

Joe Scalzo's

City of Speed and elsewhere

Luck Runs Out

All but one of the patriotic power players with their white and blue sports cars who carried the stars and stripes to Europe in the 1950s and 1960s returned to the U.S. Briggs Cunningham became a gentleman yachtsman in the America's Cup. Lance Reventlow, of Scarab fame, renounced racing for skiing; at a great loss to the ranks of racing's exotic creatures, his private plane crashed in the middle of the Colorado Rockies. Carroll Shelby, chicken farmer and snake charmer, jumped ship from Ford to Chrysler. Dan Gurney trained his new ambitions on Indy cars and the Brickyard. Jim Hall took his extraordinary Chaparrals back to Texas. Only Lucky Casner, bamboozling con artist and dashing lady killer, never made it home.



Lucky was a trickster, spellbinder, hoodwinker and flim-flamer and is hardly remembered anymore. He was a fantastic personality and impassioned, inspiring, talker who oozed effervescence. It was impossible not to like him or to say no to him, and, at his bamboozling best, he once conned the anti-freeze division of Dow Chemical into sponsoring some (air-cooled!) Porsches, Lucky beat both Shelby and Gurney into history by demonstrating how to flummox other people – or the corporations

they led – into paying for his racing. At its peak, Lucky's over-talented, 19-vehicle team, Camoradi U.S.A. – CASnerMOtoRACING Division -- had, for a stable of luscious equipment, all the factory Birdcages of Maserati plus some fast Corvettes that Lucky had sweet-talked out of General Motors. Lucky's driver pool was unbelievable: heroes Shelby, Gurney, Stirling Moss, Chuck Daigh, and Masten Gregory among them.



Lucky also was the first sly customer to get his mitts on the bloated financial reservoirs of Goodyear Tire & Rubber, including free rubber for his team, and this probably was his biggest bamboozle.

Unfortunately, Lucky's dispersing a lot of Goodyear's money on Chez le Femme – Lucky and Miss Bardot, the sex

bomb, supposedly were having sizzling romantic flings --- ruined everything, and suddenly Lucky was running out of sponsors to get turned down by, including Goodyear.

The vivid destruction of Camoradi U.S.A. began occurring in all the big races: for two years running, at Sebring in 1961 and 1962, all Camoradi Birdcages and Corvettes broke down . At Le Mans, after clocking almost 170 mph, the lead Camoradi vehicle had its engine cataclysmically unload in the middle of the night on the Mulsanne straightaway.

That reduced Lucky to his last Birdcage, his last set of Goodyears, his last mechanic – an unpaid Australian named Wallace -- and even his last driver, the ever-loyal Gregory. Typically gaining strength from failure, Lucky managed to flim-flam the organizers of the Nurburgring into accepting a Camoradi entry for its 1,000 kilometers classic. This was an enduro Camoradi had won the year before, when its drivers had been Moss and Gurney, but both had since walked out on Lucky . So it had been up to Gregory to race the Birdcage with Lucky himself acting as co-driver. Although he'd competed at Le Mans, Sebring, and in the Targa Florio, nobody but Lucky thought Lucky was any kind of racing driver. But now he was expected to spend seven hours speeding through the Ring's misted-over Eifel mountains .

Small wonder that Gregory had had to do most of the driving, and that whenever it was Lucky's turn, mechanic Wallace crossed his fingers. Serendipity was



working overtime. Near the finish Gregory was leading, but his Goodyears were threadbare, and when he arrived in the pits for a fresh set, there were – it figures -- no replacements ; moreover, Camoradi U.S.A. had become so unpopular that no team would lend it any. Then the Birdcage's

engine refused to re-fire. Right at the last instant Wallace got it running again, and the Gregory/Lucky duo somehow won, beating the Nurburgring.

Poor Wallace still hadn't been paid, and so, in desperation, he commandeered the Camoradi transport truck and gunned it from Germany into Italy. Liquidating in distress – exchanging his tool box for gasoline – the mechanic didn't stop until hitting Modena. Count Giovanni di Misurata of Scuderia Serenissima took pity and gave him work, and, years afterward, Wallace became father of the Countach Lamborghini.

The Nurburgring-winning Birdcage ended up, disastrously, in another race, at Pescara, on the Italian Adriatic. It foundered in a hairpin, then tipped over, and caught on fire with Lucky trapped inside. Nursing his first- and second-degree burns, he next decamped to Paris where he succeeded in getting placed on



Interpol's list as a possible black marketer.

Existing in greatly reduced circumstances, Lucky often could be found in the company of a trio of suspicious characters. One of them was a fellow American named

Simone; another was Simone's wife, the French actress Astor; and a third was the gentleman driver Thepenier. Simone was one of France's Maserati distributors

and had briefly come into prominence through his questionable scheme to disseminate mercury into clouds and make it rain; before this he had been a colonel in espionage. There were rumors that Simone had drafted Lucky, too, into that line of employment, along with Astor and Thepenier. But there had been no way of checking; all three of died relatively young.

Prior to his passing, Simone used to loan Lucky a Maserati for Le Mans and the 24 hours. It was Birdcage coupe model, really a bad and dangerous set of wheels – a duplicate had flamed and cooked to a crisp at Daytona -- but one year at Le Mans Lucky had impressed himself by coming around in the lead on the opening lap. In 1965 this same bad Birdcage killed Lucky, his demise occurring during the April tests, right at the end of Mulsanne, while he was moving at terrific speed – Lucky truly was hauling the mail – and the brakes went out and sent everything flying endo.

Lloyd Casner was Lucky's birth name. An unverifiable account placed him inside a military academy at the tender age of 13. He got into some trouble, then was made to stand guard through the Christmas and New Year's holidays. His classmates mocked him as "Lucky," and, liking the sound of it, Lucky remained that for the rest of his life. Along with all his bamboozling and lady-killing skills, Lucky, like Reventlow was one of racing's rare and exotic creatures. It was racing's loss that everything ended for him, when he was barely 36.