

# JOHN FITCH

During 2004, my dear friend of more than 50 years, John Fitch and I wrote a book together, *Racing With Mercedes*, and a number of signings were scheduled during the Monterey Historics that year. John traveled from his home near Lime Rock (a track he designed) in Connecticut to California. Flying into Monterey is expensive and sometimes inconvenient, so John flew to Fresno where my friends—John and Ginny Dixon—and I picked him up at the airport.

After a rather hectic weekend, we drove him back to Fresno, but delivered him to a private home rather than the airport. Unbeknownst to anyone else then, it turned out that John had a parallel family then living in Fresno and he wanted to visit them. At the time, he was very reluctant to tell me about it since it was a secret from his wife, Elizabeth and their children. How this came about is a fascinating story.

In 1939, 22-year-old John Fitch was studying civil engineering at Lehigh University in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. In the spring of that year, he got wanderlust. “I wanted to see the world,” he told me. So he dropped out of college after one year, acquired a Fiat Topolino and drove to New York City. He had decided he wanted to tour Europe and, in order to see it close-up, his idea was to ride from London to Rome on a horse! So he got passage on a Dutch freighter and landed in England.

With war impending, he gave up on the horse idea and decided to tour the British Isles. So he bought a used MG Magnette, which, he said, “Was a beautiful little car with a great engine but a terrible chassis.” When the England declared war on Germany, John’s tour was cut short and he attempted to join the RAF Eagle Squadron of American volunteers. His application, however, was turned down as they then had enough pilots.

So Fitch returned home and ended up in Florida where he found a 32-foot sailboat for which he paid \$1,500 with money he had inherited from his grandfather. The Coast Guard was holding courses for volunteers to participate in its antisubmarine patrols, so John enrolled. With war looming, Fitch and his first mate, a girlfriend named Matilda he had met before going to England, sailed in and around the Gulf of Mexico for the next 12 months, looking for, but never finding German subs.



John and his first-mate aboard his 32-foot sailboat. In John’s case, the term, first-mate, had two meanings.

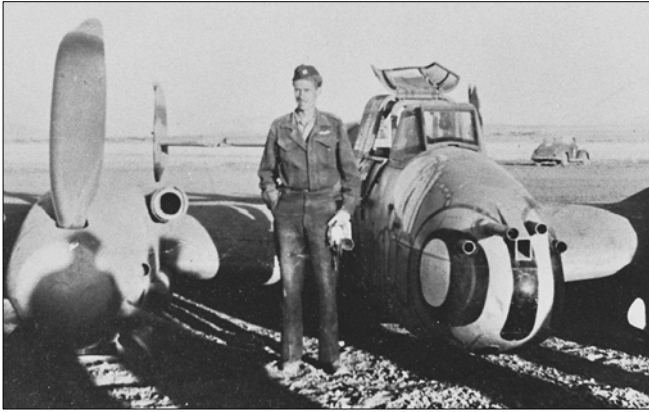
By 1941, it was obvious that America would become more involved in the war, so John sold his boat in New Orleans to a German immigrant, Karl Baskel. Leaving his girlfriend, John enlisted in the Army on April 29. After basic training, he was accepted for flight training and was sent to Turner Air Base, Georgia. On December 7, while on leave, he was attending the Army-Navy game in Philadelphia. When the game was over, everyone in uniform was ordered to report immediately to his or her unit. On December 12, John received his wings and was sent to Fort Dix, New Jersey where he patrolled the coastline.

In early 1942, John’s squadron, the 15<sup>th</sup> Bombardment, Light, was sent to England. It was the first American unit to arrive in the Europe. The problem was it didn’t have any planes. They had been mistakenly sent to Russia. So A-20 Havocs were borrowed from the RAF. The first mission was a bombing raid on occupied France. The date was July 4! All in all, John flew more than 50 missions to bomb targets in Western Europe that year.

Below: Pilots of the 15<sup>th</sup>. John is on the left.



In the fall, the 15<sup>th</sup> was sent to Algeria to support the North African campaign. They harassed German armor and supply depots while dicing with Focke-Wulf 190 fighters. After the invasion of Sicily and Italy, General Jimmy Doolittle ordered the unit to fly captured German aircraft for training purposes. While flying a Messerschmitt 110 bomber from Naples to Algeria, John was hit by American ground fire. When the landing gear failed to function, he had to crash land.



John with the 110 Messerschmitt after crash landing.

After his North Africa tour, Fitch was sent to Wright Field (now Wright-Patterson Air Force Base) to serve as a test pilot. His first job was testing a B-25 that had been converted into what was hoped to be a tank killer. A 75mm canon (without the caisson) had been fitted with a recoil device and installed into the aircraft. The pilot was also the aimer. The idea was to point the plane at a tank and fire the canon. Floating targets were placed in nearby Lake Erie where John flew and fired until the device was perfected. Subsequently, the 75mm B-25 was employed in the Pacific Theatre.

His next assignment was testing the maximum speed possible with a P-51. When flown at full throttle, the engine would soon fail due to overheating. So a water injection device was installed. John's task was to fly at 35,000 feet with full throttle until the engine blew. Then he had to make a "dead stick" landing. He kept at this until the device was fully developed.

While at Wright Field, John was reunited with his sailboat girlfriend and, although unmarried, they lived together for a time.

After returning to the European Theatre, John was assigned to the "Eagle Squadron" based in England. He flew P-51s to escort bombers to Germany. During that time, John shot down a

German jet, an almost impossible feat due to the jet's superior speed. By the end of 1944, there was no more Luftwaffe to threaten the bombers, so the fighters were redirected towards shooting at ground targets. In January 1945, John was trying to destroy a train engine near Ulm, a port on the Danube. While doing so, he was hit by anti-aircraft fire and had to bail out. As he jumped, he was hit by the tail of the P-51 and injured. He broke his leg when he landed near the burning aircraft. Soon, members of the German "Home Guard" arrived with pitchforks and axes looking to kill the pilot. John managed to hide under some nearby brush and eventually the Germans gave up the search.

John had an escape kit that included a compass. So when night came, he started towards the Allied lines. Wearing his American flight suit, he knew he couldn't walk during daylight hours. So when dawn broke, he hid in the loft of a barn and went to sleep. The next morning, he was wakened by the farmer who invited him into the farmhouse where he was treated like a neighbor. The wife prepared breakfast for John. He became acquainted with the couple as well as the farmer's daughter. But that's one story John has asked me not to tell.

Eventually, it became known that there was an American pilot there, so John was taken to the nearby town of Altdorf near Nuremberg. The mayor—a Nazi—wanted to kill John, struck him and threatened him with a knife. But members of the city council objected and John was turned over to German military authorities.

Afterwards he was transported with some other prisoners through the city of Nuremberg, which had been heavily damaged and was still being bombed. The group with their guards were attacked by angry townspeople and narrowly escaped.

When Fitch arrived at Oberursel, an interrogation center, he was placed in solitary confinement and put on a starvation diet. During the time, he was questioned to find out if he had any information that might be useful. The sessions were lengthy and there were two interrogators, a "good guy" and a "bad guy," both of whom, of course, spoke English. The bad guy was harsh, but there was no physical torture. After quite some time, the good guy revealed that he had lived in New Orleans.

But when the war started, he returned to Germany to serve. It turned out the good guy had a close friend in New Orleans, one Karl Baskel, the same person to whom Fitch had sold his sailboat. After that, a sort of friendship developed between the interrogator and Fitch. This took place in February and by March of 1945 and it was obvious to everyone that the Germans had lost the war. Eventually the good guy broke down, almost in tears, and confessed he had made a terrible mistake by returning to Germany. He had been happy and prosperous in New Orleans. He said now all was lost; he was ruined, as was Germany.

After the interrogation process, Fitch was moved to a Luftwaffe prisoner-of-war camp near Nuremberg. It was 150 miles or so from Oberursel, and the train was continually bombed and strafed, so the trip took three days. Two weeks later, the prisoners were moved by foot 100 miles to a POW camp at Moosburg near Munich. The long column of prisoners was strafed by allied planes and a number were killed.

General George Patton's son-in-law was among the Americans at the new camp. In the spring, the Seventh Army was approaching the prison camp and, after what Fitch called a "wild ground fight during which a few of us were shot," the guards fled. Fitch had not taken a shower for months, as there were no facilities for the prisoners. After the guards left, he and some others went to the guard's quarters to take showers. While there, General Patton came in and greeted each naked soldier personally. Finally, he said, "Well, now I have to go and kill some more Germans."

Eleven weeks after he was shot down, Fitch was flown to France on May 8, 1945. After brief stays in Paris and London, he sailed for home. His war was over.

Shortly after discharge, John went to Florida, bought a Taylorcraft float plane and started a small charter service. Through a mutual friend, he was invited to a party at the Kennedy compound. He met Joe and Rose's daughter, Kathleen, and they started to date. When Joe as the ambassador to the United Kingdom, Kathleen had met and married Lord Harrington. When her husband was killed in combat, she returned to the States to live with her parents.

John describes Kathleen as tall and athletic. She had an Irish sense of humor and was very perceptive regarding others' feelings. Still and all, as

the daughter of a U.K. ambassador and widow of an English Lord, she was very much a part of the "jet set," a term used by John before jet airliners.

John's dates with Kathleen included not only parties and dinners, but also less formal occasions such as the fishing excursion pictured here. The one of John and Rose was taken by Kathleen; the other by John. As a matter of fact, these are the only memorabilia John still has in his collection.



John on a fishing outing with Rose Kennedy. Photo taken by Kathleen.

Fitch recalled Joe Kennedy as a rather crude individual who flaunted his much younger girl friends in front of his family including Rose. John really liked Rose, who, he says, was a warm personality. He thinks it took great fortitude to put up with Joe. But it was a Catholic marriage that in those days didn't contemplate divorce.

JFK (called Jack by his friends) and Teddy were around too, but Bobby wasn't in Florida much. John remembers Teddy as a fat and obnoxious ten year old. He doesn't think the senator improved much since then.

One particular party at the compound sticks in John's memory. There were a great many guests and John had to relieve himself. Finding a long line at the facility, he repaired to a remote and secluded bush in the garden. While doing his duty on one side of the bush, he spied another guest doing the same on the other side: the former King of England!

As two veterans of relatively the same age, Jack and John became friends. They exchanged their war experiences. Jack was recuperating in Florida from injuries to his back sustained when his PT Boat was sunk.

John had been injured when he bailed out. John recalled one particular conversation. Lying around the pool, the two wondered what they would do with the rest of their lives. John remembers remarking that Jack would never have to worry about making a living. John suggested that Jack, without the need for money, could make a significant contribution in the nation's political life and the rest, of course, is history.

Kathleen was killed in a plane crash in 1948. John moved to White Plains, NY, bought an MGTC, and went racing.

The purpose of John's trip when we took him to Fresno in 2004 was to visit his long-ago first mate Matilda's family. When she became pregnant due to John's time at Wright Field, Matilda married another and had a daughter. Matilda had told her daughter the name of her real father, but Matilda's husband always thought he was the father. John kept in touch with his daughter and his grandchildren. John related these details to me only after the death of his wife, Elizabeth, who never knew John had another family.



He set himself up in business in White Plains with a foreign-car repair shop and raced the TC at the first Watkins Glen in 1948, placing second overall. His next race was in the TC in June 1949 at legendary Bridgehampton. The first Sebring event was held on December 31, 1950; Fitch won his class in a Jaguar XK120. Back home, he built his own sports car special, the famous Fitch-Whitmore Jaguar in which he won many SCCA races.

The car is so viable that it has been raced almost continually since its construction, now in vintage events. In 1951, he became the Sports Car Club of America's first National Champion.

On and off during the decade, John drove for Briggs Cunningham. John's and Brigg's first try at Le Mans was in 1951. John remembered that, "Here was this huge homebuilt American car

against a field of experienced factory teams. At the 18<sup>th</sup> hour we were running second overall. Only a Jaguar was ahead of us, one of the three factory cars and identical to the other two that had blown their engines. We were waiting for the third one to fail. It didn't. We did."

Due to John's drive at Le Mans, in 1952, Mercedes Benz Chief Engineer ask John to try out in a 300SL at the Nürburgring. While there, Ferry Porsche offered John a drive in a 356 Coupe in an all-Porsche event where he finished third. Also while at the Nürburgring, John suggested to Mercedes Benz team leader Alfred Neubauer that the company might want to consider entering the Carrera Panamericana. Some months later, John got a telegram asking him to drive in the famed Mexican Road Race. He did and it was a triumph for Mercedes. Their cars finished first and second with John in fourth.



Phil Walters (left) with Briggs Cunningham and John.

In 1953, he and Phil Walters won Sebring and placed third at Le Mans in a Cunningham C5R. While in Europe, John drove a Cooper-Bristol at Aix-les-Bains, a Frazer-Nash in the Tourist Trophy, a HWM-Alta at Monza and a Nash-Healy at the Mille Miglia.

I first became aware of John in 1953 when he came to California and won the first March Field race in a Cunningham C-4R. I was there taking pictures with my trusty Rolleiflex. He started out that year by winning Sebring as well as the SCCA National Championship.

His greatest year was 1955 when he was a member of the Mercedes-Benz team, which, led by Fangio and Moss, won everything. John told me that he thought his greatest drive was the Mille Miglia where he won the GT class in a production 300SL.

Originally, the factory had teamed Fitch with Denis Jenkinson as navigator. During practice, John invented a device, made out of wood that held a continuous roll of paper containing a map of the course. Stirling Moss, entered in an SLR, insisted on an all-British crew. So at the last minute Jenks was teamed with Moss. Jenks took the Fitch invention with him and the German mechanics constructed one out of metal. The rest is history. Moss and Jenks won overall.



John at the Mille Miglia just before tech inspection.

That same year in Northern Ireland, Fitch and co-driver, Stirling Moss, won the Tourist Trophy. Fitch was the co-driver of the 300SLR involved in the famous Le Mans disaster that occurred while Pierre Leveigh was at the wheel. Mercedes withdrew from racing at the end of 1955.

Many years later, I helped John write a book about his experiences with Mercedes Benz. The first edition of *Racing With Mercedes* was published in 2006. After all copies had been sold, the Saratoga Automobile Museum came out with a second edition. Copies are available online at [www.saratogaautomuseum.org](http://www.saratogaautomuseum.org).

In December 1955, Fitch wrote to Chevrolet Chief Engineer Ed Cole expressing John's interest regarding Corvette's competitive possibilities. He added that he would like to work with Cole as a consultant. As a result, Cole had John drive a stock Corvette on the Beach at Daytona in February 1956. He covered the Flying Mile at 145 mph, setting a new production-car record.

Following that, Fitch became the team manager for the Chevrolet effort at Sebring in 1956. Until then, Corvettes were boulevard cruisers and not selling well. GM was even considering

dropping the marque altogether. The cars were delivered to John at Sebring in mid February. Race day was March 24.



The cars lined up for the start of the 1956 12-Hours of Sebring. The Fitch/Hansgen car, No. 1, is at the far left.

In those few short weeks, John was able to do what GM Staff Engineer Zora Argus Duntov considered impossible. He turned them into serious competitors winning the production class and the team prize. John not only led the team, but also and drove at Sebring that year as well as the following year. In 1957, Corvettes placed first, second and fourth in class, taking the Team Prize for General Motors. In 1960 Fitch drove a Corvette at Le Mans as a member of the Cunningham team. He and co-driver Bob Grossman finished eighth.

John's 18-year racing career is the stuff of much legend, but his most significant contributions are in automotive safety. He designed the course at Lime Rock, among the safest in the world for drivers as well as spectators. Fitch's concern with safety began at Le Mans in 1955 when he was teamed with Pierre Leveigh. Before John took a turn at the wheel, Leveigh was involved in what many consider to be the most horrendous racing accident ever.

John took great satisfaction in his invention and development of Fitch Inertial Barriers. These ubiquitous barrels that line danger points on our thruways have saved countless lives. Most people assume they are just sand-filled barrels, but they are much more than that. Without going into the technology, suffice it to say that John was granted a patent, which, unfortunately, has now expired so he no longer receives royalties.

John and I became acquainted when we worked together during the sixties on advertising projects, he as driver and me as cinematographer.

For many years, whenever he was in California, we sailed together on my 30-foot boat. Since then, we kept in touch, mostly by telephone since we lived on opposite sides of the continent.



John celebrating a victory with his wife, Barbara.

In 1960, Fitch made his home near the race course at Lime Rock, Connecticut. The previous year, General Motors had come out with the rear-engined Corvair. John took the car, which was somewhat lacking in performance, and designed the Fitch Sprint and a more advanced version, the Fitch Phoenix. Unlike a normal Corvair, Sprints could, and did, hold their heads up on road racing circuits. In 1968, he performed the same surgery on the Pontiac Firebird.

During the early sixties, Lime Rock fell on hard times. Local law doesn't allow racing on Sundays. Fitch and Jim Haynes took over the company and put it back on its feet.

Racing with his friend and patron, Briggs Cunningham, John drove D-Type and Lister Jaguars at Lime Rock, Road America and Thompson among other venues. His last race, appropriately enough, was at the 1966 Sebring, teamed with Briggs and Davey Jordan. Their Porsche 904 broke a valve and they retired.

Always interested in safety, in addition to the Fitch Barriers he created Compression Barriers and Displaceable Guardrails for use on race tracks. Research he conducted has made racing



measurably safer for drivers, officials, spectators and everyone traversing our roads and highways.

On August 4, 2007, my dear friend John Fitch turned 90 years old. In this day and age of medical advances plus many of us watching our diets and exercising, 90 is not nearly as unusual as in previous times. At some 15 years younger, I never really enjoyed walking very far with John because he would tire me out.

On August 6, 2007, it was my great honor to host his birthday party at my home in Redondo Beach, California. My family was almost in revolt due to the numbers that came, among them Phil Hill and Carroll Shelby. Davey Jordan's wife, Norma, brought the cake. Bob Bondurant flew over from Phoenix to give John a copy of his just-published biography, *Bob Bondurant*, by Phil Henny.

John was in Los Angeles to present a paper to a Society of Automotive Engineers conference held in Hollywood on August 7, 2007. The paper was titled, "Are We Flat-Out for Survivable Deceleration? The 1955 Crash at Le Mans—Its Impact on Racing." It may have been the first time the society had heard from a speaker who hadn't graduated from college.

On October 24, 2008, the Petersen Automotive Museum in Los Angeles held a celebration to honor Corvettes as race cars. A large number of Corvette drivers were there, but John was the star. To help celebrate, I put together a book, *Racing With Corvettes, The Early Years*. We had a box of book hot off the press that John autographed for his fans.