

LETTER FROM VIRGINIA

BY ROGER BARLOW

Escape roads aren't just on tracks—or the back page

Ironically, "escape velocity" comes immediately after the slot in the dictionary where "escape road" should be but isn't, which is perfectly appropriate because escape roads exist on race tracks to provide for excessive velocity, as routes to compensate for errors in judgment or for equipment failure. Even the best Grand Prix drivers make mistakes or may be endangered by mechanical problems while having to get from 160 mph to, say, 50. Or arrive to find a tight corner plugged by a pair of spun-out cars.

Old-fashioned two-lane highways through the mountains had escape roads, too. Signs warned truckers that steep downhills often had "runoff ramps" near the bottoms so that out-of-control rigs could have a chance of stopping safely. Today, interstates rarely have runoff ramps and all racetracks have them at the end of every straightaway. Each of us also has a personal escape road, though few of us are racers.

I learned firsthand about race course escape roads when there wasn't one where I urgently needed it during the first Palm Springs Road Race in 1950. It was also my first road race and the first time a Jaguar XK120 ran in such an event in California.

By the fourth lap brake fade became evident, but I could do little more than push harder and mutter a couple of "Oh ---s." Three laps later I added a "Damn" as the pedal went to the floor. There was no resistance at all. Heat had melted the rubber components in the left rear brake cylinders. As I pumped futilely, I discovered that heat as well as cold can be the nemesis of an O-ring.

I was having far too much fun to give up, so I downshifted sooner and at higher revs to get more engine braking...and began to experiment with tossing the Jag into a broadside to scrub off more speed just before reaching a corner—laying on sufficient opposite lock to avoid spinning out and keep the car pointed into the corner so that I could pour on the power in second gear when arriving at the apex and exit to good effect.

In fact I was actually gaining on the two leading cars, one of them an Allard. Then came the dire need for an escape road. Approaching the end of the start-finish straight, I changed down into third, slowed, blipped the throttle again for the change down into second as I neared the 90-degree corner. Letting up on the gas pedal to slow, only

half a second from giving quick right-hand lock to get the Jag broadside, I realized I had full power instead of engine braking! Declutching at full throttle would certainly blow a perfectly good XK engine. If I attempted the corner the Jag would slide off the road sideways and flip, probably three times, when hitting the sand. Because there



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was no escape road at the end of the straight, I made my own. I elected to continue right on beyond the pavement and out into the desert. A cloud of dust, sand, flying bits of mesquite, tin cans and tumbleweeds showed the spectators where I had gone... porpoising gracefully, full throttle in second gear, until I could find the ignition switch and bring the Jag to a stop.

As I sat there in the sudden silence, with dust settling on the fascia, I didn't yet know that when the throttle was blipped hard in the downshift to second, the linkage had gone over dead center and stayed there. A most educational first race—it taught me about Jaguar brakes' overheating, glitches in new models, and the value of an escape road at the end of a straight rather than a barbed wire fence or a deep ditch... or a wall.

The next day a cable arrived from Co-

ventry: "Be alerted that the throttle linkage of some early XK120s may go over top center and remain there." Indeed!

In those early CSCC and SCCA events, I watched the young Phil Hill, who worked for me as a mechanic from 1947 until 1954, utilize escape roads, not for emergencies or to save him from his own errors of judgment (he made few), but as part of his race strategy. As starting grid positions were rarely based upon practice times but drawn by lot, Hill often started his Shorrock-supercharged MG TC from the middle or rear of the pack and, rather than join a polite parade toward the first corner, would make an aggressive all-out dash to get there before anyone else. He knew in his canny way that if, at that point, another car or cars would be occupying the line he needed to negotiate that corner safely, he could use the escape road and not endanger any other drivers or himself. Of course, if his gamble for the lead didn't pay off (and sometimes it didn't) he rejoined the race at the rear. Having had a grand time and being little worse off than had he maintained his grid position until the cars ahead of him began to sort themselves out and make room for easier passing tactics.

At that time the future Grand Prix champion was sometimes unjustly accused of being wild or erratic when he was actually being "professional," utilizing all aspects of the original course to his advantage... even the escape roads.

Beyond the life and limb aspects of racetrack escape roads, there are other escape roads we all can use almost every day—roads that enable us to get away from the many pressures, aggravations and tensions that can seriously threaten our sanity and ability to cope with jobs and life. We don't have to be a Phil Hill or drive a Jag to spend a day or two ambling along the empty dirt roads of Monument Valley. A trip almost anywhere in the West is like a voyage to another, less hectic century. Fortunately, we needn't go all the way to Wyoming or the

Navaho country to find respite from the hurly-burly of our 20th Century cities or jobs. Almost any thoroughfare other than a busy city street can serve as a personal escape road at some time of the day or night. I've found a quick late-hour drive through Central Park (being careful about tire squeal) or a fast run up Coldwater Canyon and along Mulholland Drive in Hollywood to be distinct contributions to my sanity and ability to cope. A nearby country lane at a walking pace or an Interstate highway at the speed it should be used might well be your own versions of this petrol-based pastoral retreat. Try one with that in mind. But crack the window a bit to let the enveloping tranquillity push the ugly tensions out! ■

Roger Barlow, a regular contributor to "Escape Road," has been an auto writer since the '30s. He was also a co-founder of the California Sports Car Club.