

# Gallery of Glory

Michael Turner's print (right), first of six painted exclusively for this series and designed for framing, shows Fangio's Disco Volante in the '53 Mille Miglia. Below, Simon Taylor tells the story of a remarkable drive

Only the Italians could have thought of it: the Mille Miglia, the Thousand Miles. A flat-out road race around Italy in a great loop from Brescia south to the Adriatic coast, down Pescara, across to Rome, then north to Florence, over the Appennines to Bologna and back to Brescia. The first car, probably a humble Fiat saloon, starting at 9pm from a floodlit ramp in Brescia's main square, followed at one-minute intervals by the rest of the 600-car field (it would be daylight before the big sports-racers got away, with the slower runners ahead to be carved through). The route running through towns and villages, across plains and over mountains, frequently in atrocious weather. The entire thousand miles lined with excited spectators, showing no thought for their own safety as the drivers aimed their cars between human walls at speeds of 170mph and more. Only the Italians would have permitted it.

From 1927 the Mille Miglia was held annually until 1938, when the deaths of several spectators brought a government ban. Alfa Romeo won 10 of those first 12 races and regarded the Mille Miglia as its property. When the Mille Miglia was revived in 1947 it was fitting that the winner, Clemente Biondetti, drove an Alfa Romeo.

But in 1948 Biondetti switched to the rising marque of Ferrari, starting a string of Mille Miglia victories for the Maranello firm. Ferrari was soon threatening Alfa Romeo's grand prix supremacy, too, so for 1952 Alfa Romeo

withdrew from grand prix racing and announced its intention of contesting the classic endurance races with a revolutionary new car. Since that 1947 Mille Miglia win Alfa had won no major sports car honours. Ferrari meanwhile, had won the Targa Florio, the Le Mans 24 Hours and the Mille Miglia five years on the trot. It was time to redress the balance.

When the new car appeared it certainly looked revolutionary. Its curious egg-like streamlined shape immediately earned it the nickname *Disco Volante*, or Flying Saucer, after the unidentified flying objects much in the

news that spring. At first it used only a modified version of Alfa's 2-litre four-cylinder saloon engine. During 1952 three prototypes were built and tested, but they proved to be underpowered and aerodynamically unstable. None was raced.

For the 1953 season the car lost its ovaloid shape and gained a crude but handsome coupé body and a 3.5-litre twin-cam six-cylinder engine with six carburetors and 260 horsepower. Three were prepared for the Mille Miglia. Alfa hired journeyman driver Consalvo Sanesi, German star Karl Kling — who'd



For 1953 the car lost its ovaloid shape and gained a crude but handsome coupé body and a 3.5-litre, 260hp engine

finished second the previous year in works Mercedes — and, to lead the challenge, the great Juan Manuel Fangio.

The event was billed as "The greatest race since the beginning of car racing" and the hypebole was excusable: ranged against the Alfa were not only works teams from Jaguar, Aston Martin and Lancia but also a tremendous phalanx of Ferraris, several of them the brutal 4.1-litre Spydres, driven by Farina, Villoresi, Castellotti, two of the four millionaire Marzotto brothers and the new British hero Mike Hawthorn.

In the Mille Miglia, the cars' racing numbers denoted time of departure. Hence number 635, Sanesi's Alfa, left Brescia at 6.35am and, with his mind fixed on glory for self, Alfa Romeo and Italy, Sanesi went flat out from the start. Just 105 minutes later he was at Ravenna on the Adriatic coast, having averaged a record 108.5mph. The time sheets showed that Farina's Ferrari was second, almost two minutes adrift, followed by Kling's Alfa. Fangio, deliberately pacing himself and his car, was eight minutes down in fifth place.

By Pescara, Sanesi's average was up to 109mph, but as the route turned inland and into the mountains Alfa's Achilles heel manifested itself. On the Radicofani Pass Sanesi found his steering gear disintegrating. Bitterly disappointed, he abandoned his car, hitched a lift to the railway station and took a train back to Brescia for a hot bath and, no doubt, a stiff drink.

But Farina was out, too. A difficult downhill corner in the mountains had caught him napping and he smashed the Ferrari against a wall. Ironically, team-mate Giannino Marzotto left the road in his Ferrari at the same spot but missed the wall and was able to regain the road. If he hadn't, Disco Volante history might have been very different.

So at Rome it was Alfa Romeo first and second, with Kling leading Fangio by 40 seconds and Marzotto, recovering from his moment in the mountains, a distant third. But there was a Mille Miglia superstition: "He who leads at Rome can never win at Brescia". And

so it proved. As the route turned north, Kling's differential split and lost its oil. Now Fangio's was the only Alfa left. At the Florence control, with less than 250 miles to go, the Argentinian led Marzotto by nearly two minutes, with all Alfa's hopes of vanquishing Ferrari resting on his shoulders.

From Florence the Mille Miglia route climbed into the mountains towards the notorious Futa Pass, twisting through peasant villages. Its surface changed from broken tarmac to gravel, then to cobblestones and back again. It was here, pushing through a long right-hander, that Fangio felt the Alfa lurch to the left. As with Sanesi's car, a steering arm had broken. But, unlike Sanesi, Fangio wasn't going to stop.

There was another Mille Miglia saying: "The heart is more important than the car". Somehow, despite the Alfa's flapping left front wheel, Fangio's heart and his extraordinary skills were able to subdue the wayward car enough to wrestle it on through the mountains, conscious all the while of Marzotto's Ferrari closing relentlessly. With passenger Sala hanging on in the noisy and now unbearably hot closed cockpit, Fangio's indomitable spirit got them down the Futa, on over the equally steep and twisty Raticosa Pass, and down to the plains and Bologna.

Nevertheless, Marzotto had gone ahead, and now Fangio was threatened by the rest of the pursuit — Felice Bonetto in one of the new 3-litre Lancias; the American Tom Cole in the 4.1-litre Ferrari that was to kill him at Le Mans seven weeks later, and Reg Parnell in the works Aston Martin. So, on the final leg from Bologna to Brescia, with the left-hand front wheel still at a drunken angle and the Alfa weaving from side to side, Fangio averaged more than 100mph to cross the line in Brescia 10 hours 49 minutes after he had left it. In one of the most remarkable drives of an always remarkable career, he had kept second place in a car that should have been undrivable.

It was the Disco Volante's finest hour, displaying a promise that was never to be fulfilled. At Le Mans all three retired. So did

the single entry in the Spa 24 Hours. In practice for the Nürburgring 1000 Kms there was another steering breakage, this time while Kling was driving and, rather than risk further indignity (or worse), the whole entry was withdrawn. The Disco Volante's only other appearance was in a grandly-named non-championship race, the Gran Premio Super-cortemaggiore at Merano. Having entered three cars, Alfa Romeo finally sent one for Fangio, its coupé roof removed to make a Spyder, and he won from a 2-litre Maserati.

The factory never raced the Disco Volante again. Of the six that had been built, one was sold to the lofty Swedish driver Jo Bonnier, who found the cockpit cramped and had it rebodied by Zagato as an open two-seater: he raced it with some success for a couple of seasons. It is now in America, as is another chassis which was rebodied several times by Pininfarina as a dramatic series of show cars, in one form boasting a Perspex roof and tail fins of the same material. The Merano winner is in the Alfa Romeo museum; another was rebodied by Ghia but has disappeared, while a fifth was given a luxurious coupé body and sent to Argentina for the personal use of President Peron. Perhaps it still languishes there forgotten, for a lucky hunter to find.

The sixth car was probably retained by the factory and rebuilt because the following year a Spyder turned up for the Super-cortemaggiore race, now run at Monza. According to Alfa Romeo records, in a huge practice accident it was *irrimediabilmente distrutto*. And that was the end of the Disco Volante story.

As for the Mille Miglia, that story ended four years later. As the cars got faster the crowds became harder to control: in the 1957 race, the third-placed works Ferrari driven by Don Alfonso Cabeza de Vaca y Leighton, 17th Marqués de Portiago, was passing through the village of Guidizzolo, just 30 miles from the finish, when either a tyre burst or a half-shaft broke. The big red Ferrari swerved into the crowd; Fon de Portiago, his American passenger Ed Nelson, six adults and five children died. So did the Mille Miglia. ■



The route — a great loop from Brescia to Florence and Rome



Marzotto, shown closing on Fangio in the painting, was duly cheered on to victory in his Ferrari 4.1-litre Spyder