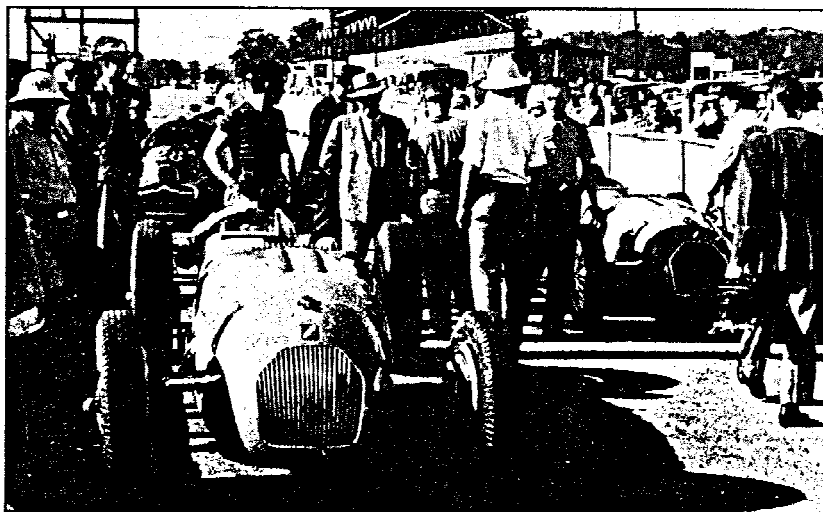


Escape Road

Talbot GP cars: Another treasure, a lesson learned

By Roger Barlow

Part two of a special four-part series



By 1943 I was in the Navy, working as ordered in New York, Washington or Hollywood as a film editor and director for the Industrial Incentive Division. The job meant I was able to keep my feet dry, eat good food, continue to work at my profession, sleep at home now and then and drive my Talbot-Darracq (subject of last week's *Escape Road*) whenever I was in Manhattan. Pretty damn lucky! Yet not lucky enough to benefit from my second great find in the barns and haystacks of New York: Two Grand Prix cars. A matched pair. Blue. French. *Talbots*, no less.

The Talbots had come to the US in 1941 to run the Indy 500. As correspondent for *The Autocar*, I went to cover the race. I arrived early to see the Talbots. Speeds at Indy were surprisingly modest then. The 200hp (145-150mph) Talbots certainly had the potential to make the field, if not qualify with ease.

To my chagrin, they did neither. It appeared as if the French drivers gave only a half-hearted effort, as if they felt they'd done their job simply getting the cars to the track. Whatever the case, the Talbot challenge quietly faded.

I did a lot of daydreaming about those handsome blue cars. The Talbots weren't exotic exercises in cost-no-object Grand Prix engineering such as the Mercedes or Auto Union GP cars of the late '30s. They were but a mere step up from the sports cars Tony Lago had created and run the past few years—and that was their appeal to me. With the addition of cycle fenders

and lighting equipment they could have made one hell of a road-racing sports car for a talented amateur (me), and yet they wouldn't have been too complicated or expensive to maintain. Their unsupercharged race engines were much like those of the Talbot sports cars: six cylinders, but with capacity increased to 4.5liters from 4.0liters. Like "Lago-Talbot" sports car engines, they had pushrod overhead valves in hemi-heads. The race engines used more light alloy than the street engines, but the race cars were not light, in part due to their heavy Wilson pre-selective gearboxes which were retained for their reliability and usefulness on tight circuits. (Keep in mind that the cars were never intended as serious contenders in Grand Prix racing against the German teams; I think the best the Talbots did was third and fourth in the 1939 French GP at Reims, third at Pau.)

Two years after they appeared at Indy I found them, by sheer luck, in a barn in Manhattan on the west side of Seventh Avenue. It was a barn used by US Customs to store the many items that had been seized by them for one reason or another, usually for non-payment of duties.

I no longer remember the reason I found myself in that barn of a building; probably it had something to do with confiscated film. But as I was leaving I paused to look at a notice relating to goods that would be sold at auction and there, to my amazement, delight and confusion, was a line that read...TWO FRENCH RACING CARS...CEILING PRICE, \$1500 EACH.

The amazement was that I had stumbled upon the Talbots (it had to be them). The delight was that they were priced at a mere fraction of their \$30,000 value. The confusion? How could they be sold at an auction if they had a "ceiling" price?

In a nearby office I learned that, inasmuch as the Office of Price Administration had set prices for almost everything in the wartime economy—from sugar to Mack trucks—so, too, was there a price for the Talbots. They would be sold at auction, but not to the highest bidder. When each car came up for bids the auctioneer would ask all those willing to pay the ceiling price to raise numbered paddles. If there was more than one bidder the numbers would be put into a hat. Thus the event was more lottery than auction.

As the gods had already seen fit to put me in the way of a Talbot convertible two years previously, it seemed reasonable to infer that now they proposed to make me the even prouder owner of one or even two Talbot GP cars. But fickle, fickle, fickle are the gods and the Finger of Fate.

The week before the auction I was ordered out to Hollywood to direct the remake of a Navy film. Thus, on "T" day, I was on a sound stage. My wife, Louise, was back in the Customs House to bid for the Talbots.

Trouble was, she was only *one* bidder whereas a couple of more clever car lovers were there with a dozen friends, all lofting the requisite numbered paddles. The odds thus greatly enhanced in their favor, they became the owners of the Talbots and woe, indeed, was me for many a sad day. (Woe is me right now as old memories come alive, 40years later.)

However, the Barlows learned from the experience. We got on the Customs mailing list and, a year later, spotted a notice that read: "AUCTION: LARGE SHIPMENT OF FINNISH FURNITURE...CEILING PRICE \$3500." We were sure it would be items designed by the famous Aalvar Alto and thus worth at least \$30,000. We were right. On auction day Louise and I were there with all the friends we could muster—38 in all—and one of them held the lucky paddle.

A Grand Prix Talbot would have been sweeter but the taste of revenge was not bad. **AW**

Roger Barlow has had a lifelong involvement with automobiles and has written about them since the late '30s. A successful racer, in 1952 he won a Golden Steering Wheel Award.