



HONOR THY FATHER

AN HEIRLOOM MUSTANG—
DRIVEN BY STEVE MCQUEEN IN
THE MOVIE *BULLITT*—BECOMES
A FAMILY'S SECRET TREASURE,
LEAVING A SON WITH BOTH A
GIFT AND A BURDEN.

Story by **Larry Webster**
Photos by **Jeremy Cliff** and **Casey Maxon**

STEVE MCQUEEN MADE ONE LAST EFFORT TO BUY his favorite Mustang in 1977. He sent a letter, typed on a single piece of heavy off-white vellum, to the car's owner in New Jersey. The logo for his movie company, Solar Productions, was embossed in the upper left corner and opposite that resided the date, December 14, 1977. The letter is just four sentences.

"Again," it begins, "I would like to appeal to you to get back my '68 Mustang." McQueen offered no specifics as to why this particular Ford was important to him, except to say that he wanted to keep it unrestored and that it was "simply personal with me."

courtesy **Larry Webster** for **www.ponysite.de**

SOLAR PRODUCTIONS, INC.



14 December '77

Mr. Robert Kiernan, Jr.
13 Prospect Street
Madison, New Jersey

Dear Mr. Kiernan,

Again, I would like to appeal to you to get back my '68 Mustang. I would like very much to keep it in the family in its original condition as it was used in the film, rather than have it restored; which is simply personal with me.

I would be happy to try to find you another Mustang similar to the one you have, if there is not too much monies involved in it. Otherwise, we had better forget it.

With kindest regards, I remain

Very truly, yours

STEVE MCQUEEN

courtesy Larry Webster for www.ponysite.de

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Steve McQueen's last plea to buy the *Bullitt* Mustang. Before he found fame in Hollywood, the Indiana native had a troubled childhood, including a stint in a juvenile reform school. He died in 1980 at age 50.

McQueen's star may have dimmed by 1977, but he remained an icon, a rare actor loved by both genders. McQueen was also one of us, an aficionado and a racer, someone who understood the instinctual joy of automobiles and motorcycles and indulged in both. And with that '68 Mustang, McQueen gave us a gift, one of the greatest car chases ever filmed, a duel with a Dodge Charger up, down, and around San Francisco. The *Bullitt* chase is coveted for the usual crashes and jumps, but it had something more: Unlike most cinematic chases that feature cars performing impossible feats, the one from *Bullitt* was every bit as exciting, but the driving was obviously real. Those who know cars knew. It's 10 minutes of film nirvana. McQueen wanted the *Bullitt* Mustang back.

The rich and famous are often allergic to the word "no," and so was McQueen. His impatience over being rebuked in his quest emerged in the last sentence: "I would be happy to try to find you another Mustang similar to the one you have," he wrote, "if there is not too much monies involved in it. Otherwise, we had better forget it."

The owner was just fine with forgetting it, and then the *Bullitt* Mustang made an exit, stage left, from recorded history.

On a gray and cold December afternoon, 38 years after McQueen wrote that letter, Casey Wallace and Sean Kiernan finished their sales calls and got into a blue Chevy Avalanche for the two-hour drive back to Nashville. The two worked as automotive paint salesmen for LKQ, Kiernan as a local manager and his boss, Wallace, as the regional manager.

The pair shared a working relationship, but they didn't have much in common; Kiernan is into cars, Wallace, sports. But Wallace, 44, is a natural salesman, very talkative and good at getting others to do the same, so during the course of killing time, he asked his car-loving employee what cars he owned. Sean Kiernan, 36, recited the few old cars sitting around his house.

"What color is the Mustang?" interrupted Wallace, when a ratty '68 GT390 was mentioned. "Green," said Kiernan.

"That sounds like the *Bullitt* Mustang," Wallace remarked casually.

At this point in 2015, few people knew under which out-of-the-way rock the McQueen Mustang might have slipped. For years, speculation abounded about the two Highland Green 1968 Mustang fastbacks purchased for the movie. Both had the GT package and a 390-cubic-inch V-8. They were aesthetically modified by removing the badges and backup lights and bolting on gray Torq Thrust wheels. One Mustang had a roll cage and performed the majority of the most brutal stunts. It was in sad shape when the shoot finally wrapped and was, reportedly, sent to the crusher. The other car, also in the celebrated chase sequence—the less abused "hero" car—had last surfaced in a 1990 article in *Mustang Illustrated*.

The article ran in response to a previous piece that

claimed someone had found the surviving *Bullitt* car, the one McQueen had tried to buy back. The car's owner saw that first article, knew it was bunk, and called *Mustang Illustrated* editor Brad Bowling to set the record straight. Bowling detailed the bona fides of the real thing, included a redacted copy of McQueen's letter (the owner wished to remain anonymous), and wrote that it lived "somewhere on the East Coast." Once again the *Bullitt* car slipped into obscurity, except for the occasional internet rumor.

Hearing Wallace mention the *Bullitt* Mustang, Kiernan's stomach dropped. "I thought I screwed up," he remembered. He hadn't; Wallace just had *Bullitt* on the brain. He and a longtime movie-business friend, Ken Horstmann, had written a screenplay about two young guys buying a barn-find car with plans to earn a fortune in the flip. But the car's owner, it turns out, had sold the car twice, setting up the tension of the movie's arc. The two kids then embark on a madcap chase to get the car, which—as you will see if this *Raiders of the Lost Ark* meets *Smokey and the Bandit* meets *The Goonies* ever gets made—is the *Bullitt* Mustang.

Wallace mentioned that he and Horstmann, a director at Turner Studios before starting his own production company, had found a replica *Bullitt* Mustang and were making plans to use it in a sizzle reel to drum up financing. Then Wallace detailed the rumors about the real one, the 1990 magazine article, and the general belief that the car had been in Kentucky but was now thought to be in Tennessee.

"He was telling me my life story," Kiernan said.

An ad on page 121 of the October 1974 issue of *Road & Track* magazine read: "1968 'Bullett' [sic] MUSTANG driven by McQueen in the movie...Can be documented. Best offer." The phone number had a New Jersey area code.

A man from Madison, New Jersey, saw the ad. He had always wanted a '68 Mustang fastback, so he bought the *Bullitt* car for \$6000, and it became a regular on the streets around Madison.

The car's path to New Jersey included a stint as a commuter for a movie editor, as illustrated by the Warner Bros. parking sticker on the bottom right corner of the windshield. It also passed through the hands of Frank Marranca, a police detective, who bought the car from the studio in 1971 with a letter from Ford certifying that the Mustang with VIN 8R02S125559 had been purchased by Solar Productions for the movie. Marranca shipped the car to New Jersey, and along the way, the shift knob and the aftermarket wood steering wheel were stolen. When Marranca's growing family needed a station wagon, he put the otherwise untouched car up for sale.

The third buyer, one Bob Kiernan, fell hard for his new car and never even considered McQueen's 1977 request to get it back. When Bob got a company car, his wife drove the Mustang to her teaching job at a nearby school. "The



courtesy Larry Webster for www.ponysite.de

Bullitt likes to drink the gas,” she said back then. In 1980, the car’s clutch went out, and with 65,000 miles on the clock, it was moved into the garage, for what turned out to be a long stay.

Bob, a Hartford Insurance executive, was relocated to Cincinnati in 1984, and the *Bullitt* car moved with him. Another transfer took the family to Florida in 1994, but the Mustang remained behind at a friend’s place in Kentucky. A year later, the family moved to Nashville. By this time, Bob Kiernan was into horses, so he bought a farm atop a wooded knob he called Wicklow Hill. The Mustang rejoined the family there, moving into the two-car garage attached to a modest ranch home on the east end of the property.

“Can I tell you something?” Sean Kiernan asked his boss, Casey Wallace.

“Sure.”

“I have it.”

“You have what?” Wallace answered.

“I have it. I have Steve McQueen’s *Bullitt* Mustang.”

A moment of silence followed as Wallace considered Sean’s claim. “I’m an excitable guy,” he said, “and I thought Sean was just pranking to watch me freak out.”

“Casey was the first person I told about the *Bullitt*,” Sean said, “For some reason I felt comfortable telling him. I’m pretty sure it was my dad smacking me in the back of the head, lining up all the stars.”

The pair sat in the Avalanche in the Nashville LKQ parking lot “geeking out,” as Sean put it. Then Wallace asked if he could let his movie-business friend Ken Horstmann in on the secret.

“That made me feel weird,” Sean said, “because I had just revealed this family secret.” He let Wallace pitch him on the idea, though. “Here was my boss, pitching me,” he remembered, “so I just let him go.”

Undecided what to do, Sean called his wife. “She got emotional,” he said. “You have to remember that an hour after my dad died, I had to go feed his horses. For the past

For the film, racer and mechanic Max Balchowsky tweaked the 390-cubic-inch Ford V-8.

Since 1995, the *Bullitt* Mustang has lived in this small garage next to a vintage Porsche 911.

year, I had been trying to figure out what I was supposed to be doing.”

The previous hours seemed too crazy to be just chance. This was fate. Sean told Wallace to call Horstmann.

The *Bullitt* was, at this point, in pieces. In 2001, right about the time Bob Kiernan retired, Ford introduced a Bullitt Mustang GT. That, plus Bob’s newfound free time, sparked a plan between father and son to get their car back on the road. “We didn’t want to keep it from the public,” Sean said, “but the attention over the years was annoying.” Nevertheless, they agreed the time had come to share their treasure.

Now 33 years old and with a bad clutch, the *Bullitt* was tired. “We planned to do just enough to make it drivable. We didn’t want to touch the history,” said Sean. They took it apart, but then, Sean said, “Life happened.” Bob was diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease. Sean got married and had a kid. And the Mustang sat, in pieces.

Hollywood had, in the meantime, come calling again.

Just before the Mustang was parked, a producer for the movie *Charlie’s Angels* wrote and said that one of the stars, Drew Barrymore, desperately wanted the original car for the film. Bob again told Hollywood to stuff it. “It wasn’t about the money,” Sean said. “My dad wasn’t stubborn, he just loved the thing. He wanted it in his garage forever.” Sean added with pride, “My dad told Steve McQueen thanks but no thanks. He was a bad-ass.”

When Ford introduced a second Bullitt Mustang in 2008, that sparked the pair to have the engine rebuilt. Again, things got in the way. Sean had a second kid and then got divorced in 2009. His father’s Parkinson’s worsened, and keeping the farm going and the horses fed simply took more time. The *Bullitt* project stalled, but there was never a thought of punching out and selling. “We knew we’d get to it,” Sean said.

Sadly, they never did. In 2014, a year before Wallace told Sean about the movie screenplay, Bob unexpectedly died. The responsibilities of the father fell to the son. Sean,



courtesy Larry Webster for www.ponysite.de

who had remarried, suddenly had a farm and his mom to care for. “We moved into my dad’s house,” he said, “out in the sticks.” He remembered sitting on a step in the garage and staring at the pile of Mustang parts as he wondered, with some dread, “What am I going to do with the car?”

Then he heard about his boss’s movie. The day after Sean revealed his secret, Horstmann, the film director, drove to Nashville to meet Wallace and Sean for lunch. Horstmann slid a copy of the script across the table. The cover of the script was a copy of the redacted letter McQueen had sent to Sean’s father. Sean took out his folder and showed the genuine document. In modern times, this is as close to becoming blood brothers as it gets. Sean was now in the movie business.

Horstmann guessed they needed about \$15 million for the movie. Among the three amigos, they had energy, possibly some talent, and a secret car that anyone with an ounce of gasoline in their veins would love to see, but they didn’t have \$15 million.

“We figured a private showing of the car would be a good way to get investors involved,” Sean said. “I just needed to put the car back together.”

That was a horrifying task. “I can build a show car all

day long,” he said, “but this was history. What if I screwed it up? The *Bullitt* scared the shit out of me.” None of them had the money to bring in a professional who was used to curating an artifact. The lucky break was that Sean and his dad had left the body largely untouched. They hadn’t removed the doors or the dash. Everything was there. So during the first five months of 2016, Sean carefully put it back together in his father’s small garage.

In May, he loaded his still-not-running *Bullitt* onto a trailer and hauled it to Horstmann’s studio in Atlanta. They needed a third party to validate that the car was, in fact, real. They called Kevin Marti, who signed a nondisclosure agreement and flew to Atlanta on his own nickel.

Marti is one of those interesting characters in the classic-car community. With \$1700 saved from delivering papers in Phoenix, he bought a Mercury Cougar in 1971 and has been a Ford guy ever since. He knows, for example, that Fords came with Motorcraft spark-plug wires, not Autolite, after 1972, and countless other obscure details. In 1996, he bought a trove of Ford’s production data and is now the guy you call with your VIN to find out your Ford’s original equipment. Along the way, he’s also become an expert at recognizing fake VIN tags.

“I walked in to see the car,” he said, “and thought,

Bullitt chase sequence: The Mustang, its front end plowing, overshoots a turn, one of many cues that the action was real.

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Clockwise from upper left: Tape residue that indicated, respectively, a shift point and the redline; the VIN tag; three steel tubes installed under the rockers supported a camera rig; the shock towers were reinforced to withstand stunts.

courtesy Larry Webster for www.ponysite.de

‘Here’s another car that looks like the *Bullitt*.’ I went over, looked at the VIN on the tag, and immediately, my emotions flipped from skepticism to ‘Oh, my god, it’s real.’”

Marti marveled at the modifications made for the movie. Underneath the rockers, three metal tubes were clumsily welded perpendicular to the car’s center line for camera mounts. There were holes cut in the trunk for the cords that ran from a generator to power the cameras and lights. Even tape residue remained—on the tachometer to mark the redline, and on the floor, presumably to secure the seatbelts and wires. “Ninety-eight percent of the original car is there,” he said. “It’s an incredible artifact.”

Horstmann filmed everything and used the footage over the summer of 2016 to make what’s known in the movie business as a teaser reel, which is basically a summary of the project. The trio then reached out to anyone they thought had the means and interest in the project. They hosted a few showings, actually secured some funding, and prepared for the big fish they hoped to hook at the annual Specialty Equipment Market Association (SEMA) aftermarket parts show held in Las Vegas every November: Ford Motor Company.

“My dad and I always talked about enlisting Ford to bring our car back into public view,” said Sean. The pair

didn’t need Ford to vet the car. They simply thought it deserved to be a part of the official Mustang legacy. Whatever the reason, Sean intended to follow his father’s wishes.

The timing could not have been better. Ford was preparing to launch a third Bullitt Edition Mustang at the Detroit auto show in early 2018, and what better way to secure mass attention than by debuting the car alongside the lost original? Ford was in.

That’s when I was brought into the fold. On the advice of Kevin Marti, Sean called my boss, McKeel Hagerty, who told Sean that the car should be part of the National Historic Vehicle Register. The Register is a thorough dossier on significant cars prepared and placed with the Library of Congress by the Historic Vehicle Association (HVA), which is run by the ebullient Mark Gessler (see “Thoroughly Vetted,” page 120).

At SEMA, Gessler and I arranged to have drinks with the trio one evening in Vegas, where I heard the whole story. My jaw dropped. We made plans to ship the car to the HVA facility in Allentown, Pennsylvania, the following March for a full suite of photography and documentation. Sean, for his part, loved the idea that the car’s history would be preserved in the Library of Congress, a fitting tribute to a cultural treasure.

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But once more, life got in the way.

The other *Bullitt* Mustang surfaced that same month, in March 2017. Body-shop owner Ralph Garcia and partner Hugo Sanchez announced they had found it in a Mexican junkyard. “When I heard, I freaked out,” said Sean. “I thought I had been outed.” What are the odds?

Sanchez and Garcia also called Kevin Marti to validate their car. Marti inspected it and verified that it wore the VIN of the second “jumper” Mustang, 125558. Speculation then swirled around how much the pot of gold was worth. Millions, most said, although the car had been stripped of most of its parts, and extensive restoration work was done to it, against the advice of Marti, who said that an unrestored car—even a shell—would be worth more. However much of the original car remained was largely inconsequential; one of two *Bullitts* was found.

About a week later, Chad McQueen, Steve’s son, announced his own search for the *Bullitt*. He even established a website, FindingBullitt.com, that included a tip line. As to McQueen’s motives? On the site there’s a section called “Why We Are Searching,” which attempts an answer. “We are searching because when we first saw them on screen... something inside us clicked.”

Perhaps all these twists and turns of the path to revealing Sean’s car are more of a movie than the one he and his buddies are working on. Anyway, the Allentown visit was scrapped in favor of a trip to Sean’s house in May. But that, too, was canceled after the trio feared a leak before the *Bullitt*’s planned appearance in Detroit. Gessler, however, said his team needed time to get the documentation in order by that deadline. As the clock spun and the car’s new public life got hashed out, I flew to Nashville last fall with a photographer to meet Gessler’s team at Sean’s house.

On a Tuesday morning in early September, I turn off a tree-lined country road onto a paved driveway that looks almost too steep to climb. It’s a long ascent, perhaps 800 feet, until the road crests at Sean Kiernan’s house. I park off to the side of the house and admire the sloping lawn and the surrounding green mountains that are half-covered in fog. There’s a barn tucked behind the house, where the forest begins. The garage is on the side, with the doors positioned perpendicular to the front of the house. One is open. There’s the Mustang, sitting on jack stands, the rear of the car nearly flush with the opening.

It occurs to me how many similarly modest garages harbor long-dormant Mustang projects. If Sean’s house were in your neighborhood, you might see the car countless times while walking the dog and never give it another thought, except perhaps to notice how it slowly becomes a storage shelf. It’s just another faded Mustang; Ford made millions. You probably hope your neighbor someday gets his car back on the road but realize that every passing day diminishes that likelihood.

I walk into the garage. There’s another car under a cov-

er in the other bay and a black checkerboard runway between the two that leads to two steps and a door to the house. The front of the Mustang is about a foot from a toolbox and workbench. A washing machine rests in front of the second car, a bright green 1976 Porsche 911.

Sean comes out of the house. “Well,” he says, holding his long arms out, “here it is. What do you think? Crazy, right?”

I’m not sure what to say, a bit tongue-tied over what’s in front of us. This is pretty close to the car version of the ark of the covenant. Sean recognizes my awkwardness and says, “Let me show you around.”

Some of the forum posts I’ve read about the hidden *Bullitt* Mustang suggest that the owner is a selfish crank, a hermit hoarding his treasure. Sean’s the exact opposite. He looks intimidating because he’s tall and his head is shaved, but there’s a kindness to him. He speaks slowly, with a bit of Southern drawl. He’s genuinely polite and looks you in the eye while speaking. During all our discussions, one thing has become clear: He wants to do the right thing, if he can simply figure out what that is.

We walk to the rear of the car, and Ken Horstmann joins us. I ask about the blacked-out gas cap. Sean shrugs but points out the sloppily welded patches that covered the holes left when the under-bumper backup lights were removed. “McQueen,” Sean says, “was very specific about how he wanted the car to look.”

On Chad McQueen’s site, he mentions that his father considered the car a character, not a prop. McQueen the senior chose the Mustang because it was a car his character, police detective Frank Bullitt, could afford. Also, McQueen tried to make *Bullitt* a modern Western, with the good guy in a Mustang and the bad guy in a black Charger. As befitting Frank Bullitt, the Mustang was made to look meaner by removing the badges and backup lights. The engine was modified for speed and sound. There’s no background music during the chase; the music is the engine, as we like it. Unlike any other McQueen artifact, this is the one he poured his heart and soul into.

We open the trunk, and I notice a couple of foam blocks glued to the forward wall and other modifications for camera rigging. Sean points out a chip on the edge of the passenger’s-side rear fender, which reveals a thick layer of filler. “This entire side is Bondo,” he says. “There must be 40 gallons of it in the door alone. It oozes out of the inside. Whoever put it on was a real sculptor, because it matches the lines of the car perfectly.” The door was smashed in during the closing stages of the chase scene, and the filler is the result of the shortcut repair.

Sean suggests I open the door, but I’m hesitant to touch anything. “Go ahead,” he says. “It closes perfectly, better than the other side. With all that weight, I can’t believe it hasn’t sagged.” I open and close it with a solid click.

We move to the engine bay. The V-8 doesn’t look like anything special. It was originally modified by Max Balchowsky, the same guy who opened Hollywood Motors

The *Bullitt* Mustang’s right door has a thick layer of filler used to repair a dent incurred during filming.

The shift knob, steering wheel, and carpet were replaced, but otherwise, the interior is as it was when McQueen drove the car.



courtesy Larry Webster for www.ponysite.de



and built the Old Yeller II race car plus several movie cars. Sean and his father had the engine rebuilt using as many original parts as they could. Before installing it, they had the engine tested, and it produced 315 horsepower at 4500 rpm and 400 pound-feet of torque at 3000. The air cleaner is not original; Sean says it was stolen by someone who broke into the Kentucky barn at some point. I see new screws holding the fenders to the frame and ask about them. “The original ones were junk,” Sean says, “but believe me, I tried to save them.”

I lie on the floor to get a look at the underside. The only shiny bits are new brake lines and a few bolts. The welded camera bars still jut out from both rockers; the original custom exhaust is still in place. The rear axle with its 4:10 gear ratio and limited-slip differential doesn’t have the usual oil coating.

Inside, the bottom of the seats are torn along the pleats. Sean did replace the carpet, because the original was simply too far gone to save. There are two adhesive smudges on the tachometer, one at 5600 rpm and another at 6500. The cabin smells musty, that comforting aroma of your favorite vintage car waiting to be taken for a spin. We have to cut our tour short, however, as time is tight.

Sean’s 16-year-old daughter will be home from school

soon. She does not know about the car’s significance. “I didn’t want to burden her with it,” Sean says. Before Sean opened up about the Mustang’s history, only a few knew of it. When his wife’s family would visit, he’d simply cover the car and call it a Camaro. Luckily, no one inquired, besides, of course, the internet.

“I can’t wait to get this out there,” he says as our photographer goes to work and we talk. He mentions his father a lot, clearly still dealing with the loss of a man he loved and admired. “My dad didn’t care about other people’s opinions. He had his mountain. He had his car. He never let the Parkinson’s slow him down. He bought a 2008 Mustang GT with a stick.”

Soon, the son will finish the mission he started with his father. After that, who knows? Kiernan has no plans to sell, but he recognizes the car is worth multigenerational money. In the meantime, he hopes the movie project moves forward. He wants to build the *Bullitt* replicas for the film. “Who better to build them than the guy who owns the original?” he asks. Then he wants to auction the movie cars for the Michael J. Fox Foundation for Parkinson’s Research, a cause his father supported.

Whatever happens to the *Bullitt* Mustang, it’s in good hands. It always has been. lwebster@hagerty.com

courtesy Larry Webster for www.ponysite.de



After its scheduled emergence at 2018 Detroit show and a other appearances, the *Bullitt* Mustang will likely return to its modest garage.



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