

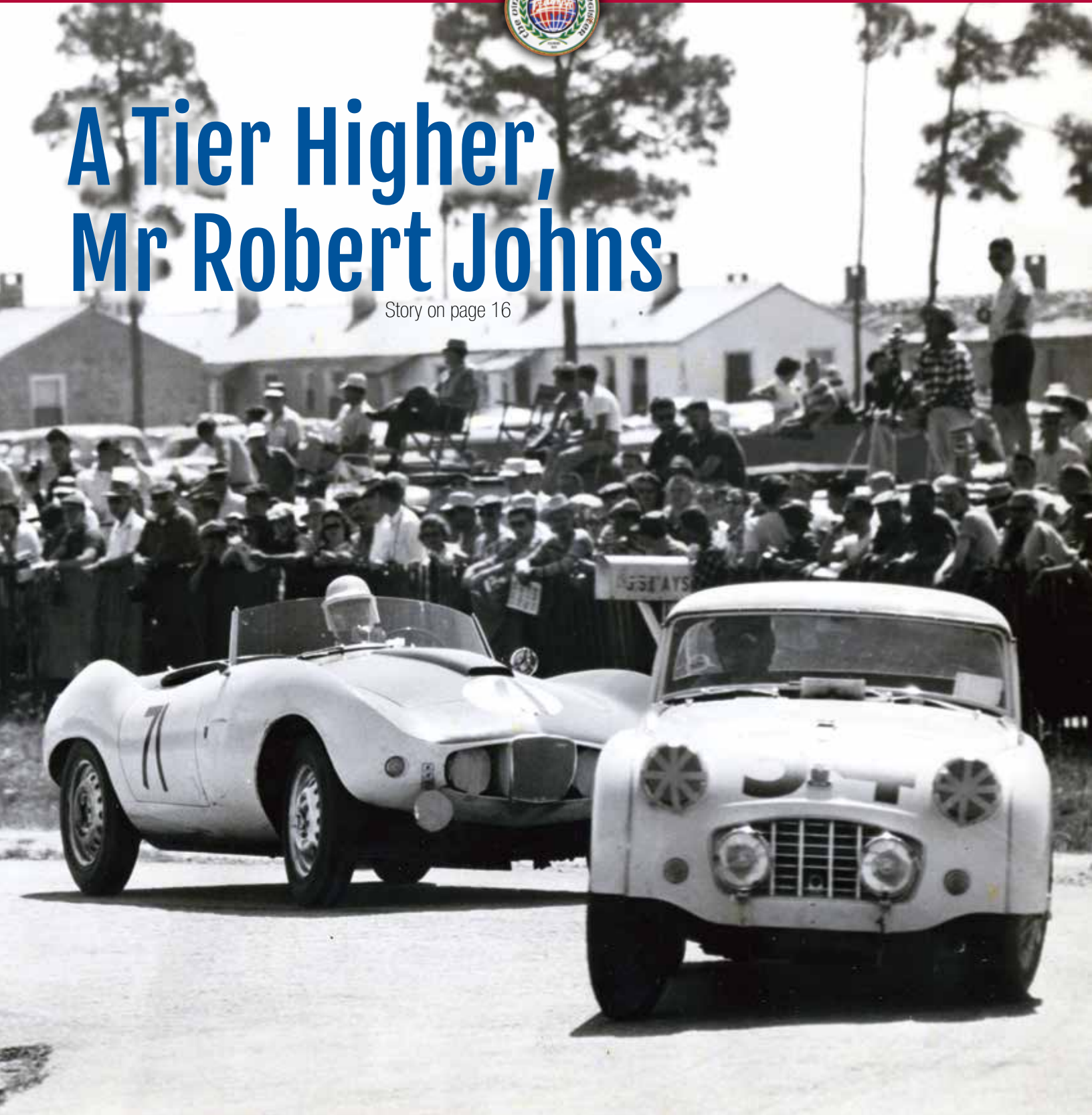
THE VINTAGE TRIUMPH

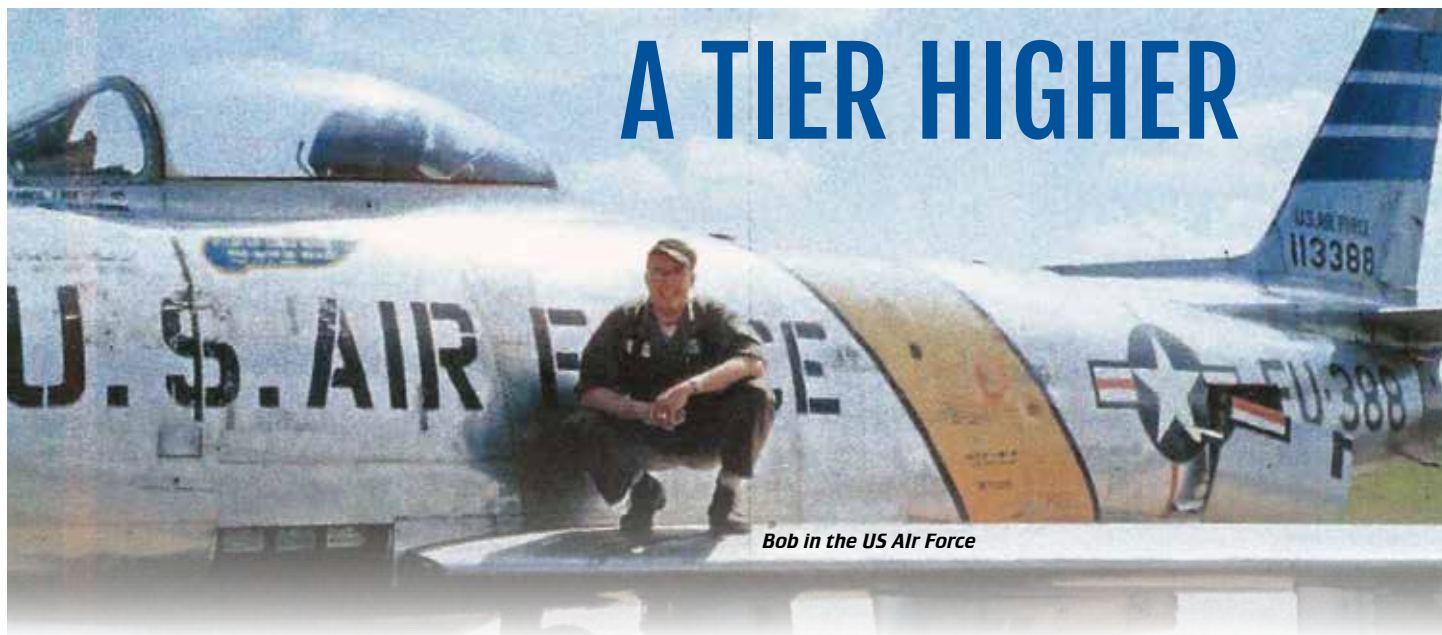
- MAGAZINE OF THE VINTAGE TRIUMPH REGISTER -



A Tier Higher, Mr Robert Johns

Story on page 16





Bob in the US Air Force

by Shawn Frank
Photos provided by Robert Johns

Life has definitely changed in many ways, one of which includes interviews with significant characters in the car community. This new normal has not allowed much time for entertainment, let alone car shows and races. Most racing is on TV or live streaming on Youtube or specific driver's channels.

I can't help but fear that the culture is dying a little, due to the lack of activity and the stories aren't given their due diligence because we aren't standing around a classic, sipping on coffee or hanging out in a shop preparing a race car for the next vintage race. Definitely less than any other year. With that being said, we managed an interview through email with a man that I thought should have his story and racing career recorded here in The Vintage Triumph and some already has. I was supposed to sit down with him during the Kastner Cup 2020 at Mid-Ohio, but our schedules did not allow us the opportunity, so I have been emailing him back and forth. We have a lot of info and will do another write up on him once we get the opportunity to sit down with him. For now, let's talk about a significant gentleman in Triumph racing history.

Robert Johns enlisted in the Air Force in 1954 and was stationed in Europe. In 1955, he caught the racing bug. There were

many race events, and the culture was thick in Europe. He was a natural, almost immediately racking up a fine racing career. Altogether, he ran 15 events as a racecar driver.

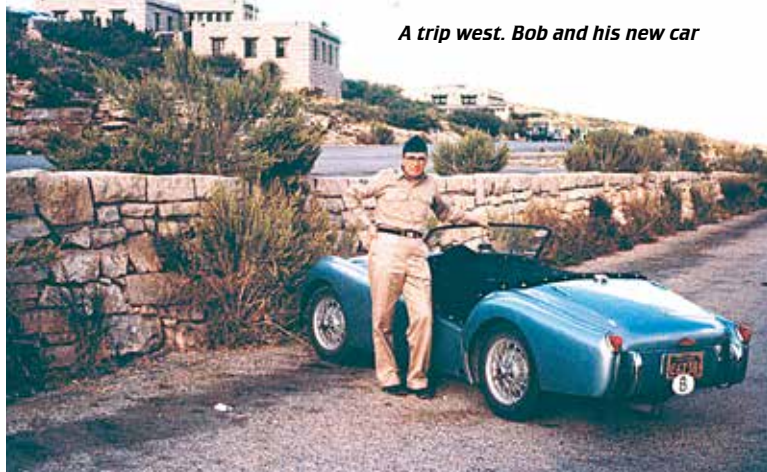
August 1955 started his career off with a 2nd place overall at the BSCC Gymkhana in Eschternach, Luxembourg. In September 1955, also in Eschternach, he earned a 2nd place in the BSCC Hill Climb in the Up to 2000cc class and a 5th place at the HMSC race at the Air Base in Phersfeld, Germany. During the HMSC Flying Mile trials in Mainz, Germany, he took his first win in the Up to 2000cc class and 2nd overall with a speed of 112mph.

October 1955 was a good month as well for Mr Johns. He acquired a podium finish at the EMSC event and another at the annual Nurburgring-Eifel Rallye with a 3rd place overall. Again in October, and this is a big one, he secured a 1st place win in Class E 2000cc and a 1st overall in the annual lap time record at the Nurburgring Nordschleife, coined by Jackie Stewart as the Grune Holle or Green Hell. Bob told me it was where he did all his practicing and learning how to go fast without "killing one's self." It was certainly his favorite track. One more for 1955 earned him a 2nd place in the Up to 2000cc class at the HMSC International SCC Hill Climb.

In Spring 1956, he successfully completed and received his Certificate of Excellence at the Swiss Automobile Club Racing Driver's school in Monza, Italy. Not skipping a beat, he gained a 1st in the 2000cc E Class at the HMSC event at the Air Force Base Road Races in Landstuhl, Germany and a 1st in class, 3rd overall in two races that included large displacement cars. In July 1956, he earned a 1st place in the Up to 2000cc class at the HMSC Sports Car race in Buchel, Germany.

All of these events were run while he continued to serve in the Air Force, in and out of Europe and his base of operations during a seven to eight-month tour, including five months in North Africa. These were all impressive and he made a name for himself while he fulfilled his duty to our country.

After returning to the States, he jumped back into the driver's seat. In October 1956, at the SCCA Regionals in Fort Sumner, New Mexico, he claimed a 2nd place finish in E Production in the 25.6-mile race and another 2nd in the 75-mile race. He told me that was his second favorite race. Also, in October, he chalked up a win and 2nd overall in E Production at the SCCA Hill Climb in Albuquerque, New Mexico and 2nd overall in the SCCA Pecos Valley photo rally. November's SCCA Time



A trip west. Bob and his new car



Trial Gymkhana at the White Sands Proving Ground earned him an overall win. He was offered a ride by Dorothy Deen on the west coast, but still in the Air Force, his AF Commander would not release him.

I tell you about these events, because they were to set the stage for Bob's entry in the FIA World Sports Car Championship's 12-hour Florida International Grand Prix for the Amoco Trophy on March 23, 1957, his favorite race event for obvious reasons. The 12-Hours of Sebring is an event that many road racers have not had the opportunity to run but would be a dream race for them. A starting position on the historic grid would be an exemplary mark on their racing resume. With that said, Bob was just out of the Air Force three months earlier and was invited to race as part of an independent team consisting of three cars. All three cars were 1956 TR3s that had previously run the '56 Alpine Rally. The car Bob drove was registration #SRW991. The cars were thoroughly checked, all the specialized rally

equipment was removed. All three racecars had steel hard tops and fixed side curtains. As a result, they were heavy. The main difference between the racecars and early TR3s was the disc brakes

Bob told me that the cars were nothing fancy. They had badly beaten seats and no roll bar or seat belts. Bob and his teammate Mike

Rothschild entered the prestigious race as car #34. The #33 was piloted by Bob Oker and Ed Pennybacker. The third car, #70 was an alternate that was driven by Jim Roberts and Lou Hesse.

Bob worked on his own cars but was disallowed in the preparation of his Sebring car, as there were engineers hired for that. "It is hard to trust another mechanic when you think that you are better. That is one thing that bothered me at Sebring. For instance, the brake pads should have been changed after practice. It didn't happen and I was throwing sparks the entire length of the car by the end."

In 1957, 65 cars entered the famed 12-hour endurance race, 38 cars finished. The #34 car clocked 159 laps, calculating to 692 miles during the grueling duel with the elements, the equipment that's been pushed to the brink, consistent maximum team effort, and driver fatigue; mentally and

physically. A fight to the finish and the TR3 crossed the line as 19th overall and 1st in the Grand Touring 2000, Class 7II (Grand Turismo 1601cc – 2600cc) with the sister car, #33 coming in at 21st overall and 2nd in class, piloted by Oker and Pennybacker.

Bob partly accredited the win to the disc brakes on the TR3. He said he out-braked a Healey 100S at the end of the main straight that went off into the weeds while Bob went on to win and receive a plaque and the opportunity to hoist the Sebring cup above his head. Imagine the feeling!

After Sebring, Bob knew he couldn't afford to race full time on a mechanic's



1957 SEBRING, Fla. Oct. 26, 1956. THURSDAY 2ND DAY. PAGES 29 451+ 464 467. Please 75 451+ 464 Robert Zeman,Driver. 3211 9471, FLA.



1957 Sebring start



1957 Sebring



← Driver credentials



Factory race photo

income, so he took advantage of the GI bill and went to college for Mechanical Engineering. Our very own Mike Cook told Bob that there was an effort by the New York office to contact him and there was rumor that Ken Richardson was looking for Bob to enter an endurance at Monza for Standard. It is also believed that contact was impeded by Bob's mom, as he was in college by then. A foreign car agency opened in the small college town and they were looking for a primary mechanic to run the shop. He got the job, got married, and life went on, secluded from the racing world.

Because he was so far separated from racing, Bob was unaware of a mistake made in the record books until

all publications reported it erroneously, aside from one UK based magazine that got it correct. It was indeed reported that the #34 car claimed 1st in class, but the drivers were erroneously listed as Oker and Pennybacker, Johns' and Rothschild's teammates that actually drove the #33 TR3 that took 2nd in class. It seems that the records have been incorrect since the 1957 Sebring race, inaccurately listing the names. Bob took all the necessary documentation to the 50th running at Sebring and went to the offices and talked with the records-keeper. He told Bob that the next time the records were republished, the mistake will have been corrected.





This prompted a search for the big trophies. It was believed that the trophies were taken to England many years ago and lost in the Leyland episode. They were in fact, found in east coast storage by none other than Mike Cook before he passed. One was returned to Bob and the other is with Mike Rothschild's daughter. Bob said, "We can all feel very glad that

Mike found them before his untimely death."

To conclude, Bob told me, "I was racing during the time when many drivers, driving top cars, did not survive. Note, this is the time when Europe had not even started using seat belts, let alone roll bars and shoulder harnesses. This was very obvious to me and I decided that I should be satisfied with the level of success that I had accomplished. After my graduation, I immediately got a job as the Project Engineer of Racing Spark Plugs for Electric Autolite Company in Toledo, Ohio. I had gotten married during College and between starting a normal family lifestyle and starting a working career, there was no place for personal sports car race participation. As part of my job as the Engineer of racing spark plugs, it was my place to go to specific races to deal with the mechanics, drivers, and owners to get them to use our plugs and to handle the application and/or issues that developed. So, that satisfied my need for racing involvement and as a starting engineer, I had no money to buy a race car. After a career of 37 years as a Product Engineer and Manager, starting with Autolite and then Ford, I started to review my long-past racing career and attempted to contact Mike Rothschild. I was able to contact his son-in-law Morty Dunst and found out that Mike had died. So, that was the end of that trail."



Standard Co plaque

Bob still watches all forms of road racing and Formula 1. I have seen him at numerous Kastner Cup races and he always shakes my hand and answers my numerous questions. We have been planning an interview for a while and I hope that this small excerpt of Bob's life shows you that there is a level unmatched by modern drivers. They will always be a tier higher in my book...

"Practice! Practice! Get those curves down pat, the braking into a fixed pattern, and adjust only as your time improves." 🏎️