

CLASSIC DRIVER

David Douglas Duncan and 'The Secret SLS'



The following article contains extracts from 'The Car That Led Three Lives' by Dennis Adler and 'The Secret SLS' by David Douglas Duncan.

Prototypes are the products of an intense automotive design process. They are ideas given physical form and are meant to test the culmination of those ideas. Most serve their purpose and are scrapped, or become forgotten embodiments of a larger production that ends up relegated to a warehouse, collecting dust, rarely – if ever – to be seen again. Occasionally, one is found on flaccid tyres, fading away in a dusty, shuttered garage, whereupon aficionados immediately elevate it from 'ancient junk' to 'treasured artifact'.

Usually, what is uncovered are the skeletal remains of a failed project, a curiosity at best. Every now and again, however, the garage door opens to reveal the unexpected: a true prototype, the first example of a genuine success story. While that is rare enough, finding a car that has served as a factory prototype three times over is beyond remarkable. One such car that conforms to the highest ideals in a vast field of prototypes that have graced the pavement is the 1955 Mercedes-Benz 300SLS, a car first chronicled by famed photojournalist David Douglas Duncan for Collier's Magazine.



David Douglas Duncan is an American photojournalist and among the most influential photographers of the 20th Century. He is considered to be one of the fathers of modern photojournalism, best known for his photos that chronicle war. He was a photographer for Life Magazine during World War II, Korea and Vietnam and developed, along with Leica, what was to become the modern SLR camera that all subsequent journalists/photographers used for the next 50 years. Duncan was an intimate friend of Pablo Picasso and went on to write several books about the artist and his work.



In 1956, Mercedes wanted to promote its new 300SL Roadster and so offered David Douglas Duncan a Mercedes Gullwing if he would take photos and write a story for either Collier's or Life Magazine. Duncan agreed, picked up his Gullwing at the same time as the shoot, producing an article titled 'The Secret SLS' for Collier's Magazine.





In his article, Duncan detailed his visit to Germany and Switzerland, where he photographed the new sports car being tested by designer Karl Wilfert. "Though much technical data is still cloaked in secrecy, factory officials have released enough details with these exclusive Collier's photos to give a clear idea of what that streaking shape actually is when standing still... a giant two-seater convertible roadster combining features of Mercedes' revolutionary gullwing-doored 300SL coupe and the streamlined racer with which Juan Manuel Fangio of Argentina beat the world on the Grand Prix circuit, the world series of professional racing. The SLS (Super Light Special) clears the ground by a hand and stands but 33 inches high at the door cowling. Designed by racing experts for sportsmen to whom the final product is the only consideration, the 300SLS is unlikely to become the second car in every man's garage. It is meant to be the crown jewel among all sports cars."

While doing research on the 1955 Mercedes 300SLS Prototype Roadster at the UCLA graduate research library, I came across an article titled 'The Secret SLS' in Collier's Magazine by David Douglas Duncan. I proceeded to contact David in 1988 and after correspondence he was kind enough to send me the photos you see contained within this article for Classic Driver.

For more information on the SLS and David Douglas Duncan, please see:

www.scottgrundfor.com
[The Car That Led Three Lives](#) by Dennis Adler
[Duncan Image Gallery](#)

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Gallery

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