



A race for their lives

As the black cloud of the Second World War descended, three grand-prix drivers came together to fight the Nazis. Only one would live to return to the race track.

Adam Hay-Nicholls recounts the thrilling and tragic tale of the Bugatti spies

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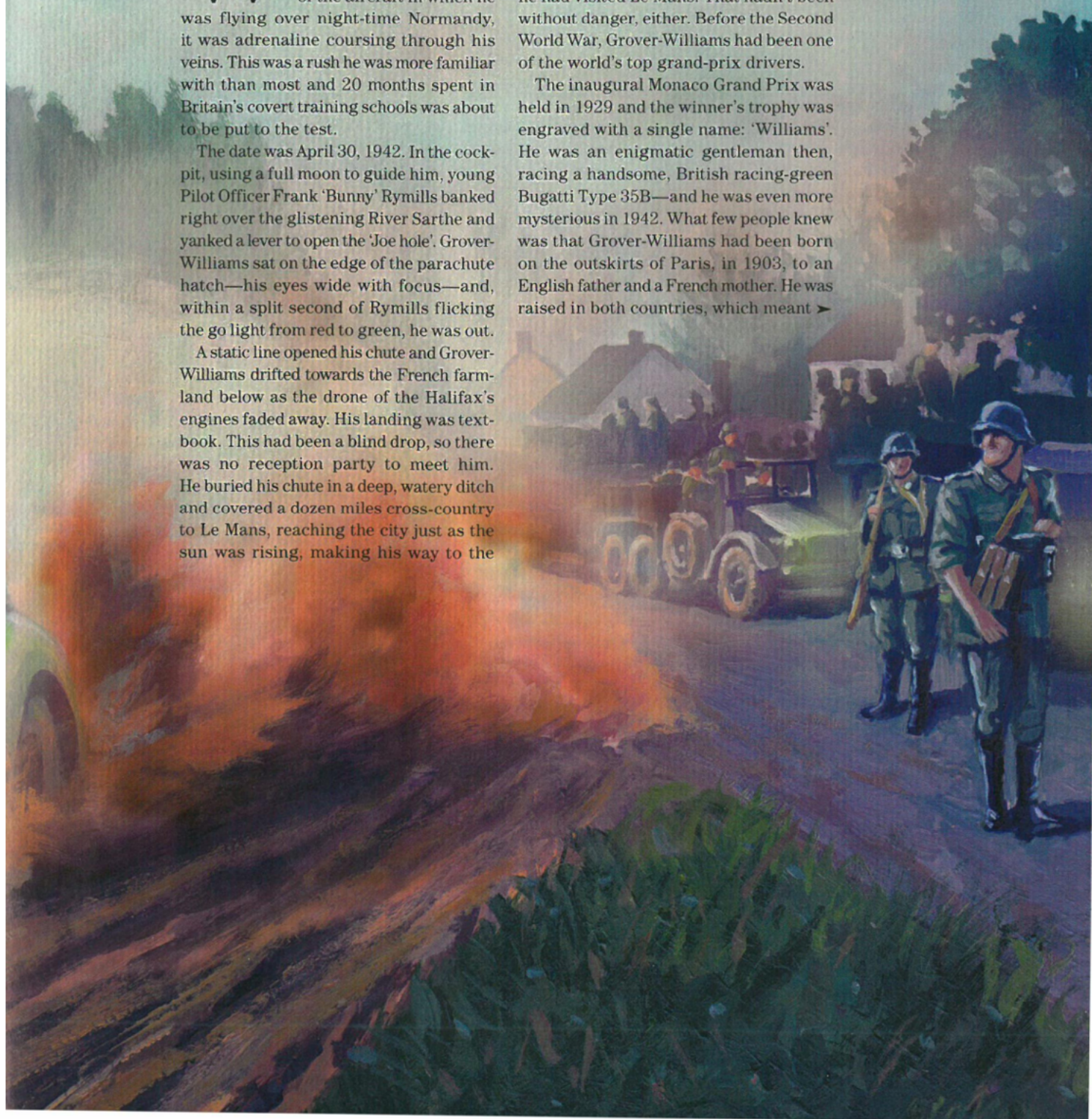
WILLY GROVER-WILLIAMS was buzzing. It wasn't only down to the vibrations of the aircraft in which he was flying over night-time Normandy, it was adrenaline coursing through his veins. This was a rush he was more familiar with than most and 20 months spent in Britain's covert training schools was about to be put to the test.

The date was April 30, 1942. In the cockpit, using a full moon to guide him, young Pilot Officer Frank 'Bunny' Rymills banked right over the glistening River Sarthe and yanked a lever to open the 'Joe hole'. Grover-Williams sat on the edge of the parachute hatch—his eyes wide with focus—and, within a split second of Rymills flicking the go light from red to green, he was out.

A static line opened his chute and Grover-Williams drifted towards the French farmland below as the drone of the Halifax's engines faded away. His landing was textbook. This had been a blind drop, so there was no reception party to meet him. He buried his chute in a deep, watery ditch and covered a dozen miles cross-country to Le Mans, reaching the city just as the sun was rising, making his way to the

railway station. As he waited on the platform for the first train to Paris Montparnasse to appear, he pondered the last time he had visited Le Mans. That hadn't been without danger, either. Before the Second World War, Grover-Williams had been one of the world's top grand-prix drivers.

The inaugural Monaco Grand Prix was held in 1929 and the winner's trophy was engraved with a single name: 'Williams'. He was an enigmatic gentleman then, racing a handsome, British racing-green Bugatti Type 35B—and he was even more mysterious in 1942. What few people knew was that Grover-Williams had been born on the outskirts of Paris, in 1903, to an English father and a French mother. He was raised in both countries, which meant ➤



he had perfect fluency in both languages and a loyalty to both flags.

Grover-Williams learned to drive in a Rolls-Royce, courtesy of his brother-in-law, who was an engineer for Sir Henry Royce. As a 17-year-old, he began a career as a professional chauffeur in Paris, ferrying the famous artist Sir William Orpen and other distinguished clients.

Such was his passion for motorcars that, in 1925, he purchased a Hispano-Suiza and went racing. From there, he upgraded to the lightweight Bugatti and won the French Grand Prix at Le Mans. He became a factory driver for this prestigious French marque, racing alongside established star Robert Benoist and hotshot Jean-Pierre Wimille, who was barely out of his teens. As team mates, the three were a force to be reckoned with, battling wheel-to-wheel with the likes of Tazio Nuvolari and Rudolf Caracciola.

Funded by the Third Reich, Mercedes-Benz and Auto Union were all-conquering in grand-prix racing by the mid to late 1930s. Grover-Williams retired from motorsport aged 30, with many victories to his name, shortly before the Germans dominated. The older Benoist took the reins of Bugatti's competition department and, together, he and Wimille diverted into endurance racing, winning the arduous 24 Heures du Mans together for Bugatti in 1937, in a streamlined, but enormously bonneted car they called The Tank. Wimille would win Le Mans again in 1939, with Pierre Veyron—then, the Second World War began.

Benoist, who was 44, had been a pilot in the First World War and was brought back into the Armée de l'Air to fly a desk. Wimille, now 31, signed up to the flying corps, too.

Germany wasted no time invading France and the cities began to empty, with refugees fleeing for the countryside. In the second week of June, 1940, Benoist joined the exodus from Paris in his supercharged Bugatti Type 57C Special Coupé. A swooping, Art Deco masterpiece painted two-tone black and pistachio green, it probably wasn't the most incognito transport he could have chosen.

He was nearly at Poitiers when a German convoy caught up with him and, after they'd salivated over his glorious automobile, the enemy

soldiers ordered Benoist to return with them to Paris. The convoy slowed for an obstruction and the racing driver seized his opportunity. He flooded the Bugatti and the luxury car launched itself down a small lane to the side, in a cloud of dust and exhaust fumes. Before the Wehrmacht could raise their rifles, Benoist was out of range.

At that very moment, Grover-Williams was crossing the English Channel by sea. Landing in Falmouth, Cornwall, he had already enrolled in the Royal Army Service Corps, driving generals around. He was about to get a promotion. After a series of clandestine interviews and a background check by MI5, he was drafted into the Special Operations Executive (SOE), given a new identity and tasked with building a resistance network in France to help the Allies win the war.

‘He flooded the Bugatti. Before the Wehrmacht could raise their rifles, he was out of range’

Transferring between comfortable country houses in the south of England and a punishing training centre on the wintry west coast of Scotland, Grover-Williams learnt the essentials of espionage, signals, safe-cracking, demolition, assassination and close-quarter combat. At RAF Ringway near Manchester, he learned to parachute from low-level barrage balloons, wearing darkened motorcycle goggles to simulate night-time. The F-Section briefing officer gave him his final orders at the SOE's London HQ in Portman Square: in a black-tiled bathroom, they used a loo seat as a map table. The following night, after a good lunch at the Café Royal with fellow agents, he was floating down towards a moonlit field in occupied France.

Grover-Williams rented an apartment in Paris, in the bourgeois 16th *arrondissement*, and set about establishing his network of saboteurs. First on his list was Albert Fremont, a garage owner he knew. The second was Benoist, who was



a trusted friend to both—as well as being clever and courageous, he also had the perfect cover. The pragmatic Ettore Bugatti was no fan of the Nazis, but, as the Italian owner of a French company, there wasn't much he could do other than manufacture the small vans the Germans insisted he build for them. He suspected Benoist that was a part of the Resistance and was willing to give him the authorisations he needed to, on the face of it, service Bugatti clients across the whole of France.

The focus of their operations, however, was another auto manufacturer: Citroën. Grover-Williams's network managed to infiltrate its Paris factory and, using the sabotage skills he'd acquired in Britain, he and his gang succeeded in halving Citroën's Nazi-ordered production of cars, military trucks and half-tracks for the next couple of years.

Benoist's family owned a secluded property in Auffargis, 30 miles south-west of the capital, and it was here that the network had the Allies drop weapons and medical supplies. The guns and explosives were hidden in wells and the canisters in which the deliveries were dropped were sunk in a nearby reservoir. However, after assembling an almighty arsenal for the resistance, Grover-Williams's luck ran out. On August 2, 1943, the Auffargis property was raided by the SS, led by Hauptscharführer Karl Langer, a caricature who strutted around in a shiny black trench coat, barking orders. Grover-Williams was taken to the SS's counter-intelligence HQ at 84, Avenue Foch in Paris, a house of unimaginable horrors, where he refused to give his interrogators any useful intelligence. He was later sent to the Sachsenhausen concentration camp near Berlin, where he was executed.

Benoist had been away when the Auffargis bust occurred and, as he scrambled for information, he realised he was on his own. He changed Paris apartments, moving in with his brother, Maurice, in the east of the city, and used a telephone kiosk at the post office on Place Gambetta to try to warn those members of the network he could. Then, he rang his emergency SOE contact and put an extraction plan in motion. As he put the receiver down and walked back towards the apartment, he heard



Unconventional methods: following a briefing in a London bathroom, SEO operative Willy Grover-Williams parachuted into occupied territory (facing page). With the help of men such as him, the Resistance organised no fewer than 950 attacks across France on D-Day

a man call his name. He pretended not to hear, sensing danger, but three Gestapo surrounded Benoist and strong-armed him into a car.

The gas-powered Hotchkiss and its four occupants made their way west along the Grands Boulevards. Crammed in the back of the car between two scowling minders, Benoist realised that, if he stretched his arms wide behind their heads, he could pull the leather straps that opened the door latches. At the junction of rue de Richelieu, the car made a sharp left turn and, at that moment, Benoist pulled the right-hand strap and pushed hard to his right, tumbling out of the Hotchkiss's open door onto the cobblestones and using the Gestapo man to break his fall. Before the Nazis were on their feet and knew what was going on, Benoist was sprinting up a small arcade and out of sight.

His SOE contact had arranged for him to be picked up by the RAF between Angers and Le Mans. Such were the frequency of pick-ups and drop-offs near the village of Soucelles that it was known among frequent fliers as The English Airport. Benoist was flown to the UK, where he was inducted into the British Army for a crash course in spy mastery, before being sent back to France to establish a new network. His mission was to destroy communications and transport links in the port city of Nantes ahead of and during D-Day.

Once back in Paris, Benoist visited his old Le Mans team mate Wimille, about whom Grover-Williams had had

reservations: the Humphrey Bogart lookalike had political ambitions and was chummy with members of the Vichy government. Up until this point, Wimille had enjoyed a comfortable war—he'd married a beautiful heiress and acquired a sybaritic villa on the Riviera—but he wanted to fight the Germans and Benoist trusted his instincts.

Together, they sabotaged the electricity pylons on the Île Héron, which served Nantes, took out the city's telephone exchange, banjaxed the railways, demolished bridges and felled trees across roads, so that, when the Nazis in the area tried to respond to the D-Day invasion, they were snookered. In total, there were 950 resistance attacks across France on June 6, 1944.

Benoist's parents had been imprisoned following the Auffargis raid and, although she had been freed by now, his mother had never recovered from the ordeal. Informed that she was on her deathbed in hospital, her son raced to her bedside. As he was leaving the network's safe house in Sermaise, he warned his co-conspirators that, if he wasn't back by noon the following day, he must have been compromised and they'd have to bolt.

By the time Benoist reached the private Clinique Bizet, after 35 miles of rapid driving to Paris, his mother had already passed away. Heartbroken, he dragged himself to his flat on the rue Fustel de Coulanges, opened the door and found himself on the wrong end of a Luger pistol. ➤

‘Only Wimille escaped, hiding in a stream as the Nazis set the house ablaze’

A very long and uncomfortable night at 84, Avenue Foch ensued. Benoist knew he had to keep the address of the cell's Sermaise safe house from the SS long enough for the others to scarp. The resistance group was enjoying a post-Nantes celebration, oblivious to the soldiers bursting through the gates. Only Wimille managed to escape, running for his life and hiding between the roots of a tree in a stream as the Nazis rounded up his colleagues, beat them and set the house ablaze.

It was later alleged that Benoist's brother, Maurice, had tipped off the SS about both the Paris and Auffargis addresses. Maurice had been a frequent visitor to Avenue Foch over the past three years—notably, never in handcuffs. After the liberation of Paris, he took a new identity and disappeared. Benoist, only 10



days before the Allies stormed Paris, was carted off to Buchenwald concentration camp in Germany, from which he never returned.

Four months after the war in Europe had ended and a week after the Japanese finally surrendered, on September 9, 1945, Paris hosted a motor race on a temporary circuit in and around the Bois de Boulogne in honour of Benoist. *Le patron*, Ettore Bugatti, was in attendance.

Bittersweet victory: in 1945, Jean-Pierre Wimille was joined on the podium by Robert Benoist's daughter, Jacqueline, and old friend Albert Fremont, survivor of Buchenwald, bearing the Williams Cup

In a six-year-old Bugatti 59/50B, which had been hidden by Benoist during the occupation to keep it from the Nazis, Wimille was quick to re-familiarise himself with the car's controls. Starting at the back, having missed qualifying due to air-corps commitments, he had soon overtaken the whole field and claimed a thrilling and jubilant victory.

As the cars pulled off the track, a lone bugler sounded *The Last Post* and the crowd rose to a minute's silence. On the podium, Wimille was joined by Jacqueline Garnier, Benoist's daughter, who placed the winner's wreath over his shoulders. Then, to his surprise, their old friend Fremont—frail, with a shaven head, having survived Buchenwald—joined him at the rostrum with a special silver trophy, the Williams Cup.

Wimille's instant return to form saw his driving career reignited and he went on to win many more races, including the 1948 French Grand Prix. At one point, Juan Manuel Fangio, the great Argentine driver who would win five Formula One world titles, raced Wimille as his team mate—and lost. Had Wimille not been killed at the wheel practising for the Argentinian Grand Prix in 1949, a year before the inaugural Formula One World Championship, it is likely he would have been crowned champion.

Following that sunny afternoon in the Bois de Boulogne, *Le Monde* printed Wimille's victorious photograph. The newspaper stated 'each spectator understood the moral winner of the day was France herself'. 🐉



I spy: for attacking the road, the fastest drivers in the French Resistance chose to fight at the wheel of a Bugatti

Bugatti Type 35B

This grand-prix car won more than 1,000 races in its day. The Type 35 was victorious on the fiendish Targa Florio for five consecutive years between 1925 and 1929. The 'B' version was the best of all, with a supercharger fitted to its 2.3-litre engine. Willy Grover-Williams used his British racing-green example to win the inaugural Monaco Grand Prix and the French Grand Prix twice towards the end of the Roaring Twenties.

Bugatti Type 57G Tank

Jean-Pierre Wimille and Robert Benoist won the 1937 Le Mans 24 Hours in this car, known as *The Tank*, beating their rivals by seven laps. Three cars were produced and only this one survives today. The third car was involved in a road accident, which killed Ettore Bugatti's son, Jean, in 1939. He was 30.

Bugatti Type 57C Special Coupé

Designed by scion Jean Bugatti, this green and black grand tourer from 1938 features some of the marque's most flowing Art Deco coachwork, its teardrop fenders and low headlights giving that iconic horseshoe grille even more prominence. Benoist managed to escape the Nazis in this car and keep it out of their hands. It was also used by Ettore Bugatti and Wimille.

Bugatti Type 59/50B

Raced before and after the Second World War, the 59/50B boasts a 3.3-litre engine developing 250bhp. Only eight were built, one of which Benoist was able to squirrel away when the Reich were marching down the Champs-Élysées. Fittingly, it was designed to take on the better-funded German competition of Mercedes-Benz and Auto Union in the 1930s.