

CLASSIC DRIVER

The 'Operation Caracas' Porsche 550 Spyder: Brother of the 'Little Bastard'



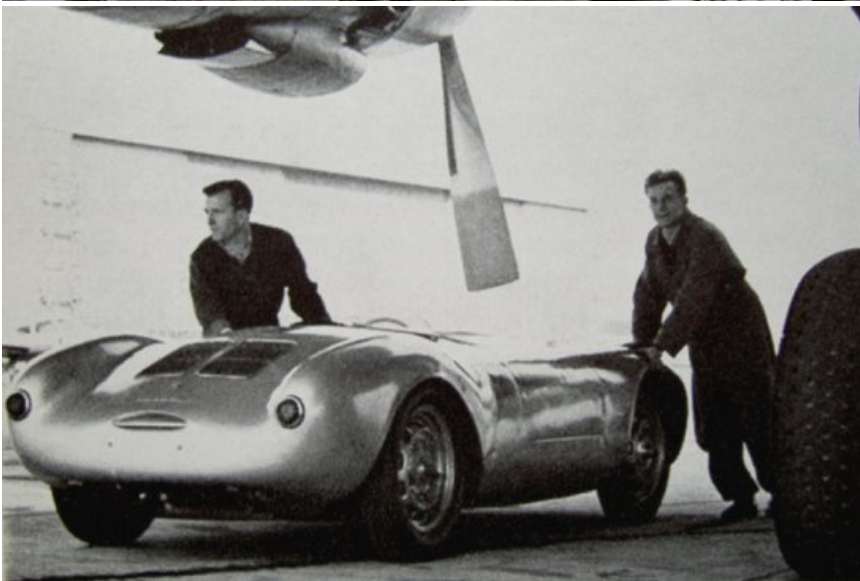
News of James Dean's ill-fated romance with his petite Porsche spread well beyond the automotive community, but his wasn't the only 550 with a tale to tell - that of the 'Operation Caracas' Spyder is just as fascinating.

James Dean and the 'Little Bastard' 550 Spyder might have spent just nine days in each other's company before the fateful crash, but they're undoubtedly one of the most famous pairings of man and machine in history, their names now eternally linked. Many accounts have been given of chassis number 550-0055 and its fate after the crash - some more 'creative' than others - but rather than undertaking the near-impossible task of separating fact from fiction, we thought it better to turn the spotlight onto one of its relatives. Meet 550-0030, a Spyder with a history just as interesting, if not as famous.



Starting life as one of the factory cars, it was soon enlisted for an assignment known internally as 'Operation Caracas'. With the inaugural Venezuelan GP looming rapidly, the 550 was air-freighted to its destination (it was too late for the usual method of travelling by sea) where it was met by Porsche's racing team manager

and head of PR Huschke von Hanstein – who would go on to win the Targa Florio a year later in another 550.



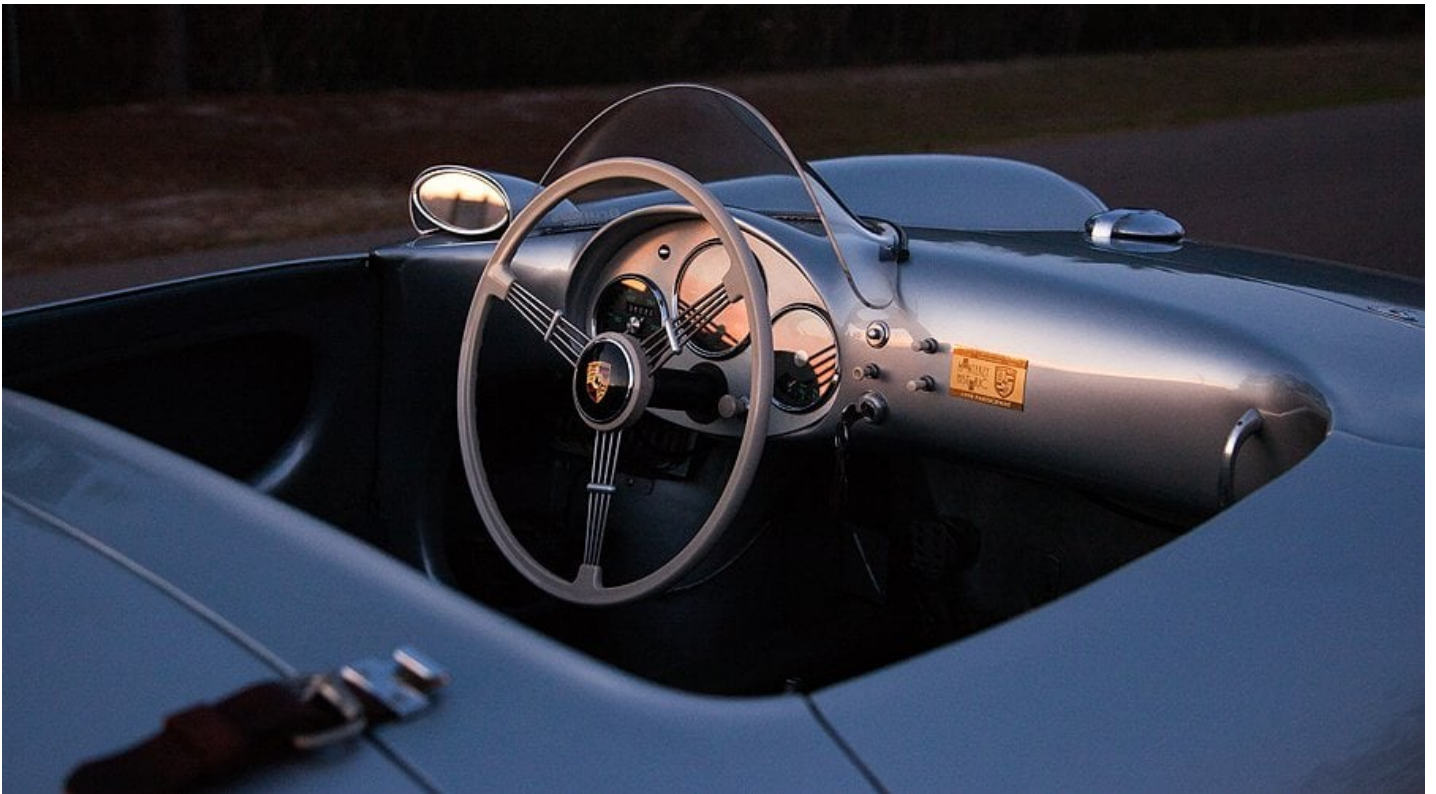
Against such formidable opposition as Fangio in his 3.0-litre straight-six Maserati 300S, von Hanstein steered

the underpowered Spyder (1.5-litre boxer-four) to a respectable eighth place in the South American race. Shortly after Fangio's champagne had evaporated from the podium, the 550 was sold to a local Caracas privateer – a common practice to save Porsche's sparsely-funded *Rennsport* division the cost of a return journey – and subsequently disappeared for several years.





The 550 resurfaced in 1963 on a Florida forecourt having been taken as a part-exchange... for a Ford pick-up truck. The new owner was thankfully more clued-up about the car's potential. Bill Bencker, who was associated with American racing team and dealership Brumos Porsche, raced the Caracas 550 for a decade before the four-cam engine finally gave way.





It was then consigned to storage for a number of years before being bought by Brumos and restored to the full glory of its time with von Hanstein – and given the ‘Huschke’ licence plate it still sports today in his honour. Interestingly, red stripes were added to the tail-fins (with Porsche often entering four or more cars in a major race, different colours were used to allow the pit crews to differentiate between them), although these have since been removed to remain faithful to the adventure with von Hanstein.



Today, still in the ownership of Brumos, the car regularly makes appearances at top American events such as the Rennsport Reunion. While it's often the more tragic tale that captures the prolonged attention of the public, the Caracas 550 story presents a welcome contrast to that of the ill-fated 'Little Bastard'.

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