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**RARER THAN RARE**

1939 ALFA ROMEO 6C

THE AIR COOLED SARA: PART TWO





Above: Functional rather than beautiful, the berlinetta recreation has an undeniable glamour. Its performance lives up to this promise

Left: The Alfa 256 in the pits at Le Mans, 1939.

It was to retire in the 20th hour

(Geoffrey Goddard Collection/Matt Spitzley)



## RARER THAN RARE

**D**on't all speak at once. However familiar it may seem as you gaze in admiration at its brutally aggressive lines, the car you think you see here does not exist. The car in the upper picture is not, and does not purport to be, the long lost Alfa Romeo 256 *berlinetta competizione* of 1939/40. One of three known recreations, it is actually an amalgam of more or less appropriate 6C 2500 components clothed in entirely new bodywork, a tantalising tribute to the works coupé that contested Le Mans in 1939 and the Mille Miglia the following year. I have been privileged to have a run in it, and what follows is its story.

Actually, there may have been two such cars

*Alfa Romeo built only one (or possibly two) examples of this brutal-looking competition coupé. Douglas Blain encounters a clever recreation*

Differences in the official photographs taken at the time show that the earlier car was lighter in colour and had a narrow band of exposed aluminium tracing the outline of the wheel arches. It had only two tail lamps, one flush-mounted fuel

have had the opposite effect. There was a big slot on each side behind the door windows, and a double row of three louvres under the grille, presumably to feed an oil cooler.

The second, dark crimson example, clearly benefitting from race experience, can be seen to have shed the beading and all orifices aft of the doors. It can also be seen to have much enlarged mesh grilles in place of the louvres under its snout. Intriguingly, it sports larger wheels and tyres (6.50 by 19 is my guess) and two quick-access filler caps in the offside of the tail. No trace remains of either of these two cars, if indeed there were two. We will come to the filler caps in due course.

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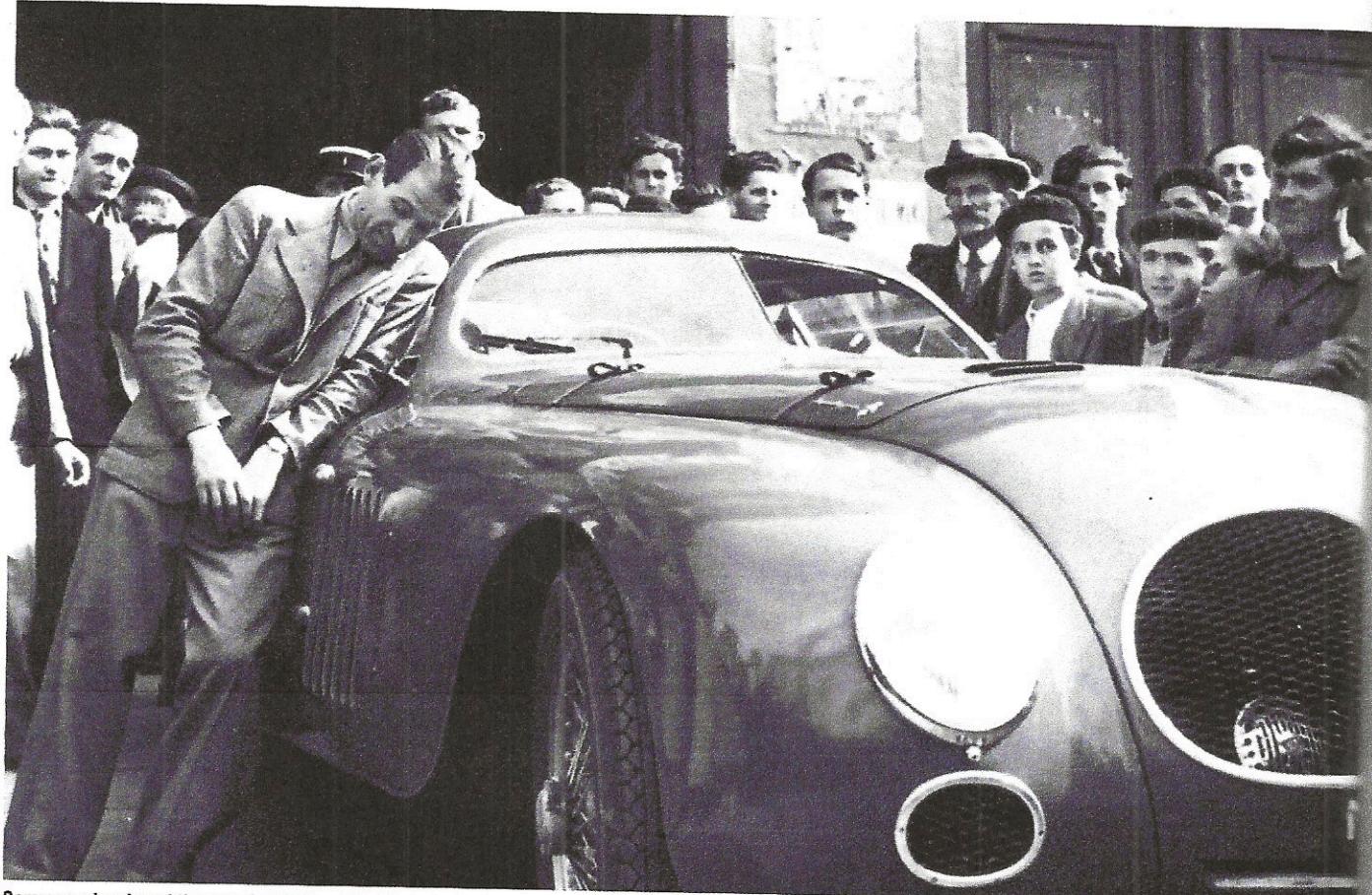
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Sommer, who shared the coupé with Bira at Le Mans in 1939, poses for photographers before the race (Geoffrey Goddard Collection/Matt Spitzley)

chassis are known to have been sanctioned. Ex-Alfa engineer Luigi Fusi, in his 1960s textbook, says there were only eight. The confusion no doubt arises from the fact that a handful of these racing chassis escaped into private hands – one of them, chassis number 915.015, into those of Benito Mussolini himself – and some of the racers were re-bodied as road cars for onward sale.

How did the 256 differ from other Alfa Romeos of its era? With the company state-run since 1933 and wars to be fought in North Africa and Spain, where Mussolini had pledged to aid Franco's Fascists, car production had taken a bit of a back seat by the late 1930s. The legendary 8C 2900 was approaching the end of its run. Its intended replacement, the V-12 S10, was slow in gestation and never got past the prototype stage. The smaller

6C 2300 had proved inadequately powered to drag around the heavy limousine coachwork favoured by the regime, even when fitted with a 5.083 to one final drive ratio. The answer was the 6C 2500, still with a 100mm stroke but with a new block and a bore increased from 70 to 72mm, giving 2443cc. Launched during 1939, it was destined to continue for some years both into and long after WW2.

Seeing the need to replace the ageing 8C 2900 as a flagship vehicle for competition under a new sports-racing formula which excluded superchargers, Alfa's down-to-earth Ugo Gobbato assigned development of a suitable derivative of the 6C 2500 to Enzo Ferrari in the old Scuderia Ferrari works in Modena. Enzo, having fallen out famously with Wifredo Ricart, the Spaniard who was now engineering director at Il Portello, was by

this time resigned to the fact that Alfa had a 80 per cent of his company and re-launched in Milan as Alfa Corse. It suited both however, for him to take on the 256 project according to a capacity-followed-by-number cylinders formula that was typical of the alongside the early development of his the Auto Aviazione 1500 straight-eight that become, in effect, the very first Ferrari.

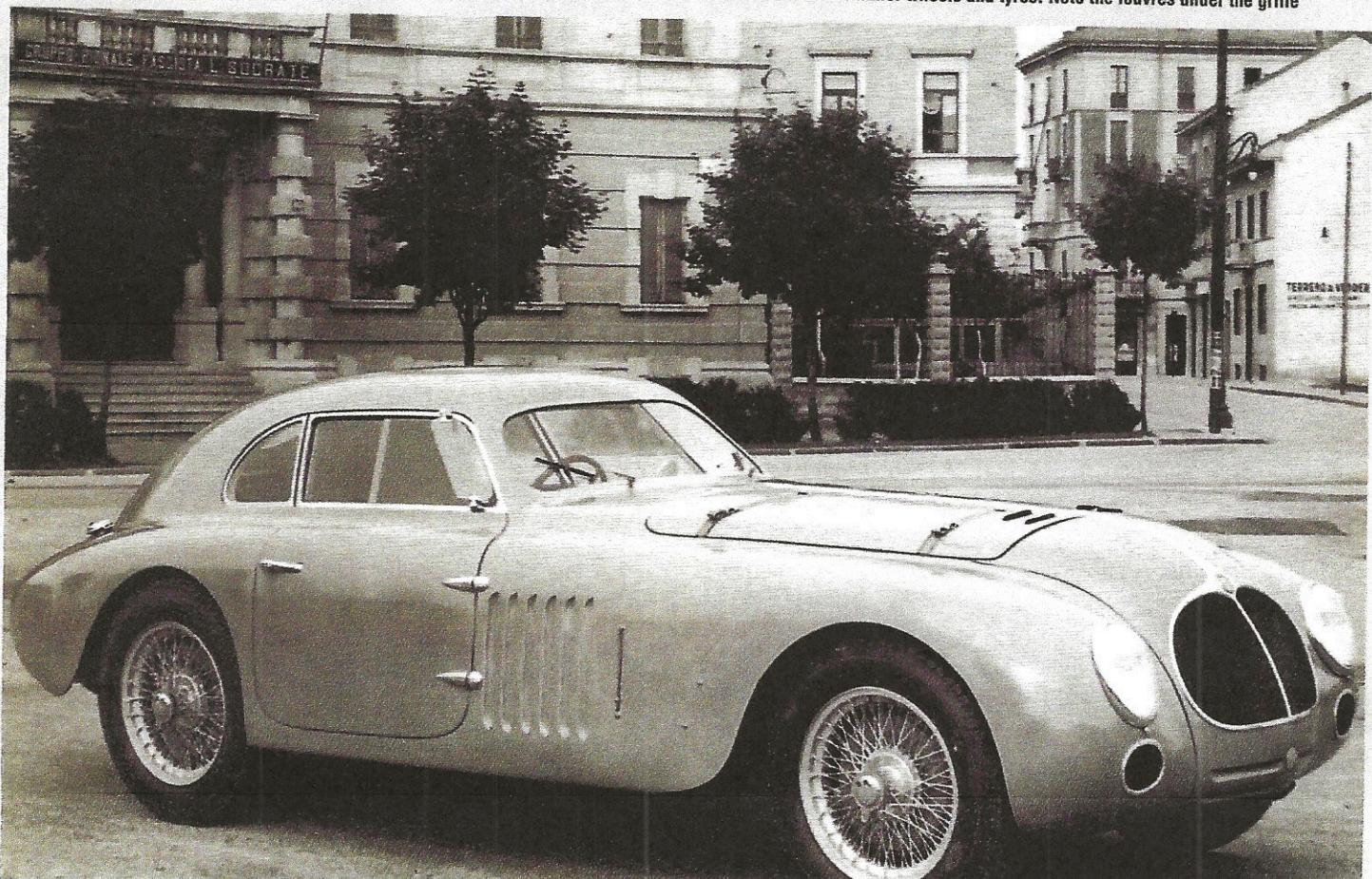
In search of less weight and more power began with the chassis just signed production at Il Portello, the Super Sport reduced wheelbase of exactly 2700mm. shed as much surplus weight as possible frame, he fitted stiffer coil springs to the trailing link front suspension and, at the torsion bars increased in diameter to 25.75 positive camber evident in the standard model eliminated and tubular competition dampers fitted all round, four of them at the back. Of duralumin-rimmed Rudge-Whitworth wheels fitted with 6.00 by 18 Pirelli racing and a final drive ratio of 3.69 to one, the was ready to receive appropriately light bars from those masters at Touring in Milan.

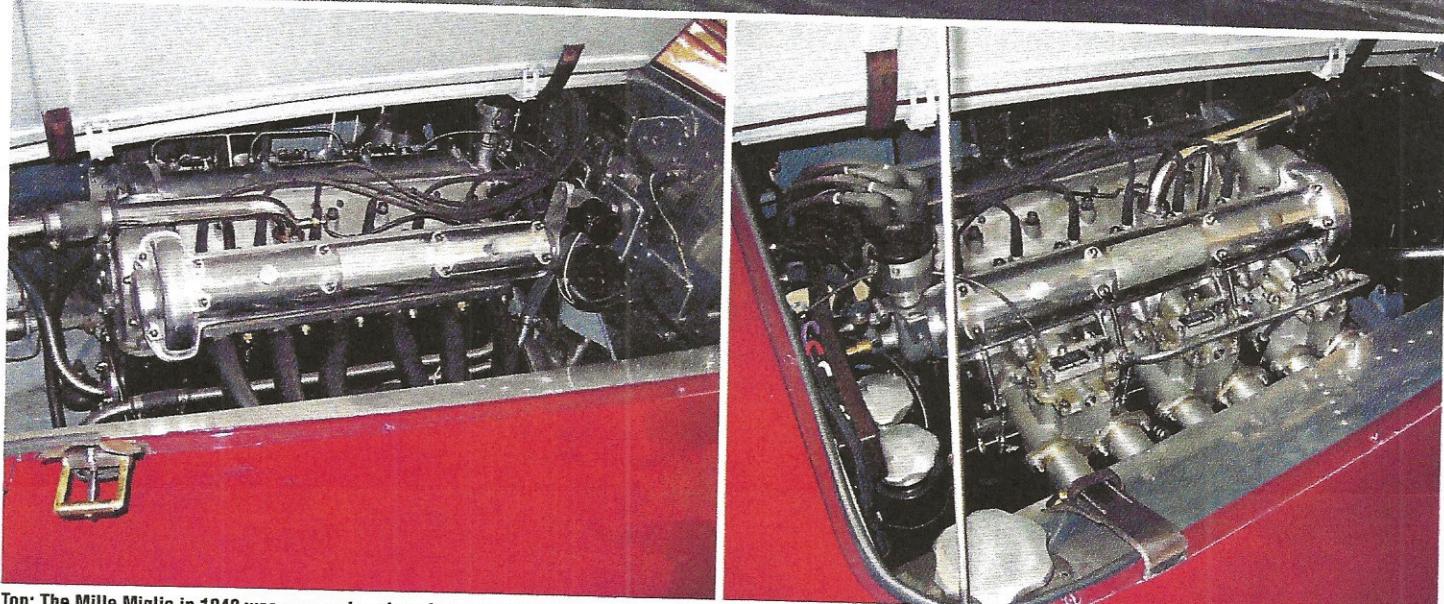
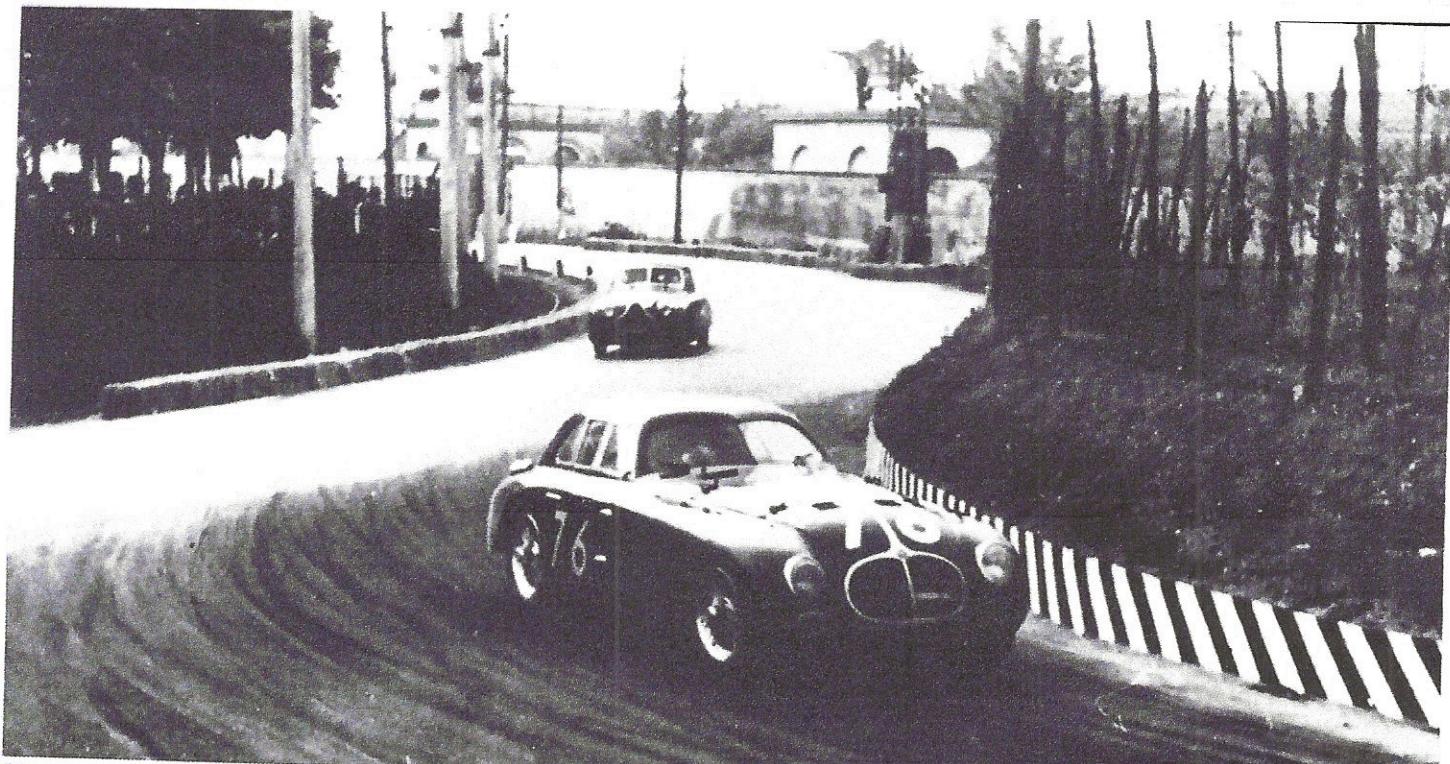
As for the engine, the first move lightened it as far as possible by substituting electron for aluminium in some of the structural castings, was to improve its bore which in standard saloon form was via a downdraught carburettor. At one stage motorcycle carburettors were tried, then Fuel injection was even experimented with. 36 DO 2 sidedraught Webers proved a sensible compromise, together with a revised intake system. Fitted with twin Bosch Champion R17 racing plugs, compression ratio eight to one and competition valve power output according to Fusi was





Above: Constructed on a body buck as the original would have been, the replica certainly looks the part. Inset: Two quick-release filler caps on the right-hand rear flank featured on the works car in its 1940 guise. What were they for? Below: This posed Touring photograph, taken outside the Fascist Party headquarters in Milan, shows the car in its original form, lighter in colour and with smaller wheels and tyres. Note the louvres under the grille





Top: The Mille Miglia in 1940 was run on closed roads on a 165km course between Brescia, Cremona and Mantova. Alfa were beaten to the flag by a BMW (Alfa Romeo) Left: The replica's engine is to 1946 *Competizione* specification and gives more than 150bhp. Right: On the induction side, note the oil tank for the dry sump lubrication system

4800rpm. Anselmi says it was slightly less, but they agree on a 125mph maximum speed.

Always referred to by Fusi as the 6C 2500 SS Corsa, but known to subsequent Alfa scholars as the 256 to distinguish it from the version built at Portello and marketed as the 6C 2500 Super Sport, the new racer appeared in March that year for the 1500km Tobruk-Tripoli road race. The first four chassis, numbered 915.006, 7, 8 and 9, were fitted by Touring with lightweight spider bodywork specially for the race, which was expected to be very fast. One was in a revolutionary all-enveloping style referred to colloquially as *ala spessa*, or 'broad winged'. In reality it looked like a precursor of the Jaguar XK 150S two-seater of 20 years later. The others were more conventional.

The aerodynamic open car was destined for Sanesi to drive with Ercole Boratto, Mussolini's personal chauffeur. Its slab sided, blunt nosed form, conforming to the then-fashionable aerodynamic theories of Jaray, had been developed in the military wind tunnel at Guidonia. Using the wooden wind tunnel model as a guide, Touring craftsmen had shaped the tubular body frame while working

With five wheels and tyres, oil, water, no fuel and two seats, the prototype as raced in North Africa weighed 1075kg. It won the race easily, galloping past its Alfa Romeo sister cars on the long straights and beating strong BMW works opposition, entered at the last minute, into third place.

The 256 team cars had a successful 1939 season back home in Italy, winning convincingly the Targa Abruzzo in Pescara and a number of town-to-town road races and hill climbs. For Le Mans, a new and even more revolutionary berlina, driven by Sommer and Bira, appeared as Alfa's only works entry. Based loosely on the 2900 coupé that had so nearly won the 24-hour race the previous year, it used the 256 chassis but was of course slightly heavier than the spider at 1160kg. In the race it disappointed. It lay no better than 10th before retiring in the 20th hour.

There was no Mille Miglia that year because of safety concerns, but for 1940 the race was re-organised on a much reduced road circuit based around Brescia. The factory had by now distanced itself from Enzo Ferrari, so the trio of spiders which appeared for the race clad in lightweight Touring

them came a poor second to the works BMW 328 of Huschke von Hanstein, which, ironically, had been fitted with a Touring body clearly based on that of the Alfa berlina. The berlina was there, too, either in its original form with substantial modifications or as a complete replacement. It now sported 19in wheels and those two mysterious filler caps in the tail, finishing fourth in class.

One theory holds that, experimentally, the coupé was fitted with a dry sump engine when it contested the Mille Miglia, and that one of the fillers was for a rear mounted oil tank. That is certainly a possibility. The factory had by this time developed a two-wheel drive cross-country vehicle for military use, called the Coloniale, which did indeed sport a dry sump derivative of the 6C 2500 engine, albeit with its 14-litre oil tank mounted on the scuttle. As proof that Alfa were thinking along these lines, it is worth noting that when the ultra-light 6C 2500 *Competizione* works coupés appeared at the end of the war they were all to use a dry sump version of the same engine, this time with a 15-litre oil tank alongside the crankcase. There is

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experiment with two separate fuel tanks, for some reason omitting to link them with a balance pipe?

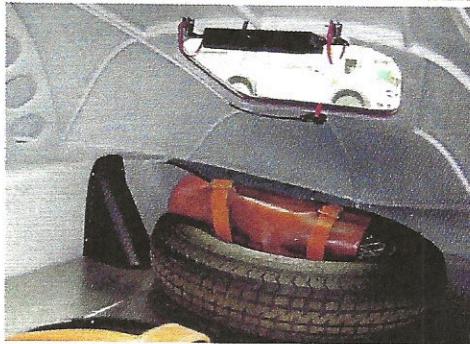
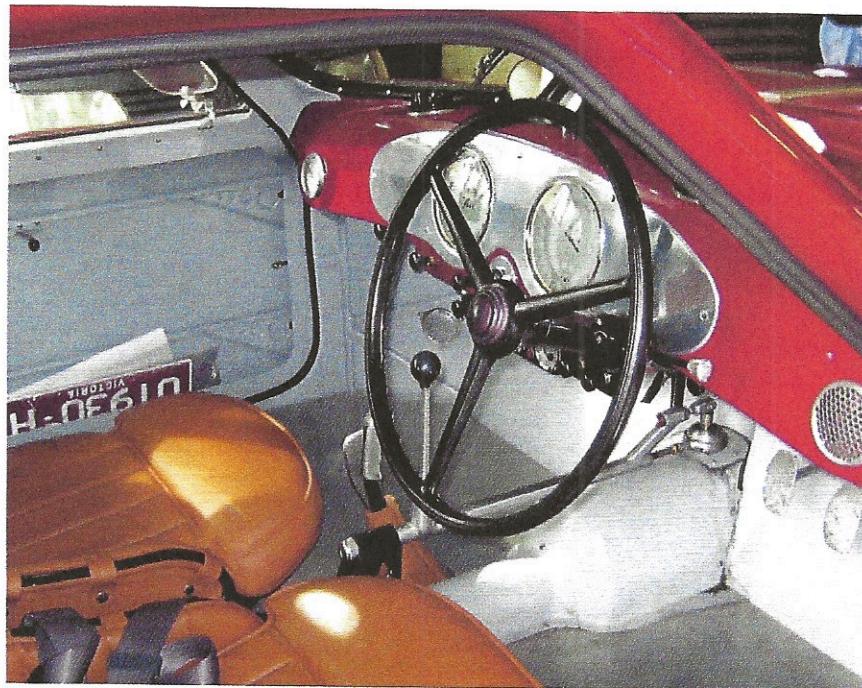
The splendid recreation we are concerned with here certainly does have a dry sump. The car started life, I am given to understand, as a normal 6C 2500 Lungo saloon, chassis number 913.191, delivered probably late in 1939 to a purchaser in Poland. This suggests that the recipient was a Nazi officer. When the remains were found there by dealer, restorer and passionate Alfa enthusiast Raoul San Giorgi still accompanied by the original handwritten title document, the engine was missing. Its eventual replacement was to be a dry sump unit, origin unknown but possibly from a Coloniale or even a naval patrol boat. This, together with the rolling chassis and a big crate of other parts, was sold some 15 years ago to John Lawson, another very knowledgeable Alfa enthusiast who hails from Melbourne, Australia. It was he who had the idea of using these components as the basis of a replica berlineetta competizione 256.

He turned the car over to Paul Chalager and Dale Parsell of Historic and Vintage Restorations, a long established business based in the Melbourne suburb of Blackburn. They rebuilt the chassis and running gear to the correct specification. Historic and Vintage, as its name implies, specialises in sporting cars of the 1920s and '30s. The company's spacious workshop is always full of fascinating projects belonging to Victoria's thriving VSCC community.

Charged with building a body for the 256, Paul and Dale's first task was to assemble as many contemporary photographs, drawings and other visual material as they could lay hands on. They then measured everything with extreme accuracy and transferred the outlines, curves and sections to huge sheets of fabric laid out on the floor. After that they made a full-size wooden body buck.

Copying the well known *Superleggera* or super-lightweight technique pioneered by Touring and licensed to, among others, Bristol and Aston Martin, they formed a cage of small-bore steel tubes with drilled sheet metal gussets at strategic points and, particularly around the sills, scuttle and door posts, box sections to add stiffness and strength. Historic and Vintage's craftsmen then used the buck like a jig to shape the skin, using a wheeling machine but resorting to the traditional hammer and stump for tricky bits such as the headlamp nacelles, door pillars and the characteristic trench-like recesses that house the straps holding the bonnet in place. Inside, it is hard to imagine anything more functional. The web of structured tubes, the insides of the panels and doors, all the reinforcement, the door mechanisms, the floor – everything is exposed, just as it would have been in the original.

As for the engine, it is clear that John Lawson set out, having acquired his wet sump unit, to copy the authenticated installation developed by Alfa for the works Competizione cars in 1946 rather than speculate as to what might or might not have been in period. As clearly shown in works photographs taken at the time, these post-war coupés had a single fuel filler at the rear, covered by a hinged flap, and an oil filler orifice directly above the tank in the right flank of the engine compartment. Similar pontoons in the recreation follow the same profile, with the tank inside the right-hand one. The layout of the inner wings differs from that in the original 256, and of course leaves one of the rear filler necks redundant, but it matches John's chosen specification.



Top: Incredibly stark for its time, the interior is actually quite comfortable. Left: Looking back from inside, *Superleggera* construction system is much in evidence. Right: Even the bonnet straps are recessed to redi-

steel rods. New pistons were forged, camshafts made and new valves and valve springs fitted. With three horizontal twin-choke Weber DCO3 carburettors like those of the Competizione cars, and with up-to-date cam profiles, this is a potent unit indeed, as I was soon to discover.

Entering the berlineetta, having first admired its pugnacious looks from all angles, one first reaches in to unbolt a hinged and padded panel on the outside of the seat. Slipping in tail first, minding one's head on the low door lintel and compacting one's legs to avoid the unfriendly-looking A post, then bolting the panel back into place and belting up, one finds oneself in a surprisingly spacious, light and airy working environment. The instruments, housed in a kidney-shaped panel of polished aluminium, are typical of no-nonsense late '30s Alfa thinking, stylish but generous in size and clearly readable. Functions not covered by the four subsidiary dials built into their faces are dealt with by smaller gauges set in a subsidiary panel.

The big, Bakelite-covered period Alfa wheel is raked nearly to the vertical due to the length of the steering column. The pedals have no rubbers, just raw ribbed metal. The gear lever, a remote, upright black-knobbed affair linked by a horizontal sliding rod to the stump of what would have been the original rather wispy wand, reminds me of the one in the road-going Lotus XI I once owned.

The engine starts with a raucous bellow, sounding bigger than its 2½ litres. The gears slide in and out firmly and precisely (synchro on the top two only), ratios well chosen for the task in

where the car's present owner, Georg content to leave it in their care. The ride of course, but not harsh, the noise level as we barrel round the perimeter of a neat entering, we take some pictures and the into a deserted street curving uphill between verges. In first and second, gears scream rev counter shooting towards 5000, then boot in the back as we rocket towards 1. Slipping sharply into third, there is a click the tyres and the swing axle rear end momentarily, biting again with great tenacity and with no sign of the dreaded wheel tuck-under.

How much power? Well, the plate scuttle says 155bhp at 5500rpm. After years I suppose one does develop a feel things, and I have no reason to doubt that Lawson (who has a bit of a reputation as in such matters) has achieved the stated from his cleverly contrived and honestly composite engine. Quite enough, at any put this light, taut, aerodynamic coupé running in historic endurance racing, him and whatever else takes the lucky owner.

I do hope his plans include shipping Europe from time to time so we can be watching it in action.

With acknowledgements to Alfa Romeo 2500 by Angelo Tito Anselmi (*Domus Touring Superleggera, Giant Among Italian Coachbuilders*, by Carlo Felice A. (Autocritica, 1983); and, for help with