

Alfa Romeo

The Alfa Romeo Owners Club Magazine

DRIVER



Volume 45/1
February 2011

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A girl with a racy past



Nick Eden reveals the fascinating history attached to his Alfa Romeo 6C 2500SS

In 1939 an Alfa Romeo Tipo 256 won the 1939 Mille Miglia Africana, driven by Mussolini's chauffeur and cousin, Ercole Boratto. It is thought that this car (chassis 915 006) remained in the factory during the War until used by Alfa Romeo in 1949 as the basis of a 6C 2500 Super Sport, with a Villa d'Este body. Restoration started in 1975 and included a new body based on a Luigi Fusi design. Restoration was unwittingly unsympathetic to its history.

The car's fascinating history has now been pieced together. Whilst gaps remain, research and independent investigations have led to the view that what remains of 915 006 is the car seen today.

The story starts with the 1938 Mille Miglia,

marred by tragedy when a Lancia Aprilia crashed killing 10 spectators including 7 children. The following day Mussolini banned all city road racing in Italy. Consequently the organisers of the Mille Miglia arranged a road race in North Africa as 1939's substitute: the Mille Miglia Africana. The race ran from Tobruk, Libya, then Italy's Tripolitania colony, to Tripoli. Colonial influence was such that even by 1916 A.L.F.A. employed 100 Libyan labourers and part of the factory was nicknamed 'Campo Libia'.

Alfa Corse entered four Tipo 256s (2.5 litres, 6 cylinders), including 915 006, the first of two cars completed for the race with Superleggera aerodynamic Ala spessa ('wide wing') bodywork by

Carrozzeria Touring. It was revolutionary, enveloping the wheels and flanks of the car, but was disliked by the drivers as visibility was poor.

915 006 was registered as 47820 ROMA in early March 1939, although records show that number on a 1935 Alfa Romeo 6C 2300 (chassis 700 625/engine 700 635) owned by Mussolini. The number transferred back to Alfa in November 1939, presumably transferred earlier to 915 006 by Mussolini. The other Alfas entered had Milan registrations.

By the time 915 006 was completed, the Mille Miglia Africana was just 11 days away, on the other side of the Mediterranean. The other Ala spessa car (915 009) and the other two Siluro ('torpedo') bodied cars (915 007 and 915 008) were ready the day after.

What became of 915 007 is unknown, although it was sold shortly after the race. 915 008 may still exist, having been sold in March 1995. 915 009 is thought to have suffered 'demolita' in 1951.

Anselmi, in his 1993 book on 6Cs, considered seventeen 256s and 2500 SSs existed, whereas Fusi (founding Director of Alfa Romeo Museo) suggested there were only eight 256s. Confusion arose as some chassis 'escaped' to private hands and some racers were re-bodied as road cars for onward sale. Also views differ as to when the 2500 SS moniker was used instead of the Tipo 256 designation.

The four cars entered each had a ladder frame chassis with a 270 cms/105 inch wheelbase. Today the chassis of 915 006 has the same wheelbase, and remains consistent with that configuration except it has cross ('X') bracing rather than two



Model of original Carrozzeria Touring body (Photo NLE)

Targa Florio Centenary 2006 (Photo: NJE)



Winning Angoulême in 2006 (Photo: Jim Gaisford)



traverse bars in the middle, and a cross member above rather than below the rear differential. Work on the Alfas entered went on at Scuderia Ferrari and in Milano, so work may have included chassis strengthening, although the chassis changes appear to be later.

At an auction in the 1990s the history of the car, now registered RAS 529, was questioned as the chassis carried a cross-brace, which is generally taken to have been an indication of post War construction. In 2006 independent chemical analysis, optical omission spectroscopy and metallographic examination determined that the chassis cross-bracing was of different metallic composition to the main chassis. This discovery suggests the bracing was added subsequently, when the comparatively heavy Villa d'Este body of 1949 was built on the chassis. Also, independent analysis at the time determined that the Vickers hardness value of metal trepanned from the main chassis, compared at the same time with metal from four other Alfa Romeos, each of which were pre-War, was seen to be comparable. However, possibly more importantly, independent macroscopic etch tests were carried out in 2009 on the chassis and engine numbers, employing metallographic etchants to check for the presence of any residual sub-surface deformation or compression markings. The test results stated categorically that the chassis number remained unaltered and that there was neither subsurface deformation nor any compression markings. The chassis number is correctly stamped on the top of the front cross member, facing backwards. The same tests produced the same results in respect of the engine number (SS 923 802), stamped directly onto the engine block; the report states "No evidence of secondary deformation marks or latent number indications were apparent either



Stub cross-brace of Museum car (Photo: NJE)

associated with or adjacent to the numbers present. The Numbers SS 923 802 were clearly visible after etching...."

On 14th February 1943 the Alfa Romeo factory suffered its first aerial bombardment, a second in August and in a third raid, on 20th October 1944, was very badly damaged. Many records were destroyed, including the 6C Register for 1939 to 1942. However, Automobilità Storico Centro Documentazione Alfa Romeo have confirmed chassis 915 006 was made for a 1939 6C spider. Anselmi records 915 006 as having engine number SS 923 802, and he explains that ".....the dates to verify the history of your Alfa Romeo 915.006 are reported on page 192 of my volume.....extracted

from an internal memorandum from the Technical Office dating from the time of Fusi. It pertains to a page of notes which I do not have a copy". The 'SS' reference was used in 1939, and stood for 'Super Sport' although the cars were not referred to as 'Super Sport' initially.

The engine in the car represents the final stage in the development of the highly successful series of 6 cylinder engines which began with the 1500, designed and developed by the great engineer Vittorio Jano. Jano left to join Lancia in 1937, Gioachino Colombo and Bruno Trevisi thereafter assuming engine design responsibilities.

The race cars had consecutive engine numbers. *Gazetta dello Sport* reported in 1939 that the cars "...will have the new type 2500 SS derived from the preceding 2,337 cm³ 6-cylinder unit. A fourth Alfa Romeo with a 2.5 litre engine will be driven by Boratto..." suggesting the engine of 915 006 differed to the others. Mechanical components of 915 006 now differ from the original specification, due to its conversion to a road car in 1949 and its long restoration from the mid 1970s. For example 915 006 has triple Solex 35 AHD carburettors from a 6C variant, rather than triple Type 36 DO2 Webers, and has a different gearbox.

In the race 915 006 was driven by Consalvo Sanesi as well as by Boratto. Boratto had been an Alfa test driver, and was Mussolini's chauffeur from 1922 until 1943. Boratto was, according to Sanesi, "an excellent driver, who knew his own limitations and never took chances". Of Mussolini, Boratto thought him to be 'a fast driver, but a bad one' Sanesi joined Alfa Romeo in 1928 as an apprentice mechanic in the racing car test department. In 1940, when only 29, he became responsible for testing all production and racing cars, a position he held until retirement in 1976. Having travelled to the start as a mechanic, Sanesi became Boratto's



Nick Eden at Shelsley Walsh hill climb 2010 (Photo Ken Carrington)



Nick Eden, 2009 VSCC Spring Start (Photo: Ed McDonough)

Angouleme below the Cathedral 2006
(Photo: Jim Gaistford)



Angouleme top hairpin 2006
(Photo: Jim Gaistford)

co-driver as a last moment substitute; the Mille Miglia Africana was his first race, and proved to be a baptism of fire. Although Sanesi started behind the wheel, within 100 kilometres Boratto, the man who 'never took chances' went into what Sanesi described as a 'blue funk' about Sanesi's driving, so Sanesi handed the wheel to Boratto who never relinquished it thereafter. 915 006 won averaging 87.86 mph. A photograph of 915 006 immediately afterwards, shows Boratto (at the wheel) and Sanesi with Mussolini (uniformed, decorated and with shades).

915 006 next competed in the Lido di Roma, coming fifth; its third and last race was the Targa Abruzzo on 15th August 1939 at Pescara on the Adriatic coast. Detailed research shows it came second. War was declared just two weeks later.

Fusi's 1978 mock-up is in the museum at Arese. By 2003, Archivio Storico Alfa Romeo 'had not yet researched the chassis' of this museum car, although it had always been at the factory, was post War and bears numbers which differ to 915 006. The engine number is 927 037 (from chassis 916 600, a 1950 6C 2500 Sport). The mock-up has chassis cross-bracing but the centre is missing. Anselmi wrote in a letter that Fusi's museum car had "a fictitious and not so faithful 'ala spessa' body.... I preserve a letter he (Fusi) wrote to me explaining he used a post war chassis that he received as a gift from an Alfa Romeo dealer."

915 006 (with engine 923 802) emerged in 1949, with a Villa d'Este body by Touring, honouring its Ville d'Este Concours d'Elegance success that year. Alfa Romeo therefore appears to have made use of the chassis, strengthened it and then sold as a 6C 2500 Super Sport, with a rare and exquisite Villa d'Este body. Anselmi records six Villa d'Este cars for 1949 (the first for Fangio) and a total of twenty-five.

The car went to Argentina in the 1950s or early 1960s. The late Lory Barra, the previous owner, recollected that "since mid 60" his father had known the two previous owners. As explained in Simon Moore's book *The Immortal 2.9*, the Barra family was involved with Alfa Romeos after the War. Lory's father, also Lorenzo, was President of the sporting commission FIVA (ANA) in Argentina. His Great Uncle, Carlos P Anesi, was President of the Automobile Club of Argentina (ACA). In 1947 Anesi organised a season of racing, engaging such well-known drivers as Varzi, Villolosi, Ascari, Farina, and Wimille. Lory Barra became President of Argentina's Sports Car Club and organised the Thousand Millas Sport de la Republica Argentina.

During 1975 Barra restoration of 915 006, removing its Villa d'Este body. This body was sold and put on the chassis of another 6C 2500 (chassis 915 352). In 1976 Fusi finalised plans (which still exist) for new bodywork.

Fusi knew Barra's car was 915 006, but its significance was unknown until 1994, the year after

Anselmi's book, which for the first time publicly recorded and linked the chassis number, three years after Barra's restoration. Later, Barra wrote "It surely has post war parts due to, I used parts of other 2500 that were in better conditions, to optimise the functioning. The gearbox is from a newer model, this was sent written by me..... All this minor modifications were made a long time ago with the idea of upgrading the running of the car and not being an expert in 2500."

In 1992 Lory Barra took 915 006 to Italy for the Mille Miglia Storica and then to La Festa Mille Miglia in Japan. The car returned to Italy from Tokyo for the 1993 Mille Miglia and also participated in 1994.

In 2002, 915 006 came to England, its new owner undertaking another major refurbishment. Success followed, with a podium finish in the first race entered, the 2004 Pre-War Sports Car race at Angouleme, France, driven there and back from England. In 2006, 915 006 won the same race and during 2008 the car successfully took part in two VSCC races in which it was well placed in both, and won the Milan Trophy. In 2009 two VSCC races were entered, both on the last day of racing before Donington closed. The owner won one on handicap, and his 19 year old daughter raced the car in her maiden race in the other, making an intentionally cautious debut moving from 17th, finishing 10th out of 26: the history of the past in the hands of our future; long may it last.

Nick Eden

A Villa d'Este 6C in 1949
(Photo: Alfa Romeo Archive)



915 006 with Villa d'Este body in 1972 (Photo: L Barra)