely mangled right foot trapped under the brake pedal. Two nuns were first on the scene to find brake fluid dripping into the wound.

Many viewers of the film were under the impression that the accident involving the pseudo radio-controlled 917 was actually the Piper accident. The confusion

was understandable as both cars were resplendent in the famous Gulf livery, the numbers were 20 and 21 respectively and the accidents, imaginary and real, were at White House Corner.

Back in hospital in England surgeons battled for a month to save the limb but unfortunately it had to be amputated inches above the ankle. One day as Piper lay in hospital contemplating his footless future, Mike Parkes (Ferrari engineer and works driver) walked into the ward accompanied by none other than Douglas Bader. Bader glared at Piper and asked: 'Feeling sorry for yourself, old chap?' And with that he undid his belt and dropped his trousers. 'You've got nothing to worry about, just look at me,' he added.



A group of hired drivers: Mike Parkes, Jean-Pierre Jabouille, Gerard Larrousse, David Piper, Jonathan Williams, Steve McQueen, Derek Bell, Masten Gregory, Hughes de Fierlandt, Herbert Linge and director Lee Katzin.



According to Piper, it was thanks to that nudge that he immediately 'came right'. Some years later, he discovered that not only could he drive cars on the road again but could race them as well. With a career that commenced in 1954 and ended about three years ago it could just be that David Piper is the world's longest-surviving racing driver.

