

MOTORING

I join a shooting squad

Gordon Wilkins

WHEN I GO TO THE CINEMA I AM happy to be deceived, for I am always fascinated by the miracles the property men and scene builders can perform with lath, plaster and other simple materials. Part of the fascination is trying to spot the flaws that give away how it was done. Sometimes the laws of nature defeat the technicians. In a sea battle, they may go to enormous trouble to build scale-model ships complete with miniature guns fired electrically, belching forth real smoke and flame—but you can't make scale-size waves to perfection, for the drops of spray which are torn off the top by the wind machines usually look like great blobs the size of a man's head and give the whole game away.

So I knew I was taking on a tough assignment when M.G.M. invited me last summer to be technical adviser on their motor-racing film *The Green Helmet*, which has just been released. The tempo of production matched the speed of the subject. Chuck Vetter, the producer, was creating something of a record by having bought Jon Cleary's novel, got the film story written, found the director and cast and started production in only seven weeks. Mike Forlong, the director, was determined that the film was not going to be just one more "ludicrous beanfeast of histrionics" as he put it. But recreating three major motor races, Le Mans, Sebring and the Mille Miglia, on a limited budget is not easy, particularly in the fickle English climate.

My dream of designing an original new body for the *Launer Special*,

the key sports-car in the film, was replaced by a frantic weekend of work with the studio technicians transforming a Lister Jaguar with hastily sketched nose, carburetter air intake and new rear wings. And no sooner was it completed than it was wrecked in a real, not a faked, crash on a road near the Llanberis pass, that had been disguised with Italian signs and stone posts to look like part of the Mille Miglia course. Within hours another identical Lister Jaguar had been acquired, disguised and pressed into use, while mechanics went to work to make the wrecked one look like a new car, half-built, for some of the garage interior shots.

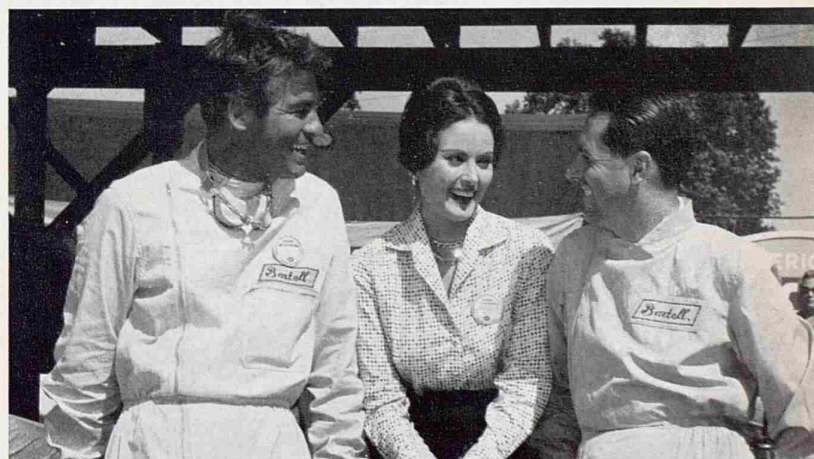
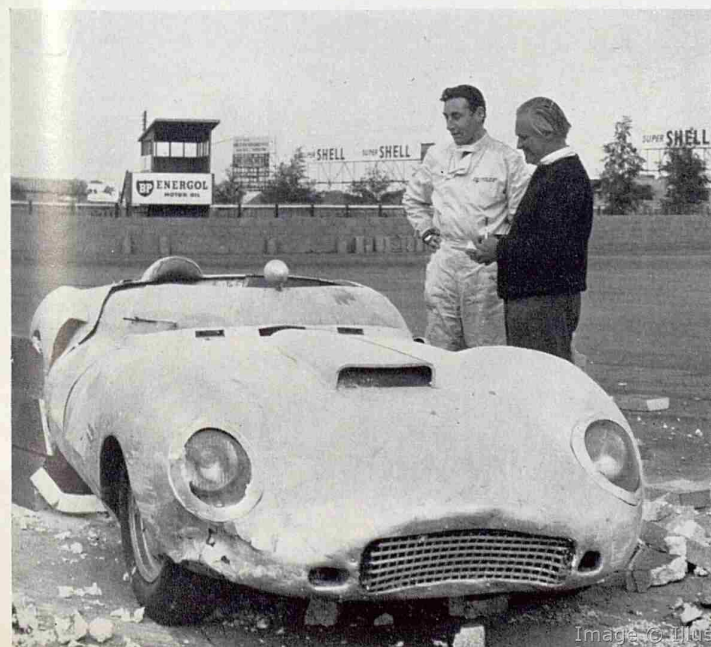
Expensive days went by with the stars, Bill Travers, Nancy Walters, Syd James and Ed Begley, plus a small army of technicians and extras, sitting around at Silverstone waiting for the rain to stop. And when it did, new problems arose. Late one afternoon after a wasted day the sun came out. So make-up and property men went to work, the cars were dried off and warmed up, lighting and camera crews set up the shots and everything was ready to roll—when the continuity girl pointed out that the sun had now completely dried the track. This would never do, because the previous shot had shown a *wet* track. So everyone stopped while the fire brigade pumped 400 gallons of water on to the track, but by the time they had finished it was raining again, and shooting was off for the day.

Another whole afternoon went by while a stunt driver tried to overturn an elderly Oldsmobile, acquired for

a crash scene. First its ignition system failed. Then the jolting stirred up dirt in the tank which blocked its whole fuel system. Finally, in desperation, the producer himself put his own car behind it and pushed it flat out to its doom up a ramp where it took off and rolled over and over to an accompaniment of smoke and flame effects.

The pits at Le Mans and Sebring, and the starting ramp at the Mille Miglia were recreated with minute accuracy on the outdoor studio lots. During the all-night sessions when the pit scenes at Le Mans were shot it was easy to imagine that one was really watching the race again. The shots of the Mille Miglia start, too, have been interspersed so skilfully with contemporary film taken during a real race that I sometimes found it difficult to sort them out.

Roy Salvadori and John Coundley spent hours doing the stunt driving for race and test run incidents at Silverstone, handicapped to a surprising extent by the inherent stability of the modern sports and racing car, which gives it a high natural resistance to spectacular skids and spins of the premeditated kind. What with the weather and the technical problems, one of the most spectacular accidents, where the Lister Jaguar (driven by Roy Salvadori) crashes through a retaining wall, had to be shot late in a dismal evening just as the sun was setting. It was difficult to see how this was going to match up with earlier shots made on a bright sunny morning, but camera men and printing laboratories are also full of resource and ingenuity.



Filming *The Green Helmet*: Driver Roy Salvadori discusses with director Mike Forlong a car he has expertly slidden through a retaining wall at Silverstone. Above: Bill Travers and Nancy Walters, the stars, with world champion driver Jack Brabham, who also took a leading part