

MARATHON

Navigator's eye view of a Dolomite. The grille lets the hot air out of a very warm Sprite.

Shipshape and Speedwell fashion for the start in Liege. The chances of coming back from the rally equally undented are about 10 to 1 against; and 3 to 1 against coming back with the rally at all.



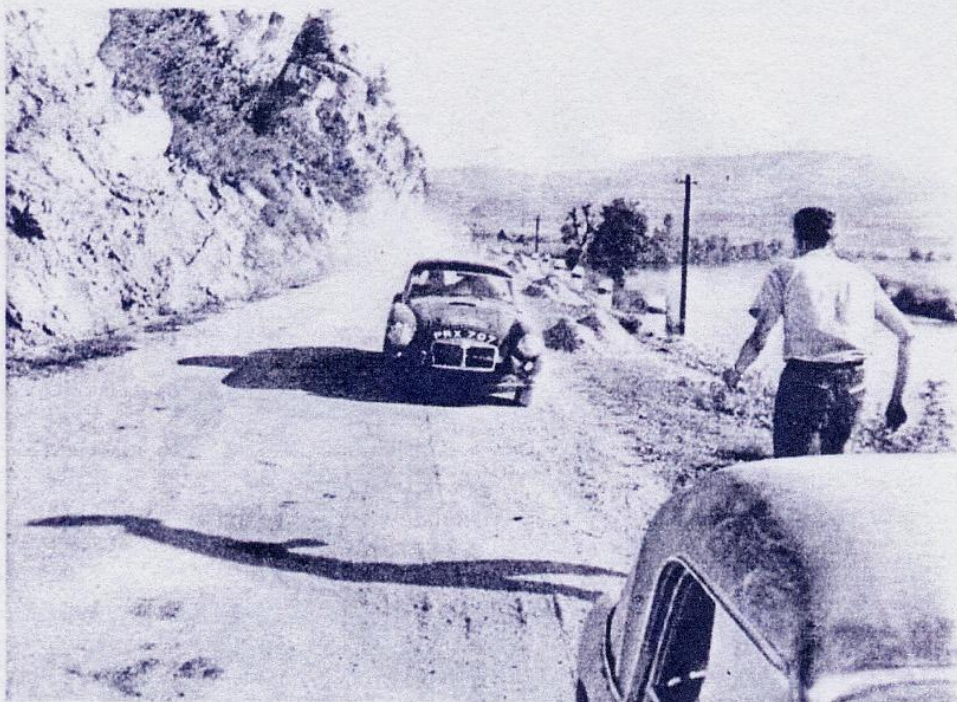
I ASKED Willy Cave (who had gone with John Sprinzel in the Sprite) how he had enjoyed the Alpine Rally.

Willy said Not Much, he goes rather fast downhill; which coming from him is the sort of statement that ought to make anybody in his right mind remember a good reason for not being able to go on Liege-Rome-Liege in the Speedwell Sprite after all. Still, I didn't think I had better let Sprinzel go off for four days on his own in case he forgot the Yugoslav for Excuse me I have just run over your cow—three cheers for Marshal Tito. So there we were in Liege one August night, pretending we were going to enjoy it.

The important thing about training for a big rally is to make sure you relax and get plenty of sleep. John takes it so seriously that he stretched out on the bench before dinner before the start because, as he pointed out, he just hadn't been able to find time to relax before then. If it had not been for some people having a motor race in Portugal three days before I might easily have been in training myself. Anyway we had some splendid multi-coloured pills for keeping awake, and I bought a rubber cushion in case one of us should be deaf enough to sleep in a Sprite which had been approximately screwed together again after winning its class in the Alpine.

The Marathon, you will remember, is a competition for Touring and Grand Touring cars, so that the public will know that the winner did it all in a car just like the one the public takes the kids to school in. You only have to look around the scrutineers' enclosure in Liege to see how severe the regulations are about this sort of thing. I doubt if anybody even had a supercharger fitted when they put the identification marks on at the start. What is so nice about the "Liege" is that they never listen to protests even if anybody makes one, so all the bother of examining the cars at the end is avoided.

We persuaded John's chums not to weld a new silencer



Pit stop. Sprinzel advancing towards Team Captain Gott (stopping) to confess. Please, we have lost our wheel...

MISLAID

How We Brought the
Good News from
Liege to Banja Luka

by RICHARD BENSTED-SMITH

on to the panel under my feet and take the exhaust straight out sideways, so they welded it straight along under my seat instead to stop me getting rigor mortis on the special stages, and we woke John up after dinner and shoved off from Spa absolutely bursting with hope and mineral water gazeuze.

Going across the tricky part of Germany John drove and I navigated. Then on the Autobahn I drove and John slept, and on the next section across Austria John drove and I sat and cooked on the exhaust pipe, which is the sort of justice you get for being a navigator.

Rally drivers have a tendency to suck their teeth and say Tut Tut when you speak about the Moistrocca Pass which starts a few miles beyond the Yugoslav frontier, but I suspect that this is mostly idleness because the Moistrocca consists of a lot of little short straights joined by hairpins, where even a driver cannot get lost unless he turns left when the hairpin goes right. In consequence navigators are able to conserve their valuable strength, commenting merely upon the passing landscape, the parentage of rally organizers, the great gulf fixed between the mentalities of brilliant, intelligent navigators and moronic drivers, and so forth.

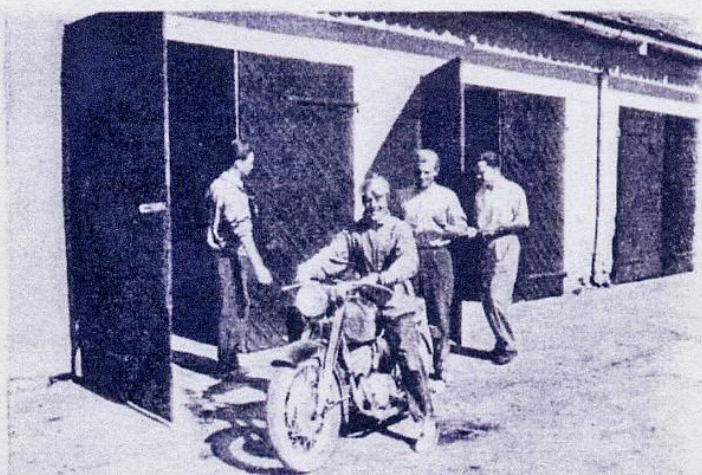
We put our crash helmets on at Predil.

On the way down into the valley I even offered a good deal of most sensible advice, saying "No" quite loudly every time John changed up into third on a 1 in 10 descent with a dust surface and a blind corner just ahead. On one occasion, I remember, he went so far as to apologize for going so slowly. We passed a Renault Alpine going down, and somewhere at the bottom we caught a fairly special sort of D.K.W. which had started two minutes ahead, and then just at the beginning of the big climb we passed the D.B. ahead of that, so Sprinzel stopped moaning about his driving and complained that they would all catch up again now because of our high second gear. When we reached the top, which is



Saviour Mk. 1 recovering from immersion after recovering wheel from tributary of Danube...

Saviour Mk. II (Big Brother) demonstrating latest, slightly sprung Yugoslav motorcycle.

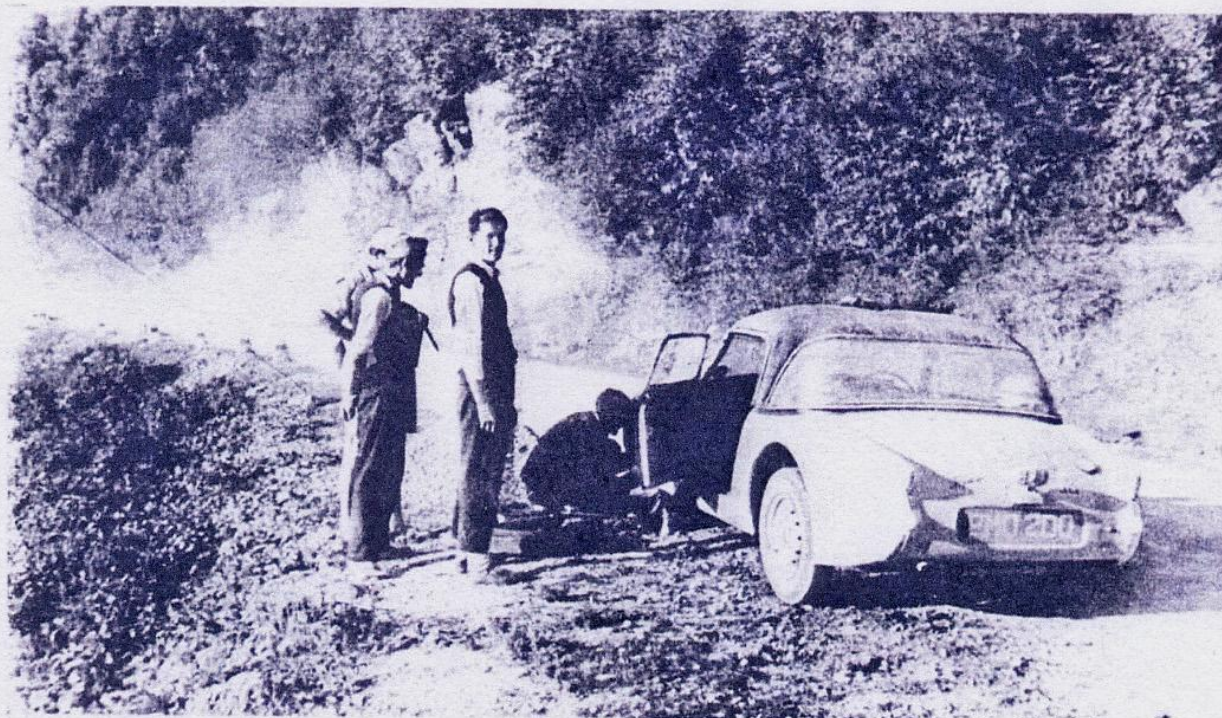
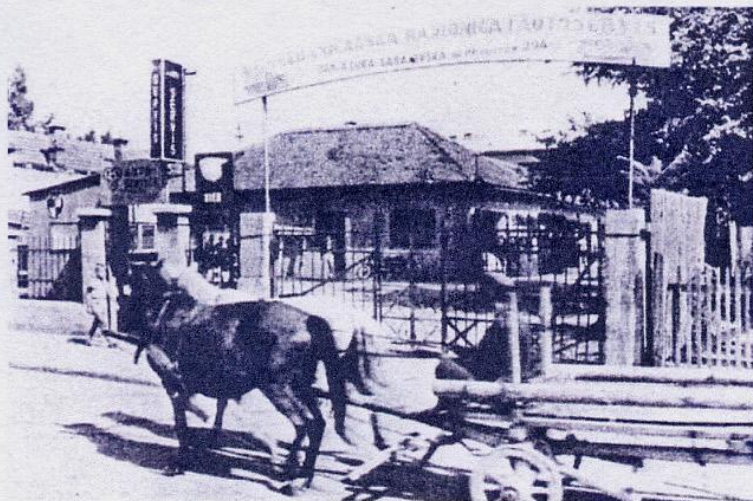


MARATHON MISLAID

Left: Spare parts depot. All spares for Austin, Jaguar or any other make constructed on the premises...

Right: Retreat. At least you have time to stop and admire the view on the road from Zagreb to the coast.

Below: Reassembly. Four wheels, three brakes and a stub axle which started life as a half-shaft are quite sufficient to bring a Sprite back from Yugoslavia.



3,000 feet from the bottom in seven miles of road, the D.B. was out of sight behind and we had a minute in hand after 45 minutes at a 37 m.p.h. average. On the way down the engine cut. We coaxed and prayed, coasted half a mile power-sliding the hairpins with no power, stopped for a quarter of an hour to find and fix a petrol pump lead buried in the depths of the tail and broken by unsecured tools, restarted and found the control two hairpins ahead, where we could have coasted in almost on time.

When John had finished speaking about car preparation in general and his mechanics in particular without ever using more than four short words (he only admitted later to the loose tools) I spoke briefly about pessimistic drivers and we continued. Yugoslav main roads are considerably better than two years ago in that part of the country, particularly in the existence of road signs and direction boards where none existed before. The drive to Rijeka was uneventful, though foggy. From Rijeka there is a splendid main road curving over the hills inland to Zagreb, and from Zagreb there is a practically genuine concrete motor road going south-east in a straight line towards Belgrade. Dawn arrived with the washboard minor road to Bosnia

Gradiska just in time to dispel the idea that Yugoslavia was going to be a snip.

The washboard was hideous. According to the stiffness of your springs, you can find a speed for any car at which the wheels will "float" over the crests, but the stiffer the springs the higher the speed, and with a Sprite you need to be going a lot faster than it is reassuring to go when the fog subsides only to be replaced by dust clouds from the cars ahead.

Water With It

Bosnia Gradiska is a very small spot on good maps of Yugoslavia, where they do not see a great number of motor vehicles at the best of times. At 4.45 a.m. it is, understandably, asleep; at 5 o'clock it bustles with life apparently regardless of the presence of idiot foreigners. Half the rally made for a café to knock back salami buns for breakfast and stare baffled at Yugoslav coffee which comes in a miniature Turkish copper pot with a glass of water on the tray to take the taste away. The way they do it in Bosnia Gradiska there is a lot to be said for the water.



The washboard was worse on the next stretch. They have an artificial section at the M.I.R.A. proving ground, but the people who think that continental testing is now superfluous would do well to try a few thousand miles off the reel in places like the province of Bosnia. I was having a small snooze after breakfast when the wheel came off (we breakfast early in those parts, and the surface had improved to merely abominable). By the time I came to, John was half out of the car speaking urgently about hubs. By the time I was out, the wheel was 50 yards away in a nearby tributary of the Danube and making resolutely for Rumania. "My wheel!" cried Sprinzel, "A kingdom, or words to that effect, for my wheel," thereby prompting a solid Yugoslav comrade to respond to the chance of a cheap monarchy by peeling his clothes off and swimming to the rescue.

Home-made Spares

After that, I am bound to admit, the story begins to border on fantasy. In ten minutes or so we had a dozen locals offering mute sympathy while we peered at the wheel, the broken stub axle and the map of Yugoslavia, wondering how many days' mule-ride it might be to an Austin agent. Odd peasants arrived at intervals with a look of triumph and a brake shoe from somewhere up the road to Banja Luka. Every couple of minutes another rally car churned past and spread another layer of dust impartially over the scene, but it hardly seemed to matter. It just seemed a long way to an Austin agent, even when John Gott and the M.G.A. turned up and we passed word on for the benefit of friends and relations.

Eventually a small sympathizer disappeared and came back with an elder brother possessed of a motorcycle and a red armband which presumably made him either a postman or a party member. John kindly suggested that as I was writing the story he would forgo the pleasure of this new experience and stay with the car, so big brother sat on his motorcycle and I sat behind him with my feet on the exhaust pipes (which was nothing new), and small brother sat behind me with his feet on mine, I think. Actually, owing to big brother riding exclusively on the

left of the road because it was not quite as rough as our side, and all the rally competitors coming the other way on the right of the road, and the dust, and the back springs of the motorcycle having no oil in them, I never made sure whose feet were on whose, but I know I had cramp in mine.

After a time I subordinated the flesh, as there wasn't much alternative, and fell to contemplating the strange things that happen to reporters 950 miles from home as the crow flies. The morning sun shone, and the motorcycle went pitter-pitter-pitter-Put-Put-pitter-Put-pitter the way that two-strokes do, and the tributary of the Danube twinkled along beside us. Every now and again the motorcycle went Clonk in a pothole and small brother and I rose briefly into the air, but I hardly noticed. It was a pleasant, green valley. There were cottages with sunflowers in the back yard cultivated after a fashion by barefooted brown peasants who get along much as they have done for hundreds of years, Kruschew, Tito and President Eisenhower notwithstanding. They sing to pass the time on a fine morning in the fair land of Bosnia; even big brother sang on the front seat—the same sort of song we had heard across the valley where John was sitting with the car.

At the end of an hour the motorcycle went pitter-Put-POUF. Big brother jumped off and beckoned me to a cottage with signs indicating plainly that he thought it was time we had one. Now if you do not know what it feels like to be really frustrated, try 20 miles on a dirt road and a motorcycle with no oil in the springs as a preliminary to finding yourself in a wayside pub without even knowing how to say yes. Mercifully, big brother came up at last with my only word of Russian, which oddly enough is the one for beer. We had one.

After that we came back to reality and it was all quite easy. The mechanic in Banja Luka garage murmured sympathetically, vanished with the pieces of stub axle and came back in a few hours with a new one turned from a discarded half-shaft, English thread and all. We rescued John and the car, and we made Liege before the rally came home. And if you want to drive over the Grossglockner in a Sprite with only one front brake, so far as I can see there is no reason why you shouldn't.