

Le Mans - The Movie

SOLAR BOOK LE MANS AND 26 G5/6 CARS FOR MCQUEEN FILM

The Porsche 908 camera car entered for Le Mans by Solar Productions, the company making the Steve McQueen film about the race, was still going well at the finish in the hands of Herbert Linge and Jonathan Williams, despite losing an hour at the start. Over 250,000 ft of film were shot by this car during the race and there were six more static cameras around the circuit. This week filming has begun in earnest at the track which Solar Productions have hired for the next 12 weeks. Every hotel in the Le Mans area has been booked up for drivers, mechanics, cameramen, technicians and so on and Solar have assembled a complete "village" as their headquarters near the circuit.

The director of the film, whose story starts at the start of the 24 hours and finishes at the end of it, is John Sturges who worked with McQueen in *The Great Escape* and *Bullit*. In charge of special effects will be the young Swiss specialist who was responsible for the ski and bob chases in *On Her Majesty's Secret Service*. A total of 26 proper Group 5 and 6 cars, their drivers and mechanics, will be at the circuit for the next 12 weeks: in all, filming will take five months and the film will cost \$6 million. It is expected to go on general release early next year.



The Porsche 908 camera car driven by Herbert Linge/Jonathan Williams

At The Movie - Part 1

By Mike Twite (CAR December 1970)

Will The Real Le Mans Stand Up?

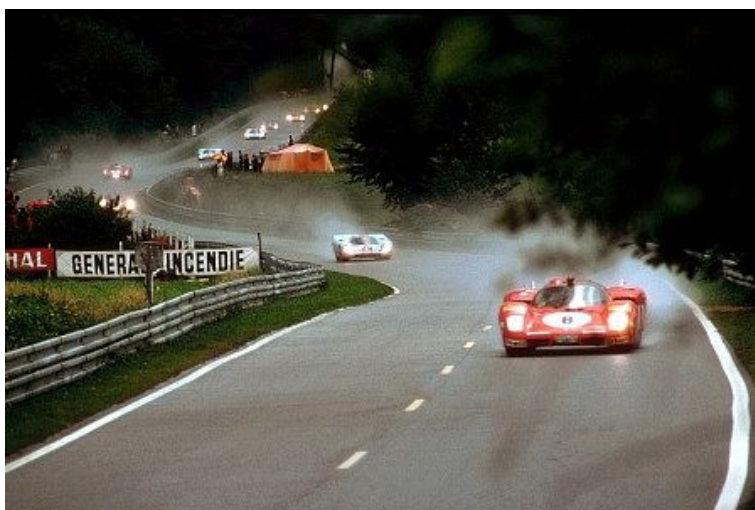
It was my first time on a film set, although the 'set' was very familiar ground to me as it was the pit area at Le Mans. As all the world knows, Steve McQueen is shooting his epic which is titled simply *The 24 Hours of Le Mans* and I was anxious to see if film sets and the people who work on them were as I had imagined. Did a wizened old man hobble out in front of the cameras with a clapper boards? Did the director shout 'Roll' and 'Cut' and 'Print it'? Were there canvas seats with the stars' names stenciled on them? did the female lead prance and posture even when she wasn't on set? Yes! It's all absolutely true, I'm delighted to say. My illusions for once were not shattered. Director Lee Katzin smokes constantly, even while eating his lunch, and smokes cigarettes, pipes, cigars without noticing what's in his mouth. On one traumatic occasion he rushed from the set to his little canvas seat with his name stenciled on it and out of a side pocket produced a bottle filled with a blue liquid; he gulped it down and tore back to the pits to grapple with the problem in hand. In contrast, Steve McQueen is quiet, self effacing, melts into the background, rides away on one of his fleet of motorcycles with his wife

on the pillion and keeps himself to himself.

McQueen's motorized activities on celluloid have been eulogized too many times to bear repeating here, but suffice it to say that his exploits in *Bullits* did as much for his image as his entire screen career before that. He has nurtured an ambition to make a realistic film about motor racing for many years but it was not considered 'box office' by the film moguls even though mundane screen epics like *Grand Prix* and *Winning* did well enough at the box office to change that view. He was all set to make a motor racing film called *The Champion* three years ago but illness put paid to that, then *Grand Prix* came along and the project was shelved. The ambition did not die and although he kept his hand in on such films as *The Thomas Crown Affair* (remember the beach buggy antics?) and *Bullit*, followed by *The River*, which is now on release, the idea of a motor racing film never moved far from his mind. The opportunity to do a film of Le Mans came up and now that he had his own production company he was less in the hand of film moguls, although the backers did kick up when he announced that he would drive with Jackie Stewart in this year's race. They had their way eventually and for three weeks McQueen was unapproachable, but he came round and properly now realize that it would have been expensive and awkward if he had been injured during the race.

McQueen felt that a good film could be made by filming a major motor race 'straight', without any serious attempt at providing a script. This horrified everyone connected with the film, who couldn't see the general public sitting through a 1½ hour film about pure motor racing with no 'love interest' or story of any kind. So McQueen was persuaded to accept a screenplay, but in the early days of shooting he fell out with first director John Sturgess over several things, but mainly the script. Sturgess finally quit the picture and a new director, Lee Katzin, was appointed. Katzin is mainly noted for his direction of TV series like *Mission Impossible* and *It Takes a Thief*, but he done film directions - his major success being *Whatever Happened to Aunt Alice?* He was on his way to San Francisco to do a TV movie when the call to Le mans came, but he quickly adapted to the new film, and is respected by the crew.

As a cynical and suspicious motoring journalist I approached the film set ready to pick holes in everything, but I came away impressed beyond measure. Everyone connected with the film is concerned in making it accurate in every possible way, even if the difference between doing it right and nearly right is thousands of dollars. Unlike *Grand Prix* in which F3 cars with ghastly looking simulated F1 bodies trundled round to the annoyance of enthusiasts, Le Mans uses 25 of the cars which took part in this year's race plus most of their drivers. The only serious faking that was done was to dress up a couple of Lolas to look like Ferrari 512S and a Porsche 917 for the crash scenes, because even Solar Productions blanched at the thought of shunting a pair of £14.000 cars. But I defy you to say when you see the film (hopefully June 1971 is the release date, just prior to next year's Le mans race) that you can tell the difference between a real Ferrari and the 'Lolari'. I had to have a good look round the 'Lolari' before I spotted the difference, and so lifelike is the dummy driver who occupies the driving seat during the shunt that I absentmindedly wandered up to have a chat to him!



Porsche 917 chasing a Ferrari 512S

There are two major crash sequences in the film. I was fortunate enough to be present when the 'Lolari' was crashed and afterwards I saw the rushes (that film jargon again!) of both that crash and the Porsche one. I can categorically state that they provide the finest racing car crash sequences I have ever seen. When the rushes were shown to the crew everyone burst into applause at the superb camerawork. Extensive use is made of slow motion film, which shows the 'Lolari' disintegrating in minute detail from every possible direction since 11 cameras were used to film the sequence. As no stunt were used be expected to hurtle into trees at 100 mph, control operation together with a cine camera inside the car to record the crash from the driver's viewpoint. British club driver Malcolm Sear assisted in setting up the cars for these shunts and can tell of many hairy moments as the guinea pig in the driving seat while being guided by radio control. The first two attempts to crash the 'Lolari' went wrong because the car veered off course and shunted the guard rails, but on the third attempt it hurtled down at full throttle in first gear (the car had a bog standard Chevy engine with hydraulic valve lifters so it couldn't come to much harm through over-revving) hit the sandbank at near 1000 mph and soared into the air, knocking down a Martini sign, brushing through the three tops, and crashing back to earth with an almighty thump which broke all the suspension. Since there was a camera crew only 50 yards ahead, Malcolm Sear cut the engine as soon as the car hit the bank, a fortuitous move because there would have been several dead or injured cameramen if he hadn't. The car had originally been intended to pass through the threes and knock them down, but it went so high that it passed over most of them. The crew had carefully sawn through the trunks of the trees so that they would snap off more spectacularly, but a high wind blew up a day or two before the crash was to be staged and blew several of them down! Miraculously, for the purposes of the film, the driver survives the crash and runs away just as the car blows up. Of course this sequence was shot several days later and dynamite was used to disintegrate the Lola. Amazingly, someone actually bought the tatty remains - so beware if you are in the market for a Lola T70 - if the vendor says it has blown up he really means it!



Ferrari or 'Lolari'?

One unintentional disaster was when the Ferrari 512S Derek Bell was driving caught fire and burnt out while returning from a filming sequence. Derek received some nasty face burns and the Ferrari was totaled, although someone bought *that* soggy heap, too! Professional to the last, one of the cameramen groaned 'Hell, and we didn't have a single camera there.' Poor David Piper also shunted his Porsche 917 when returning from a filming session, and he was unlucky enough to put himself out of action for some time with a badly broken leg.

The other intentional crash is that of another Lola dressed up to look like the Gulf Porsche that Steve McQueen drives in the film. This time the car is made to brush the guard rail near Maison Blanche, then thunder across the road to crunch the opposite barrier. The rushes of this sequence are again quite superb because the car is shown to disintegrate in slow motion, while the telephoto shots are some of the most superb action shots I have ever seen. McQueen (alias

Mike Delaney in the film) survives the crash, returns to the pits and takes over another Gulf Porsche. An amusing part of the crash which probably won't be seen in the final edited version is that the radio control equipment was damaged in the crash and there was no way of stopping the engine running at full throttle. The car wedged itself against a barrier and sat there with the rear wheels spinning until first the tyres then the mag wheels were ground away. Eventually a brave soul ventured into the smoke and switched it off.



A Porsche-wannabee Lola in a movie crash

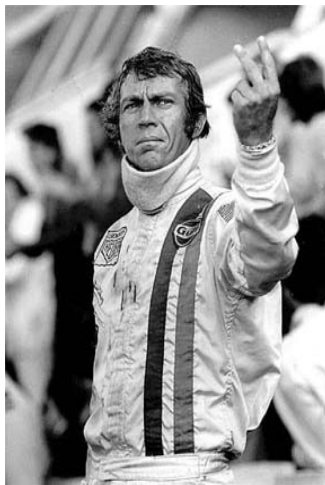
The film actually started way back in early 1969 when a film crew went to Le Mans to film the race and take mountains of notes about the circuit, the crowd, the cars, drivers, pit crew, girl friends, and all the million-and-one items which make up a motor race. Orders had to be placed for hundreds of items of clothing, like anoraks, umbrellas, caps plus mountains of other equipment. The drivers' Nomex equipment had to be spot-on, down to such minutiae as names and blood groups being stitched on the overalls, the decals on the cars had to be authentic, even the drivers' wrist watches had to be correct. Before the 1970 race all the owners of advertising signs were asked if they would leave their boardings in position for the film - not that any of them were likely to refuse such free advertising! But it all had to be taken down and stored because souvenir hunters would have nicked it. All the owners of trade caravans were asked if they could bring their vehicles back for the paddock scenes to give the authentic touch. The attention to detail ran to such items as making the drivers' suits dirtier as the race wore on - a difficult job as sometimes early were shot after late ones. The cars had to get dirtier as the race progressed and even worse, mechanics, drivers, spectators, photographers all had to sprout stubbly chins for the early morning scenes. The shooting schedule reminded everyone not to shave in the mornings before shooting started, and if anyone forgot, they had to be made up to look black bearded. Where possible the crew used real people to do the jobs they did at the actual race, so many marshals, gendarmes, mechanics and so on played the same part as they played in the real race. They even imported some real motor racing photographers to play themselves because the extras who were given the job originally did not look authentic. Your humble servant was even given the job of playing a cine cameraman, although he was a complete novice!

At The Movie - Part 2

The cost of setting up the operation runs into many millions of dollars - no one is quite certain just how much - but Solar Productions reckons to have spent four million dollars in the Le Mans area alone. The main problem was getting the use of the circuit, which uses a lot of normal public roads and runs past many houses, restaurants, factories, etc. The avaricious Automobile Club de L'Ouest and the Departement de la Sarthe were convinced that it would be a good idea to hire out the track, especially when Solar offered a 30.000 dollar fee! Another 30.000 dollar was spent on building the Solar village inside the circuit, this consists of a huge dining hall, offices, workshops, toilets, dormitories, and caravans, together with practically every facility that might be needed by the crew. Anything between 150 to 300 people are working on the film at any one time, plus up to 1000 extras in the crowd scenes. The huge 75mm Panavision

cameras are hired from a London firm at astronomical cost and consume film at a horrifying rate, especially during the slow motion sequences.

Perhaps the most expensive undertaking was to assemble the 25-car selection of sports cars and their drivers. There were four Ferraris, five Porsche 917s, three Porsche 908s, two Lolas, two Chevrons, four Porsche 911s, a Matra, a Ferrari 312, a GT40, a Porsche 914 and an Alfa Romeo 33. These were all assembled by ex-Lotus team manager Andrew Ferguson and kept running under appalling conditions by a team of mechanics who were housed in a huge garage owned by a caravan firm. The cars, most of which had got through the real Le Mans, had to do day after day of stop-start motoring over a three-month period. Surprisingly there were few breakdowns. The real drivers commuted back and forth from their various racing commitments, but the cars usually stayed at Le Mans, their owners suitably compensated for the loss of racing miles. The drivers, who were paid a minimum of 200 dollars (£80) a day, varied their time between hurtling down the Mulsanne Straight at 180 mph and sitting in their caravan playing chess, reading and getting thoroughly bored. In fact the big problem in film making is the time taken to set up a scene, which involves only a few people in the lighting, sound and camera departments. Everyone else stands around feeling completely useless. Two of the drivers actually get small parts in the film; Jonathan Williams plays Jonathan Burton, co-driver of Ferrari no. 5, and Eric Glavitz, the Austrian rally and racing driver, plays Joseph Hauser, co-driver of Ferrari no. 8.



Delaney asks for two more cup of coffee - we think!

Apart from McQueens few people will have heard of any of the other actors in the film, who seem to have been deliberately chosen for their anonymity. The only well known British actor is Ronald Leigh-Hunt, who plays the part of JWs team manager. Being a real professional he earned the accolade from one mechanic "He's more like David Yorke than David Yorke is!" So dedicated is he to his part that he even eats with the mechanics at his hotel in Le Mans. One or two of the actors over-act like mad both on and off the set, which I hope does not show through the film. Gino Cassani, who plays the Ferrari team manager, seemed most unconvincing to my inexperienced eye but at least he showed a fine turn of speed when an airline blew off its pipe in the pits. While everyone else stared curiously, Cassani was hotfooting it down the pit lane. What was that joke about the book of Italian heroes?

Everyone in the crew has some story or other to tell of his exploits. British sound engineer John Mitchell had to sit in the passenger seat of a 917 next to Rob Slotemaker while he hurtled down the Mulsanne Straight to record the noise of a Porsche on full song, and worst of all he had to record Slotemaker spinning the Porsche on a wet track. The cameramen who have had to sit in the jump seat of the special cut down GT40, and in cradles outrigged behind 917s, all have their tales to tell, but I can't repeat them as most of the camera crew are French, the chief cameraman being Rene Guissart, who filmed *Grand Prix*.

I won't spoil things by telling you the story of the film - it might change between now and next June anyway! However, Steve McQueen doesn't win the race after all and he doesn't get to kiss the leading lady. All I can say is that this will undoubtedly be the finest movie about motor racing yet seen. The shots taken from the Porsche 908 which took part in the race driven by

Jonathan Willaims and Herbert Linge are quite fantastic. Amazingly, had this car been eligible for the race it would have finished eighth overall despite its enormous load of two cameras. They didn't make pit stops for fuel, just new reels of film! The other action photography is also some of the best I have seen. You just can't afford to miss it.



A Ferrari 512S in a racing scene captured by the cameraman