

THE SAGA OF THE BLUE GOOSE

February 20, 1937 was a day of glory in the short history of the Third Reich. It was the 50th anniversary of the Berlin Automobile Exhibition. To commemorate this day a brand new exhibition hall had been built for the forthcoming International Automobile Und Motorrad- Ausstellung for 1937. Dedication ceremonies were to be performed by the Fuhrer himself. As the opening time approached, a cavalcade of Grosser Mercedes Benz Offener Tourenwagens departed from the Reichchancellory traveling through the Brandenburg Gate along the Kaiserdamm. In the lead Mercedes with the top and all the windows in a down position sat Adolph Hitler in the right rear seat. To his immediate left sat Hermann Goering, Reichsmarschall of the Greater German Reich, President of the German Parliament (Reichstag), Commander of the German Air Force (Luftwaffe) and President of the Prussian Council of State. The weather was cloudy with a light snow from the night before still in evidence on the Kaiserdamm. Along Hitler's right side of the Mercedes admiring spectators stood on the sidewalks guarded by the police. On Goering's left side of the automobile was a formation of smartly aligned motorcycles with side cars manned by a Special Corps of Nazi party members standing at attention as the top leadership of the Third Reich headed to the new exhibition hall. At the intersection of Elizabeth Strasse the motorcade turned left and proceeded to Hall #1 where the lead Grosser Mercedes Benz pulled to a stop.

Immediately the Waffen SS adjutant riding in the front passenger seat smartly exited the Mercedes and then opened the right rear door for the Fuhrer and his first deputy, Hermann Goering. As the party gathered around the Fuhrer, the signal was given for the ceremonies to begin. Immediately the band started to play as the Fuhrer walked to the podium of the new hall. The music stopped; the Fuhrer was introduced with great applause. In his speech he spoke as if the world were his audience. Hitler said, "By the cutting of the ceremonial ribbon, Germany is again reclaiming its rightful position as an industrial might to be reckoned with in the years to come."

All the notables of the German automobile industry, including Director Wilhelm Kissel of Daimler Benz, A.G., were present to greet the Third Reich elite. It was during the tour of the Mercedes Benz 540K exhibit that Goering spotted again a Special Roadster, which he had previously ordered in the 500K series in 1935. For 1937 Mercedes Benz had enclosed the rear spare tire with a streamline metallic tire cover. Goering stopped and inquired how long it might take to build an additional Special Roadster with the larger 5.4 litre engine with more horsepower, but with certain unusual modifications. He wanted his new Special Roadster bullet proof and bomb resistive. He also wanted to enhance the driving range necessitating greater fuel capacity. Kissel agreed that these additions could be accomplished.

Being given this assurance Goering opened the driver's door and attempted to sit behind the steering wheel of the automobile. He immediately encountered a problem. His ever-increasing waistline encroached upon the lower portion of the steering wheel. An attempt to adjust the seat to a more backward position was not possible since the seat was back as far as it could go. Over the years, Goering had gone from a slim fighter pilot of World War I to an overweight condition in 1937. His 5'10" frame carried 220 pounds, much of it being attributed to the sumptuous meals at his country estate called Carinhoff located northeast of Berlin where the serving of food and wine never ceased. The estate was named after his first wife, Carin v. Kantzow, v. Fock.

Director Kissel, seeing the dilemma of Goering, turned to his assistant in charge of the 540K custom creations. After some discussion it was decided that the entire driver's compartment had to be enlarged primarily lengthwise. Assurance was given to the Reichsmarschall that Daimler Benz could make whatever changes he desired. Detailed specifications would be given to him after the design team drew up a new set of plans. Lastly Goering said that his Special Roadster had to be painted in Aviation Blue, a metallic sky blue color as was on his present 500K Mercedes Special Roadster. Arrangements were made for finalizing the purchase. Goering concluded the discussion with the customary, "Heil Hitler" and then rejoined the other dignitaries as they journeyed through the exhibition halls.

Goering, inspecting his new creation at the Caracciola Mercedes Benz Agency in Berlin in mid July of 1937, was ecstatic. (Rudy Caracciola was the lead Mercedes Benz Grand Prix race driver during the 1930s.) The color of the metallic Aviation Blue was stunning. Goering with his own motorcycle escort had to test his new exotic toy to feel the increased power of the 540K supercharge engine developing 180 horsepower. On to the autobahn with his left hand blue lens spot light glowing he pressed the accelerator to the floor kicking in the screaming supercharger. With his eyes alternating between the passing countryside and the speedometer he gleamed with pleasure as the speedometer needle swung near 160 KM per hour. Returning to the Mercedes Benz agency he declared to Caracciola and the Mercedes Benz Design team representative that his new Mercedes was a resounding success.

During the winter of 1940/1941 Goering had the Special Roadster sent back to Daimler Benz A.G. to the Sindelfingen plant for a repaint. The metallic light blue paint had faded and become quite dull. The technology worldwide on metallic paints in the late 1930's was still in its infancy. He had the Special Roadster repainted a darker blue with less metallic additive upon the advice of the Mercedes Benz design development.

Goering indicated that his increasing weight now in excess of 260 pounds was causing him a problem with his stomach encroaching upon the lower part of the steering wheel. The tension of the war and the lack of success of the air war in the Battle of Britain in the autumn of 1940 led to his disfavor with the Fuhrer. To overcome this increased tension Goering took to an eating orgy. The lack of room for his belly was remedied by reducing the thickness of the driver's rear seat cushion by four inches. Satisfied, Goering then had the Special Roadster sent to his country home in Berchtesgaden in the Obersalzberg area at the base of the Alps where it stayed for the duration of the war. A short distance away Hitler had built a beautiful country home called the Berghof. To the east of these homes Hitler also had a mountain top retreat called the Eagle's Nest built on an Alpine peak overlooking the magnificent Alps Mountains.

THE RISE OF HERMANN GOERING IN THE THIRD REICH

Hermann Goering was born in Bavaria on January 12, 1893, making him four years younger than Adolph Hitler. His father, Heindrich, was a haughty German colonial official serving the majority of his life in Africa as an embassy official. Hermann's mother Franziska (Fanny) was twenty years younger than her husband, who had four children by his late first wife. Fanny gave her husband Heinrich five more; Hermann was the second oldest of the five children. During the diplomatic career of his father, Goering had befriended an Austrian Jew, Hermann von Epenstein, who became the godfather to all the second batch of Goering children. Epenstein had used his wealth to purchase sexual favors from Fanny. The Goerings lived in Epenstein's castle in Franconia near

Nuremberg. Hermann's mother became the mistress of Epenstein quite openly. The bizarre triangle no doubt gave the future Reichsmarschall mixed character values, which were manifested later during the years when Goering made and executed policies for the Third Reich.

It was in his secondary education at a military cadet school that the listless adolescent Hermann came alive. From being nearly a failing student in primary school, he now excelled in all of his activities as a cadet. After graduation he entered the army. Shortly thereafter World War I broke out in August of 1914; Goering was sent immediately to the front. As an army officer, trench warfare was not suited to his health. In a short time he had severe attacks of rheumatism.

While hospitalized he became enthralled by the air war. Through military connections he got himself transferred to the Imperial Air Service. During the years of the war Goering distinguished himself in air combat earning the coveted blue enamel cross of the Pour Le Merite, [the "Blue Max"] near the conclusion of World War I. Goering took over the most famous air squadron of the war. It had been led by the legendary Manfred von Richthofen, the Red Baron, who was killed in action in early 1918. After his successor was also killed shortly thereafter in action, Goering took control of the squadron on July 14, 1918, five months before the end of the war.

Since Germany's army and air service were still intact when the war ended on Nov. 11, 1918, much of the military felt that they had not been defeated. Peace came by the Versailles Peace Treaty concluded in June 1919, but at a terrible price to Germany. In essence the treaty laid the ground work for World War II twenty years later. The Germans had agreed to an armistice based upon U.S. President Woodrow Wilson 14 point peace proposal, but the final result was a totally vindictive treaty in which the Germans saw their future existence torn asunder.

Goering as well as many of his former comrades-in-arms, perceived this quandary. With no money and no job Goering joined former members of the Richthofen Squadron to form a flying circus in Denmark. Still seeking new pursuits he joined the newly formed Swedish airline Svenska Lufttrafik. This endeavor brought him into contact with his future wife, the sister-in-law of Count Eric von Rosen, a client of Goering. Countess Carin v. Kantzow v. Fock was already married and had one child by her officer husband. Carin was bored with him and life in general. She was eager for adventure and a new romance. From the moment Carin met this handsome German aviator at the von Rosen estate romantic sparks flew back-and-forth between the two. In a short period of twenty-four hours their destinies intertwined until her premature death of tuberculosis in 1931. Their adulterous affair was a public scandal in the conservative capital of Stockholm. In time Carin was granted a divorce giving up all rights to a compliant husband as well as renouncing all rights to her inheritance. Hermann and Carin were married in Germany and shortly thereafter Goering entered the University of Munich. But the atmosphere of university life in 1922 was not about academics as much as political activism of righting the wrongs of the Versailles Peace Treaty.

In 1922 Goering, who himself was trying to raise a small political party of ex-officers, heard shouts for Herr Hitler to speak in Munich's Konigsplatz. From that moment Goering's star became attached to Hitler's destiny. Hitler, sensing Goering's elite class and military status, made him a key ingredient in the newly formed National Socialist Workers Party. Yet he nearly lost his life in an attempted coup d'etat in the infamous Munich Beer Hall Putsch of 1923. Hitler was captured and sent to prison; Goering was shot in the groin trying to escape. With the help of his wife he was secreted out of

Germany to Austria where he recovered from his wound. But in his rehabilitation process he acquired a terrible morphine addiction used to control the pain of his wound. Throughout the course of his life he suffered from various forms of drug addiction.

It was in the late 1920s that the German government gave a pardon to the leadership of the National Socialist Workers Party. Hitler was given his freedom while the arrest warrant for Goering was quashed. Goering returned to Germany and with Hitler as its leader the Nazi movement was reborn. The stock market crash in October, 1929 had a drastic economic effect on Germany. As the 1930s started, the rise of Hitler and the National Socialists surged to power. As this was happening Carin became critically ill from tuberculosis and died in 1931, two full years before her husband reached his zenith of power.

Through a strictly legitimate process the Nazis obtained control of the German parliament in 1933 with Goering assuming the position as President of the Reichstag. From that point of time the material fortunes of Goering flourished. The good life followed. In 1935 Goering married a second time to the German movie actress, Emmy Sonnenann, in an ostentatious wedding which would have rivaled the royal weddings of Europe. Hitler was his best man.

The wealth, which came to the Reichsmarschall in his new position of economic governance, gave him a sense of self-importance accompanied by an opulent and materialistic life style. Everything he wanted could be obtained by his power and wealth. His taste for flamboyancy could be seen in his many daily clothing changes of sparkling custom designed uniforms employing an abundance of gold braid. Where Hitler in his mannerisms appeared to be severe and dogmatic, Goering reveled in hearing the German people shout "Hermann, Hermann." In his own mind the German people idolized him without detracting from their loyalty to their Fuhrer.

But war can and did bring a change of fortunes. In the later part of World War II, when Goering realized that the great German offensive of the Ardennes of 1944 had failed, in what Americans refer to as the Battle of the Bulge, he started to prepare himself, his personal finances and accumulated art treasures for Germany's final demise.

On April 16, 1945 the final Russian offensive on Berlin started. On April 19th Goering moved his banking assets from the Berlin banks to his personal bank account at Bayerische Bank in Berchtesgaden. As midnight approached he made his way to Hitler's bunker to wish him an early happy birthday shortly after midnight on the morning of April 20th. The Fuhrer demanded that he still be available at the midday briefing. At this briefing, Goering was given command of the forces in Southern Germany by Hitler. At the conclusion of the briefing Goering asked, "Mein Fuhrer, I presume you have no objection to my leaving for the Obersalzberg right away to be closer to my troops?" "Do what you want" snapped Hitler. Leaving Hitler's presence Goering had a short and strained conversation with Heinrich Himmler, chief of the SS about Hitler's successor. As darkness fell, an air raid of RAF Mosquito bombers appeared over Berlin. Instead of staying in Hitler's private bunker, he decided to go to the nearest civilian air raid shelter. After the all-clear was sounded he immediately left for the Kurfurst Hotel in central Berlin, where Goering and his staff had a temporary residence. On the early morning of April 21, Goering's convoy of five cars laden with his staff and luggage headed toward Berchtesgaden. Goering in an armor plated Grosser Mercedes was accompanied by his personal chauffeur, his man servant and his nurse who had control of his medicine case. The convoy traveled south through the gap being closed on the east by the Russians and on the west by the Americans. The convoy arrived at 11:00 AM at his Obersalzberg villa,

which was crowded with his wife, daughter, his wife's sister, Goering's sister, Paula, and a host of nieces and nephews. Goering had already sent six railroad cars of his art collection and objects d'art to the area for safe keeping several weeks before. His trip before Berlin fell was as much to ensure that his personal finances and art works were being properly safeguarded, as well as to save his life from the barbaric Russians. The war was far less active in the Obersalzberg area than in Berlin. For the next few days he enjoyed some peace until American bombers rained havoc on the homes of the Nazi elite on the night of April 25th. Sensing the danger of an air raid, Goering pulled up stakes beforehand and headed to his Fischhorn Castle near Zell am See, located about thirty miles south of Berchtesgaden.

On April 30th, the Fuhrer ended his life. Grand Admiral Karl Doenitz announced the death of the Fuhrer at 10 PM on the evening of the 1st of May. He also announced to the German people that the Fuhrer had appointed him as his successor. This was small consolation to Goering when he heard the news since he now sensed his capture was imminent.

Following the death of its leader the various German armies started surrendering to the Allies. On the evening of the 7th of May American forces under Brigadier General Robert I. Stack of the 36th Infantry Division came upon the Goering entourage and took him prisoner. Stack suggested that Goering and his family spend the night at Fischhorn Castle near Zell am See before returning to the American lines the next day. For Reichschancellor Hermann Goering the war had come to an end.

Following his capture he was briefly interrogated in the Bavarian war zone. By mid May he was taken to a series of internment centers ending up in October in Nuremberg, Germany where he was tried for war crimes against humanity at the Palace of Justice the following year. He was found guilty on October 1, 1946 and sentenced to die on October 15, 1946. A few minutes before he was taken from his prison cell for execution by hanging, he committed suicide by taking cyanide. His remains were cremated and his ashes were spread over the infamous Dachau concentration camp area, the first camp of its type, which he had authorized as President of the Reichstag in 1933.

THE CAPTURE OF THE MERCEDES BENZ 540K SPECIAL ROADSTER

Captain Joe Crilley, a soldier of the 326 Engineering Company of the 101st Airborne Division of the United States Army approached the picturesque town of Berchtesgaden, Germany with his fighting unit on May 4th, 1945. By now the fighting had dropped off dramatically. Crilley knew the war was coming to an end. Yet he had no idea how rapidly events were unfolding in Berlin, following the suicide death of Hitler the previous Monday, April 30th, ten days after Hitler's fifty-sixth birthday. Crilley had successfully maneuvered his company through the village with no encounter with German forces. Many homes had white flags hanging. However the lack of a firefight did not mean that the Nazi elite were not holed up in the Eagle's Nest retreat following a possible retreat from Berlin.

Crilley knew instinctively that the area surrounding the Eagle's Nest could be heavily fortified with Hitler's personal guard of Waffen SS storm troupers willing to fight to the death. The question perplexing the 101st Airborne Division was whether the Nazi leadership had fled Berlin and was now holed up in his mountain retreat. As Crilley's engineering company approached the demolished homes of the Nazi's at the base of the Alps, no evidence of enemy troops was sighted. Near the damaged homes stood the Waffen SS housing compound as well as its adjacent garage.

Anticipating a fire fight, Crilley ordered his company to spread out. But no enemy was sighted. The garage was surrounded and then entered by American troops. Inside were two magnificent Mercedes Benz automobiles side by side on the brick floor. Both cars had splattered mud over their exterior bodies but otherwise appeared in good condition.

Crilley turned to Staff Sergeant Robert Smiley and said "Check them out." The first of the two cars was the Goering 540K Special Roadster. The Roadster sat with the fixed windows in their up position, but with the top down in its concealed compartment. The other car was a black Grosser Mercedes Offener Tourenwagen.

Smiley approached the Special Roadster first with a degree of caution. He knew the Germans were notorious for setting booby traps for unsuspecting American soldiers seeking souvenirs. Taking no chances he took aim at the driver's window in the up position and fired his weapon. Then he fired a second time leaving a 45 caliber hole in the left fender. The first bullet did not penetrate the bulletproof glass, but it left a large star mark. To the relief of Smiley the weapon assault on the Goering Special Roadster did not signify a potential booby trap. Smiley then surveyed the Grosser Mercedes. Going back to the Special Roadster, to his amazement, he found the keys in its ignition. Crilley then barked out a command, "See if it runs." Smiley opened the driver's door and cautiously placed his athletic body behind the steering wheel. He quickly surveyed the instrument panel. He took a deep breath; then he said a quick prayer. Smiley turned the key to the "on" position; then he hit the starter button. After a few unsuccessful attempts the Mercedes roared to life again with a heavy growl coming from the exhaust pipe. The liberation of the Goering Special Roadster was now complete, all at the hands of the American Armed Forces.

Captain Crilley, realizing that there was work still to be done, called his soldiers back in battle formation and proceeded up the road to the elevator base for the Eagle's Nest. Crilley found the elevator disabled. (This damage also had been done by the American bombers on April 25th.) He did not attempt to go to the top of the Alpine Peak. Several days later, he did manage to make a foray to the Eagle's Nest. But to his surprise, he found that his unit was not the first of the Allies to reach to the Eagle's Nest. This had been accomplished by a small detachment of French and Moroccan forces, which had entered through Berchtesgaden from another direction, as the Americans were simultaneously entering the village. They got to the Eagle's Nest first and confiscated any war booty which they could get their hands on.

Orders then came from above telling the American forces to secure the area and hold up their advance as the war was winding down. On the day that Captain Crilley had captured the two prized Mercedes, the German High Command surrendered to British Field Marshall Montgomery all German forces in North West Germany, Denmark and Holland. On May 5th, Admiral Hans Von Friedeburg, the new Commander in Chief of the German Navy, arrived at General Eisenhower's headquarters at Reims to negotiate surrender terms. In a little red schoolhouse at Reims where Eisenhower had made his headquarters, Germany unconditionally surrendered at 2:41 AM on the morning of May 7th, 1945. The war in Europe was over.

In Berchtesgaden Captain Crilley's 326 Engineering Company received the news with profound relief. Now with time on their hands, they made an exploration of the Fuhrer's retreat. The enterprising American 101 Airborne soldiers found in the basement of the Waffen SS garage a cachet of French Cognac and choice French wines.

Before long the two Mercedes, after being cleaned by their new "owners," were being driven all over the village of Berchtesgaden by the 101st Airborne celebrating the end of the war in Europe with bottles of Cognac helping to ease the pain of previous battles. The exploits of the 326th Engineering Company soon reached higher ups. Word soon came down from above from General Ryan himself for the two Mercedes to be parked.

When Major General Maxwell Taylor, overall theater commander, saw the "Hitler" 540K Special Roadster a few days later, he thought it would make a great command car. He then turned to his adjutant and said, "Put my two star license plate on the *Blue Goose*, the name which Captain Crilley and his fighting force had given to the Special Roadster.

The command car status did not last long for General Taylor. In August, he received orders of reassignment as the new Superintendent of West Point Military Academy. At the same time, word was received from the United States Treasury Department that these two prized possessions of Hitler's would be a great draw in war bond rallies back home. There was still a war to be fought and won in the Pacific. Captain Crilley was approached by Command to tour the United States with the two Mercedes along with soldiers from his 101st airborne outfit. He turned the assignment down; Crilley had another agenda and it was getting out of the army as soon as possible and coming back home and getting married. But Second Lieutenant James Cox, who served in Crilley's outfit, had fallen in love with the Special Roadster. Cox volunteered for the special assignment. Actually Cox had tried to buy the *Blue Goose* from the American authorities. He had money available from family resources back home. But the army said "no" to the purchase, seeing that the greater good was a war bond tour throughout the United States with Hitler's cars as a major attraction. In August of 1945 the two Mercedes Benz and a small contingent of the 101st Airborne received orders to depart for the U.S. with Second Lieutenant James Cox in charge of safeguarding the two prized automobiles.

THE *BLUE GOOSE* COMES TO THE UNITED STATES

The Special Roadster and the Mercedes Benz Grosser 770 Offener Tourenwagen received a shipping order issued on September 10, 1945 by the Headquarters US Forces, European Theater indicating that these two automobile war trophies would be sent to the states accompanied by a contingent of ten men and an officer from the 101st Airborne Division. Although the original thinking was that these two Mercedes belonged to Hitler, it was later determined that the Special Roadster belonged to Hermann Goering since it sported a crest of his coat of arms on the doors. Hitler did not use a coat of arms. Subsequent supporting purchase documents verified this conclusion. Two short tours were made with the *Blue Goose*, both being after the war had ended.

In August 1946 the first reunion of the 101st Airborne Division was held in Indianapolis, Indiana with the *Blue Goose* on hand for the reunion. Anton (Tony) Hulman, owner of the Indianapolis 500 Mile Motor Speedway, invited the 101st Airborne Division to bring the *Blue Goose* to the race tracks for a few laps pacing two special trophy races of three cars each. Tony Hulman drove the *Blue Goose* around the famous track pacing the three Indy race cars to a flying start. Major General Maxwell Taylor was on hand to view his old command car. With the war over the *Blue Goose* was retired from active war bond rallies and placed in storage.

In 1956 the Goering Special Roadster ended up as surplus government property and was auctioned off by the Property Disposal Branch, Logistics Division, Aberdeen Proving Ground, Maryland. An auction was held of the two Mercedes on October 5, 1956. The bid description read, "MERCEDES-BENZ Convertible Roadster (Several informational

sources indicate that this car was the private sporty car of Hermann Goering and have identified the heraldic design on the doors as Goering's assumed coat-of-arms.) Acq. Cost Unknown. USED." The high bid was \$2167 and it was awarded to Jacques Tunick of Greenwich, Connecticut.

THE BITGOOD ERA OF THE *BLUE GOOSE*

The purchase of the *Blue Goose* by Dr. George E. Bitgood, Jr, from Jacques Tunick in 1958 had to a degree been pre-ordained in an unspoken meeting of Sea Merchantman George Bitgood, Jr and the future Deputy Reichsfuhrer of Germany, Hermann Goering, in a chance encounter in a tavern in Stockholm, Sweden.

George Bitgood, Jr, who always had a love of the sea, joined the United States Merchant Marine in his late teens, with the blessings of his father and uncle, who were noted veterinarians in the New England area.

Born in 1904, Bitgood signed-up for a six-year tour of duty in 1921 in New London, Connecticut. His ambition was someday to be the captain of his own ship. However this was not to be since he acquired a partial hearing loss while serving in the Merchant Marines, thus precluding him from continuing his sea-life ambition.

It was early 1922 while sailing the Trans Atlantic route that his ship docked in Stockholm, Sweden. While on shore leave he went to a local tavern where he found a rather large crowd gathered around a German-speaking man "holding court" with many admirers. There was much singing, laughter and drinking. Bitgood asked the owner of the tavern, "Who's the German?" The owner said, "Why, that's Herman Goering the famous German air ace from the "Great War"!" Bitgood was fascinated by the persona of Goering. He felt a reluctance to speak to him because of the language barrier. As he was about to leave the tavern, he couldn't resist going over to the corner where Goering was entertaining his court of admirers to get a closer look. Bitgood caught Goering's eye and for just a few split seconds Goering smiled back at the young American. That moment in time would leave a lasting impression on the future Dr. Bitgood leading him eventually to own the famous *Blue Goose* of Herman Goerings' once it was offered for sale to him by Jacques Tunick of Greenwich, Connecticut for about \$10,000. Both Bitgood and Goering left Stockholm shortly thereafter. Bitgood continued as a seaman in the Merchant Marines. Goering along with his mistress, Carin von Fock (later his wife), went to Bavaria, Germany in the spring of 1922, where shortly thereafter he entered the University in Munich to study economic history.

Leaving the service of the Merchant Marines in 1930, George Bitgood, Jr. then followed in his father's and uncle's footsteps and entered Ontario Veterinarian College at the University of Toronto in 1931. He graduated in 1935. Dr. Bitgood, affectionately known as "Doc" by everyone, was totally dedicated to his profession. He was on call twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. In the course of sixty-three years he never took a vacation.

Although dedicated to veterinarian medicine, he also had a passion for exotic cars in a very private way. During the years of World War II, the great custom and luxury cars of the 1930s and earlier were selling for near scrap metal prices. With gasoline rationing in effect during the war years, three gallons of gas per car, per week were allowed by the government. In the 1940s Bitgood started as a hobby buying, selling and trading what were to be referred to in the post war years as the great automobile classics.

In 1949 he purchased Jack Warner's (of Warner Brothers Movie Studios) 1937 Mercedes Benz 540K Special Roadster from Dr. Sam Scher, a noted plastic surgeon with

offices on Park Avenue in New York City. Bitgood later purchased a second 540K Special Roadster from Dr. Scher.

Then he acquired the *Blue Goose*. Once Bitgood turned his attention to the Mercedes Benz 500K and 540K series, he left the hobby as a trader and seller and turned his attention as an accumulator of these prized Mercedes automobiles. Over the years his pre-war Mercedes Benz collection reached 14 of these magical automobiles, of which four were Special Roadsters.

Bitgood, upon acquiring the Goering Special Roadster, had it repainted black. Many of the chrome pieces were re-chromed. Where Goering had his coat-of-arms painted on each door, Bitgood had the doors painted over. He had two brass plates fabricated with engraved swastikas and had each attached to a door. However, he did not have the bullet hole repaired in the fender nor did he replace the damage glass in the left driver's window with new bulletproof glass.

Only once did Dr. Bitgood display the Goering Special Roadster. The event was in 1973 in Durham, Connecticut for the Durham County Fair. Bitgood had a large banner made up advertising the famous World War II trophy. For twenty-five cents the people of Durham could feast their eyes on the *Blue Goose*

After the Durham Fair, Bitgood contacted the 101st Airborne Division located in Fort Campbell, Kentucky concerning bringing the *Blue Goose* to a reunion in 1974. However the reunion was never realized since Bitgood was diagnosed with renal cell carcinoma and subsequently had his kidney removed. Even during the six weeks of resulting radiation, Dr. Bitgood continued to work in his clinic. His health returned and he continued to practice with the help of his wife, who acted as his surgical assistant and bookkeeper for 55 years. She died in April 1993 after suffering from a long illness. Bitgood, now 88 years of age, was devastated by her death. A few months later he, himself, had additional surgery, and shortly thereafter passed away.

When Doctor Bitgood's daughters heard that the 101st Airborne Division was planning to build a new museum at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, they were eager to fulfill their father's dream of a reunion of the *Blue Goose* being reunited with the remaining veterans of World War II. After receiving the *Blue Goose* out of probate, Jim Champion, Executor of the Bitgood Estate and son-in-law of Dr. Bitgood asked Chris Charlton of Classic Car Services of Oxford, Maine to prepare the car for the 101st Airborne Reunion at Fort Campbell, Kentucky in June, 2002. Upon completion of the work, Charlton had the Special Roadster shipped to Fort Campbell, Kentucky. The initial reunion scheduled by Dr. Bitgood in 1973, but never accomplished, now took place.

Champion had discussions with the Bitgood family about doing a private showing of the car at the Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance. In the meantime several offers were received all of which envisioned a full restoration of the *Blue Goose*. All potential buyers were interested in doing a complete restoration rather than preserving the unique history of the car as it was first discovered by the 101st Airborne Division in May 1945.

Dr. Bitgood had a strong sense of the historical significance of the capture of the *Blue Goose* as well as Goering's ownership. He was inclined not to do a full restoration of the car; rather he wished to preserve the automobile except for the color being changed from Aviation Blue to black.

Eventually a buyer from Sweden was found that would fit the unique requirement of preserving the *Blue Goose* in all of its historical significance. Jim Champion's wife, Annette, saw the potential new owner from the second story window of her home. He had just flown in from Europe.

The European gentleman which Annette saw was Jan Kanevad of Carnlough International Limited of Guernsey, Great Britain. The Trust as part of its assets maintains a unique but small collection of highly desirable collectible automobiles. For the past five years the Trust had been seeking an authentic but un-restored Mercedes Benz Special Roadster. When Jan Kanevad laid his eyes on the Goering Mercedes, a deal was shortly struck with the Bitgood estate. Upon the recommendation of Champion, Classic Auto Services was contacted again as a potential restoration shop which could perform the task of a preservation/ restoration of the Special Roadster. Contact was then made with Charlton by Kanevad followed by a personal interview on location. A decision was made to bring the Goering Special Roadster back to the condition when it was found by the 101st Airborne Division on May 4, 1945 with the restoration/ preservation being performed by Classic Auto Services. Once that decision was made; the *Blue Goose* was shipped back to Oxford, Maine.

THE PRESERVATION/ RESTORATION OF HERMANN GOERING'S MERCEDES BENZ 540K SPECIAL ROADSTER

In many respects a preservation/ restoration of a classic car sixty-five years of age is much different than a straight-out body-off restoration which creates the illusion of a brand-new showroom condition automobile. The instructions from the Carnlough International Limited Trust were to recreate the Special Roadster to May 4, 1945 as the 101st Airborne Division took custody of the Special Roadster. The 45 caliber hole in the left fender as well as the large star in the left door window glass were both to be left intact. All leather was to be retained since it still appeared to be in fair to good condition. Any new paint which had to be applied, had a dulling agent added to make it blend into the original paint. A consistency of age/ quality of all parts in harmony one to the other is the qualifying factor of a preservation/ restoration process. Since this was not a body-off preservation/ restoration, the *Blue Goose* is probably the most original 540K Special Roadster in existence today.

EPILOGUE

The Goering 540K Mercedes Benz Special Roadster is a historical contradiction in values. It has remarkable finish not seemingly overdone. It appears to be a hands-on car ready to move out without fear of being soiled. One can visualize Major General Maxwell Taylor driving around Germany in this beauty in contrast to the very few cars on the roads of Germany at the end of World War II. But the bigger contradiction is the damage done to the Special Roadster by the 101st Airborne Division when it was captured. On lookers will no doubt ask about the bullet hole in the fender and the bullet star in the driver's side window glass. Many will wonder why subsequent owners never had the Special Roadster returned to the Goering original ownership condition. Moving a historical piece out of a wartime setting to a Concours d'Elegance field where perfection is the norm will no doubt befuddle many an onlooker. If the Goering Mercedes Benz 540K Special Roadster makes one think of the great price the Allies paid for the freedom of Europe, then the preservation/ restoration of this historical Mercedes Benz will have served its purpose.

It is the intent and wish of the present owners that this unique piece of history be preserved in its present condition. They hope that today's generations might have a greater appreciation of the cost and sacrifice which war brings after having viewed the

preserved Goering Mercedes Benz 540K Special Roadster, nicknamed by the American soldiers "*The Blue Goose*". Time will tell.