

Flying on wheels

By Alessandro Maschi (translation by Giovanni Uguccioni)

Early '60s. Contrasting signals between war and peace cross the world: in the USA Kennedy is elected President and Martin Luther King gives birth to the civil rights movement; the USA compete with the Soviet Union to land a man on the Moon and at the same time the Cold War reaches an apex with the failed invasion in the Bay of Pigs in Cuba and the construction of the Berlin Wall. In Europe, the first Beatles record starts ideally the “cultural revolution” that will mark the next decade and a whole generation.

In these same years Europe is seen through the eyes of Michael Sullivan, a young USA Navy pilot, just married and based in the UK as “*exchange pilot*” with the RAF.

Being selected to fly with the RAF is actually an honor – he says – as only three Marine pilots are chosen every two years for this duty and it's highly sought after duty as Marines seldom get to serve in Europe except on an aircraft carrier or amphibious ships in the Mediterranean for a seven month long deployment.



Michael Sullivan and his TR3A in front of his house in Wroxham, 1961.

For a Californian the first impact with Northern Europe climatic conditions was shocking. As Michael – pictured above in front of his home in Wroxham, a small village 7 miles North of Norwich – recalls:

The house was built by an RAF Wing Commander who had an exchange tour in the US and he modeled after that home. The trouble was he didn't put double pane windows in his house and we had a huge bay window looking out over the rear garden. The cold winds seemed to come right through! I was cold eight months out of the year and carried a paraffin heater that looked like a big lantern around with me during the winter months. I got several slight burns from getting too close to it! The Brits keep their homes about 10 degrees colder than Americans. The owner had installed a radiator system where the water was heated by coal. You couldn't get enough coal into the furnace to make the water or radiators very warm, and you could grab the radiator and it was just warm! I was sitting in ground school one morning after breakfast, up near Ripon at RAF Leeming while checking out in the Javelin when I first arrived in the UK. I was freezing and had on my uniform and my overcoat over that plus gloves. A big Brit pilot comes into the room and says, "My God, it's stuffy in here!" and goes over and opens a large classroom window all the way! It took a while for me to get acclimatized and I really never did as I was from Southern California.

The hostile weather however does not inhibit him to conform to the British style when, in January 1960, he buys his first European car, choosing without hesitation a British roadster. His choice was the Triumph TR3A, considered by all his buddies head and shoulder above the MGA and Austin Healey of the same period. He order a left hand drive model, anticipating to take her to the USA at



A red TR3 passing Chamonix, in France.

the end of his appointment, and well equipped: hard top, soft top e tonneau cover. Red, as the TR3s owned by two of his friends: they took a photograph of the three cars lined up in front of a *Gloster Javelin* – the two-engine jet deployed by RAF – and sent the shot to Triumph, hoping in a “thank you” letter or to have it published in some magazine, but Triumph did never answered.

In the 1960 summer, Michael and his wife leave Britain in their TR3A to discover Western Europe traveling through France, Switzerland and Italy, and in 1961

their tour was through Holland, Germany, Denmark and Sweden. Thanks to his diplomatic passport, crossing borders is not a problem and the US Army coupons allows to reduce significantly the cost of fuel. Moving in a TR3 does not allow to go unnoticed and everywhere people approaches them to admire this uncommon sport car; however, it is not only his own “ego” to be satisfied...

I was young so I didn't notice if it was uncomfortable as I loved the shifting of gears, the acceleration, the cornering and the feel you had strapped on a fighter jet! It was a wonderful machine! All in all, having the TR3A made traveling through Europe really special and it could go any place, climb any hill, easy to park and was so much fun to drive... You really felt like you were something special driving a high performance sports car and sitting so close to the road!

Sports cars today are getting like boats as they're too glitzy with all options included while they're losing the thrill of driving a basic, rugged, high performance machine. They've lost their basic simplicity and the price to buy one eliminates all but the rich!



Michael posing near Arc de Triomf in Barcellona, 1961.

Traveling through Europe in the Sixties means to cross a whole Continent not yet globalised, and confront oneself with deeply different cultures and sceneries, where few hundreds of kilometers entails significant changes in landscapes and in the living conditions of people. An holiday can then

be transformed in a travel through thousands of years of history, where apparently insignificant details are the consequence of events occurred through generations.

It was really nice traveling through the countryside and seeing the beautiful scenery and culture in each country. I remember having snowball fights in the Alps, as the St. Gotthard Pass we traveled through had just been opened to road traffic as they'd had closed it due to a huge snow storm.

What remains, today, of that Europe?

Each country was different and had its own characteristics and style, however, when I go back today they're all pretty much the same and I might as well be in the US in many places... I think Europe has lost much of its charm and has gotten too greedy to make money like in the US. Traffic jams are common place in most cities where in the early 1960's there were none! Many of the buildings are modern and have a cheaper, bland look as compared to the old architecture which was magnificent. Same in the US where everything is "plastic"... I'm glad I was initially able to see Europe in a more genteel and less congested time.



Postcards from Spain: the road from Leon to Oviedo (on the left) and the beach in Lloret de Mar (on the right).

The routes followed by Michael passed also through Italy, and he still has positive memories of it.

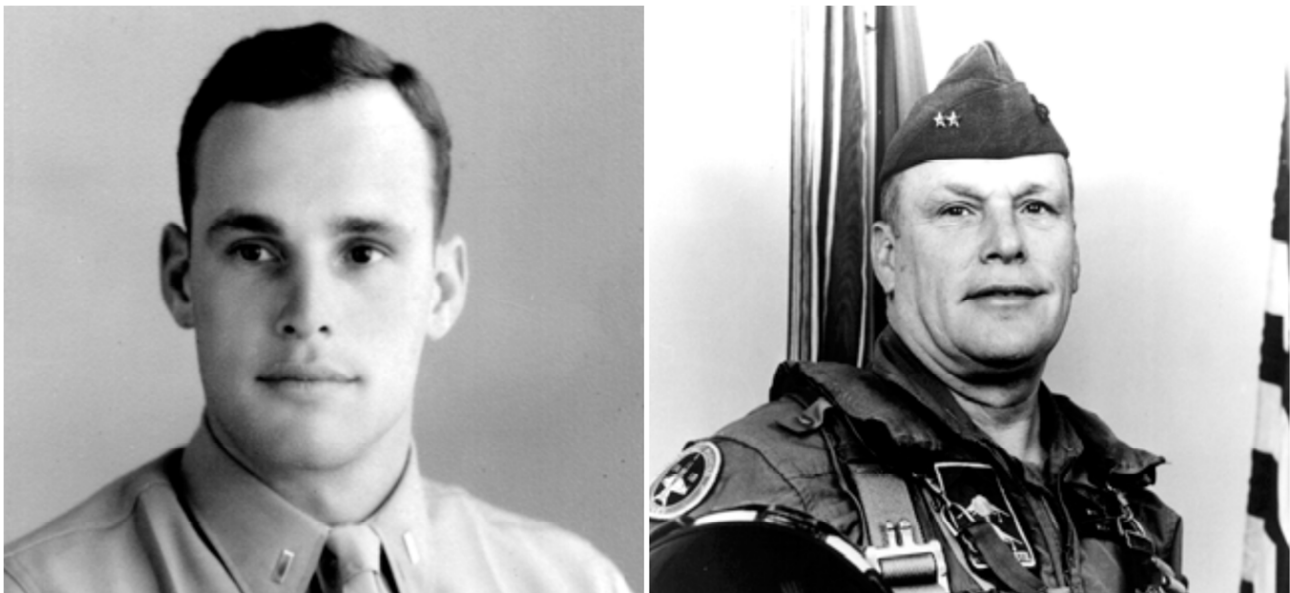
We traveled as far south as Rome, saw Naples, Milan and then spent a week in a wonderful hotel in the foothills in San Remo going to the beach every day as we didn't see the sun that much in England and being from California we really missed it! The ambience, food, the view and the owners were all fantastic. Everything was superb! I fell in love with Italy and have been back several times and have visited all over the country from Sicily to Switzerland. I enjoy the happy, friendly mood of the Italian people so much as regardless of some trying times, Italians seem to always keep a smile on their face and a positive outlook!

But travels are also made of episodes and anecdotes. One in particular is still well alive in his mind.

I was driving across the hook of Holland up on the North Sea and it was a 20 mile straight open road. I had the TR3A as fast as it would go for almost the entire distance and the speedometer was bouncing around and a little over 110 MPH and the RPM gauge was bouncing on and off the maximum peg! Low and behold, I get passed by a Mercedes like I was standing still... I finally caught up with the driver at a ferry we had to take to continue our journey along the highway. He was a very distinguished looking, tall German with gray hair and a dueling scar on his cheek... He was standing outside and leaning on his car. He looked at me, I was 26 then, with sort of a condescending look and eyeing the TR up and down implicating "You may have won the war but I have the fastest car". Great times great memories...

Even if the TR3A could not compete with the German engineering, she was his partner for some more years, until his children grew too much to stay in the rear bench and required a more roomy car. In the '70s he became a testing pilot, flying with *F4 Phantom* and *F8* in San Diego, and he bought a second-hand TR3, a bit older than his original one and without hard top. She was in very bad conditions, but the mechanic on duty in Michael's air base took care of it and she eventually became a respectable sport car, with many aeronautical components in the engine.

Years passed, and Michael's passion for sport cars faded out, replaced by the need for more comfortable cars. However, it is not difficult to imagine that in his heart and mind stay enduringly the memories of his travels, and of the miles traveled with a rough and masculine but certainly sincere and exciting Triumph, discovering an Europe that was slowly recovering from the destructions of War and that today, probably, does not exist anymore.



Michael Sullivan at the beginning and at the end of his military career. Photos taken from <http://www.epnaao.com>

ABOUT MICHAEL SULLIVAN

Son of C. Gardner Sullivan, well known Hollywood screenwriter, and of Anne May, actress, Michael grew up in Beverly Hills and attended the San Diego State University. Enlisted in the Marines at the beginning of the '50s, he served in Vietnam and carried on his military career up to his leave as *Major General*. Among his many honors, the *Alfred A. Cunningham Award* in 1974 as Navy Pilot of the Year and the *Silver Hawk Award* in 1990 as pilot with the longest active flight service. He is member of the *Golden Eagle*, an organization that group together 200 Navy Pilots that distinguished in service and that has among its members five *Medal of Honor* (the highest military decoration assigned by the US Government), six astronauts and 31 Aviation Aces.

He left the service in 1991 after 38 years and 4 months in the Navy, then he became Consultant for *McDonnell Aircraft* and Bank Director. After 7 years he retired and now he joins several committees and volunteers with the *Wounded Warriors Project*, an association that helps the war veterans that suffered invalidating wounds.

He is married with Nicole and has three children (the younger is Lieutenant Colonel in the Navy), five nephews and two basset hounds.

CREDITS

I wholeheartedly thanks Michael Sullivan for his kindness and for the time that he dedicated to our "virtual talks", without which this short story would have never be written.