

# JOHN FITCH

## THE WAR YEARS

**SAILOR, PILOT, RACE DRIVER, INVENTOR—THE INTREPID JOHN FITCH WAS RACING THROUGH LIFE EVEN BEFORE HE FIRST COMPETED IN AN MG TC. BY ART EVANS.**

**PHOTOGRAPHY FROM THE JOHN FITCH COLLECTION.**

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

After a rather hectic weekend, we drove Fitch back to Fresno, but delivered him to a private home rather than the airport. Unbeknownst to anyone else then, it turned out that Fitch had a parallel family living in Fresno that he wanted to visit. 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, Pa. 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 a year, acquired a Fiat Topolino and drove to New York City. He had decided 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 English 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 U.S. Coast Guard was holding courses for volunteers to participate in its anti-submarine patrols, so Fitch 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.

By 1941, it was obvious that America would become more involved in the war, so Fitch 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-



In his Army Air Corps uniform, Fitch served his country well.



Sailing with his first mate Matilda, Fitch enjoys his schooner, the "Banshee."

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 15th Bombardment, Light, was sent to England. It was the first American unit to arrive in Europe. The problem was it didn't have any planes. The aircraft 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. Overall, John flew more than 50 missions to bomb targets in Western Europe during that year.

In the fall, the 15th 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 fighter from Naples to Algeria, Fitch was hit by American ground fire. When the landing gear failed to function, he had to crash-land.

After his North Africa tour, Fitch was sent to Wright Field in Ohio (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 cannon (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 cannon. Floating targets were placed in nearby Lake Erie where Fitch flew and fired until the device was perfected. Subsequently, the 75mm B-25 was employed in the Pacific theater.

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. Fitch'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, Fitch was reunited with his sailboat girlfriend and, although unmarried, they lived together for a time.

After returning to the European theater, Fitch was assigned to the "Eagle Squadron" based in England. He flew P-51s to escort bombers to Germany. During that time, Fitch shot down a German Me 262, an almost impossible feat due to the jet's



John Fitch's beloved schooner, christened the "Banshee."



The 15th Bombardment Squadron, Fitch is on the left. On July 4, 1942, crews and aircraft of the 15th were the first USAAF unit to bomb targets in occupied Europe.

superior speed. By the end of 1944, there was no more Luftwaffe to threaten the bombers, so the U.S. fighter planes were redirected towards shooting at ground targets. To that end in January 1945, Fitch was trying to destroy a locomotive 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. Fitch managed to hide under some nearby brush and eventually the Germans gave up the search.

Fitch 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 awakened by the farmer, who invited him into the farmhouse where he was treated

well and remained there in hiding nursing his injuries.

Eventually, it became known that there was an American pilot there, so Fitch 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 Fitch 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 in Oberursel at an interrogation center, he was placed in solitary confinement and put on a starvation diet. During that 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 that 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 it was obvious to everyone that the Germans had lost the war.

After the interrogation process, Fitch was moved to a Luftwaffe POW 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.

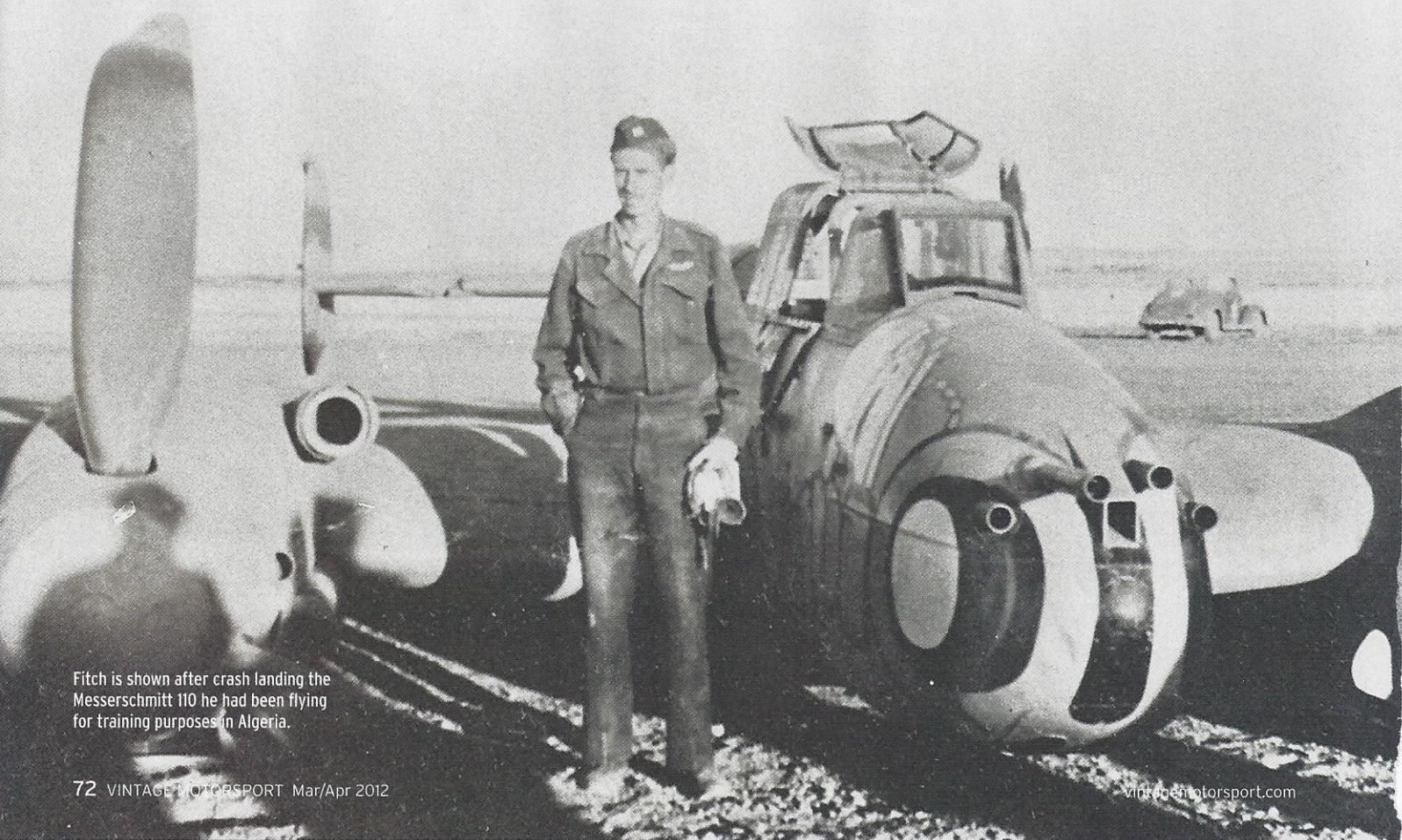
General George Patton’s son-in-law was among the Americans at the new camp. In the spring, the Seventh Army was approaching the prison camp and, after what Fitch called a “wild ground fight during which a few of us were shot,” the guards fled. Fitch had not taken a shower for months, as there were no facilities for the prisoners. After the guards left, he and some others went to the guard’s quarters to clean up.

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.”

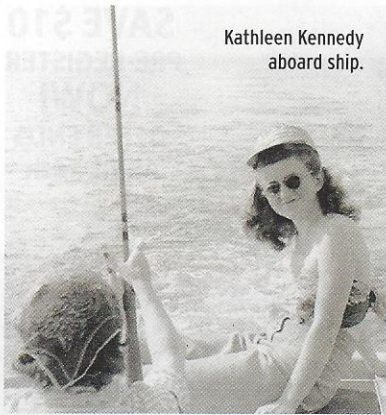
Eleven weeks after he was shot down, Fitch was flown to France on May 8, 1945. After brief stays in Paris and London, he sailed for home. His war was over.

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 Kennedy’s daughter, Kathleen, and they started to date. When Joe was the ambassador to the UK, Kathleen had met and married Lord Hartington. When her husband was killed in combat, she returned to the States to live with her parents.

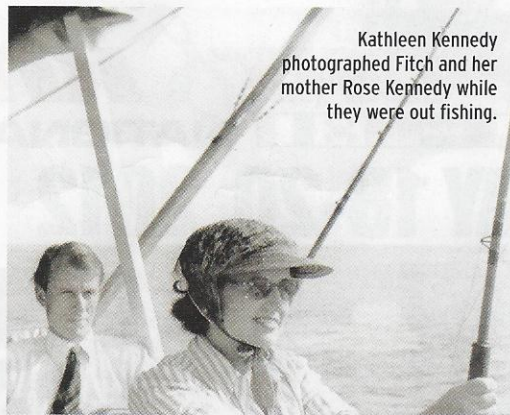
Fitch describes Kathleen as tall and athletic. She had an Irish sense of humor and was very perceptive regarding others’ feelings. Still and all, as the daughter of a



Fitch is shown after crash landing the Messerschmitt 110 he had been flying for training purposes in Algeria.



Kathleen Kennedy  
aboard ship.



Kathleen Kennedy  
photographed Fitch and her  
mother Rose Kennedy while  
they were out fishing.



Fitch poses with a P51, similar  
to the one he flew in Europe  
after the invasion.

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 there were jet airliners.

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

Fitch recalls Joe Kennedy as a rather crude individual who flaunted his much younger girlfriends 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 10-year-old. He doesn’t think the senator improved much after that.

One particular party at the compound sticks in Fitch’s memory. There were a great many guests and Fitch 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, JFK and Fitch became friends. They exchanged their war experiences. Jack was recuperating in Florida from injuries to his back sustained when his PT boat was sunk. Fitch recalled one particular conversation: lying around the pool, the two wondered what they would do with the rest of their lives. Fitch remembers remarking that Jack would never have to worry about making a living. He 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. Fitch moved to White Plains, N.Y., bought an MGTC, and went racing.

The purpose of Fitch’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. Fitch still keeps in touch with his daughter and his grandchildren. Fitch related these details to me only after the death of his wife, Elizabeth, who never knew John had another family. ❧

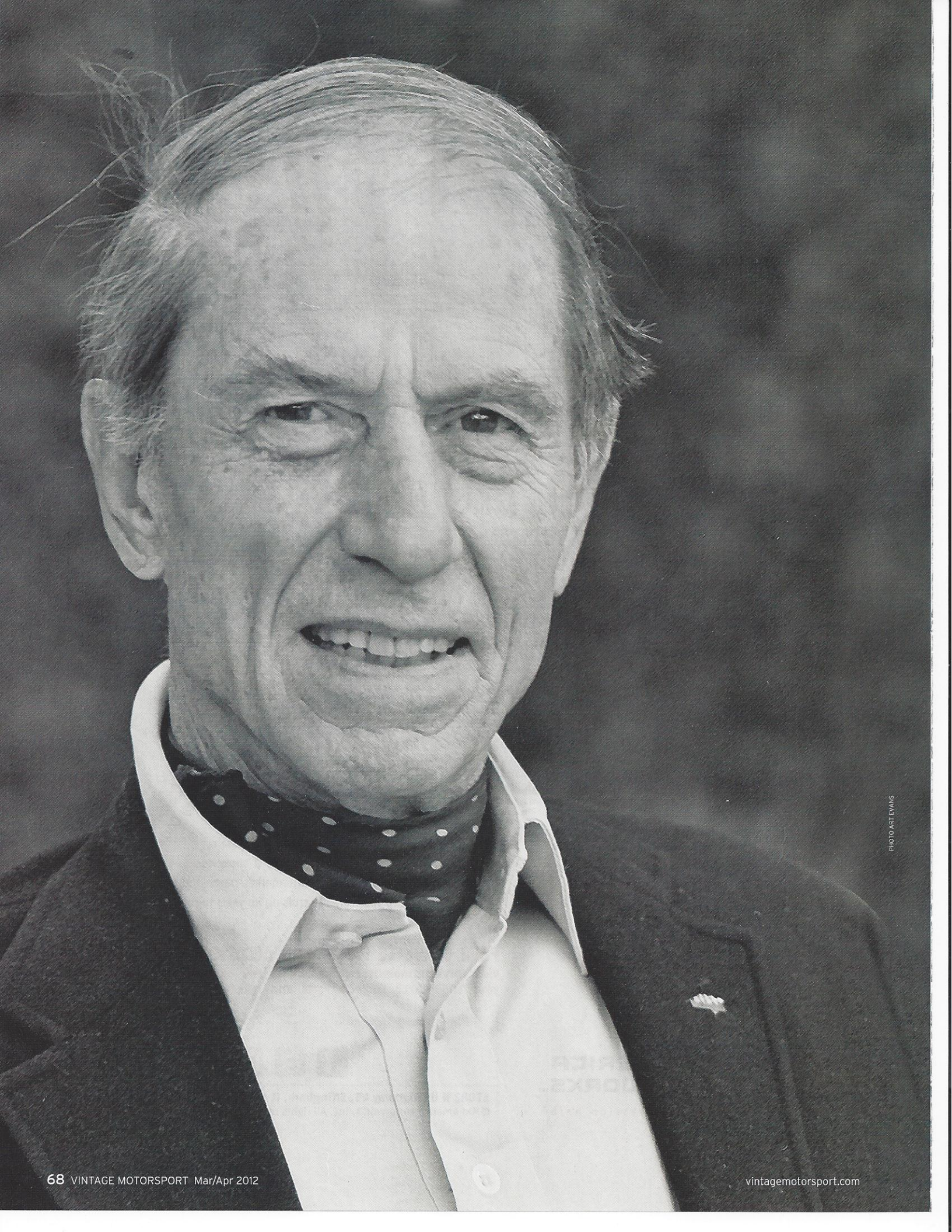


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