

Summer 1970: Steve McQueen is in northwest France shooting "Le Mans," the now cult film about the famous 24-hour motor race and rivalries on and off the track. McQueen's character, driver Michael Delaney, wears a white racing suit. On his wrist is a Heuer Monaco Chronograph, an almost square watch with a large—40mm x 45mm, and 14mm thick—stainless-steel case, a blue main dial, white subdials, red hands and a black leather strap.

In the hermetic world of watch lovers, the Monaco on McQueen's wrist provokes debate, confusion and mystery. None of the hubbub is about the watch itself, however: The Heuer Monaco was launched in 1969, the first automatic chronograph, and is beyond reproach. The crux of the matter is a question of numbers. How many Monaco watches with blue dials were on the set of "Le Mans," and how many did Steve McQueen wear?

Answers to those questions soon, but for starters: How did McQueen choose his character's wardrobe?

Marshall Terrill—an authority on the King of Cool, and author of four books on him with a fifth, "Steve McQueen: Le Mans in the

Omega, which was the hot item at that time because it had just gone to the moon. He said, 'I'd like to wear this.'

"He had already picked out his patches for his driver's uniform and one of the patches he picked out was Heuer.

"I said, 'Steve, you probably wouldn't wear an Omega watch with a Heuer patch on your uniform because that probably means you're being sponsored by Omega.' He said, 'Oh, good point.' Steve was very concerned about trying to not look overly promotional with a particular brand-name product.

"He started looking at the Heuer watches and he said, 'I don't want to draw a lot of attention to myself.'

"Pointing at the blue Monaco, McQueen said, 'Let me see that one.' So I gave it to him and he looked at it, and he said, 'Yeah, I want to wear this one.'

"With all the watches he could have picked out, that was the most flamboyant watch I had on the table."

McQueen's instincts for an unforgettable suit/watch combination outweighed his apparent reserve. Like the cars on the track—mostly Porsches and Ferraris—the Monaco watch

THE HUNT FOR McQUEEN'S HEUERS

Worn by the King of Cool in the film 'Le Mans,' their number and whereabouts have always been disputed. Michael Clerizo unravels the true story

Rearview Mirror," on the way—says: "McQueen was meticulous about how his characters looked. He knew instinctively that the wardrobe was part of the character and helps the actor become memorable to the public. Images stay with you after the movie. Like the sweatshirt with cut-off sleeves he wore in 'The Great Escape' and the white suit and Monaco watch in 'Le Mans.' He looked tough and he looked cool."

After McQueen, Don Nunley, the property master on the film, is the most important figure in this "Le Mans"/Monaco story. Mr. Nunley is a doyen of prop-department circles with a string of credits including "Little Big Man" and "The Amityville Horror." He is also Mr. Terrill's co-author on the Le Mans book.

Now 77 and enjoying retirement in a bucolic part of Washington, Mr. Nunley jumps into his account of McQueen and the blue Monaco with the up-front attitude of a western outdoorsman: "I am the guy who put it on his wrist," he says. "I guess I am what you call the horse's mouth. A lot of people like to claim they had more to do with this than they did.

"What happened is when we were outfitting Steve I got pictures of the top drivers at that time, which were Jo Siffert, Derek Bell, [Brian] Redman, Jacky Ickx, and laid them on a table along with various choices of wrist watches. Steve actually picked out an

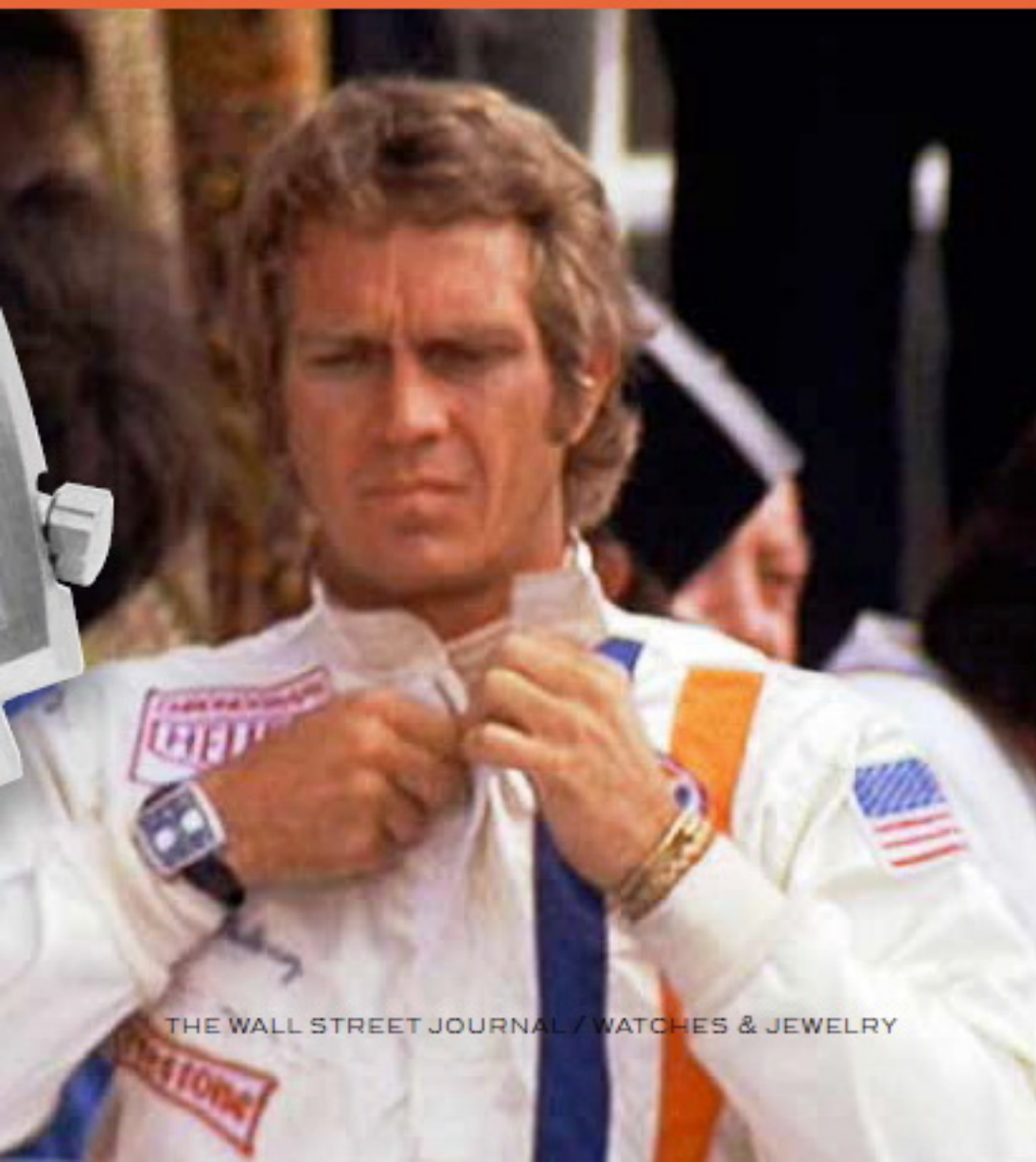
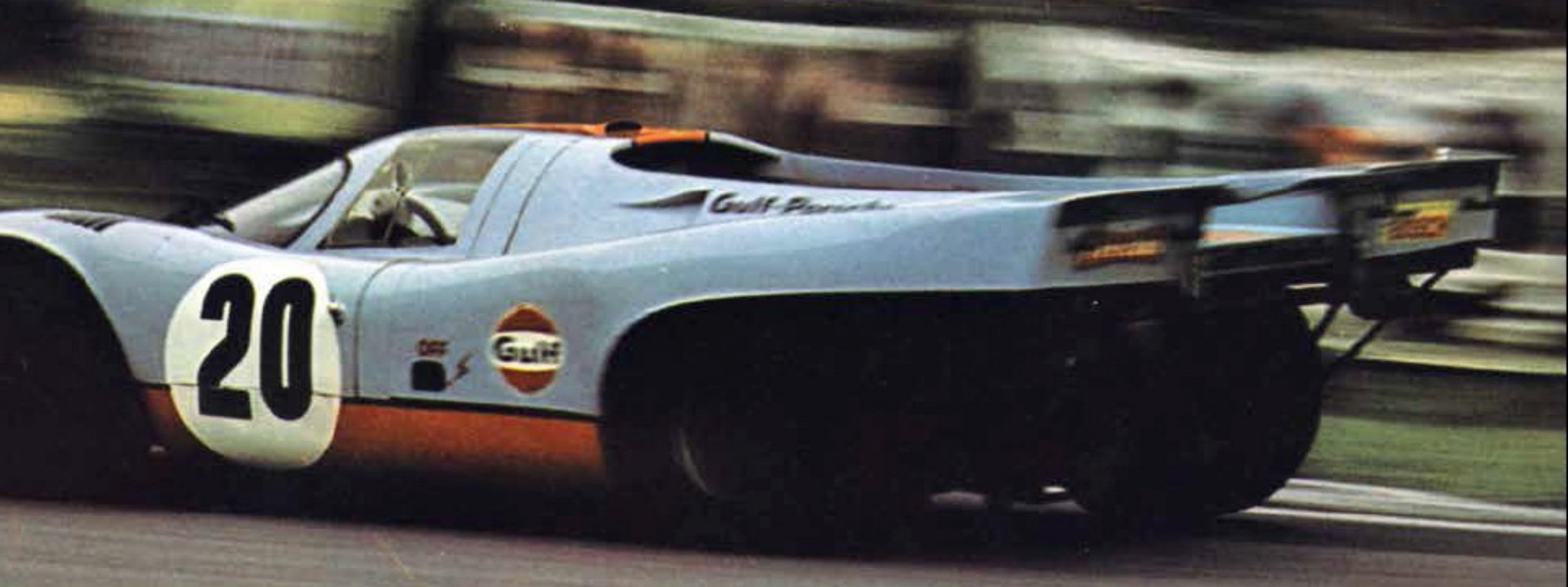
is striking in appearance and muscular in performance.

And how many Monacos were on the set of 'Le Mans'?

Lengthy online debate has produced several answers: three, four, five, six, and 15—even when the arguments are taking place on the Heuer-dedicated website onthedash.com.

Mr. Nunley is adamant: "I had six Monacos with blue dials on the set." He also says that McQueen wore all six. As property master, Mr. Nunley knew that props are damaged, borrowed (permanently) by cast and crew, or simply disappear. After the pre-production session with McQueen, Mr. Nunley phoned Jack Heuer, president >





A TIMEPIECE OF THE ACTION: Steve McQueen (clockwise from left) as racing driver Michael Delaney in the 1971 movie 'Le Mans'; one of the Heuer Monacos; with professional driver Jo Siffert, who drove on track for the movie; another star of the film—Delaney's Porsche 917K; with director Lee H. Katzin; and climbing into the Porsche 917K on set. Above: McQueen at the wheel as Delaney



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> and majority owner of the Heuer-Leonidas SA watch brand (now TAG Heuer) and asked for “at least four, maybe six” blue Monacos along with watches for other drivers. A few days later a Heuer representative arrived in Le Mans with a briefcase full of wristwatches, stop watches, decals—or transfers—patches and other equipment.

The invoice for that shipment, which has been authenticated by the TAG Heuer Museum, is dated June 26, 1970 and addressed to Don Nunley in Le Mans. On its second page, the fifth and sixth items are listed as “1133 B,” the designation—known as a “reference” in timepiece terminology—for Monaco watches with blue dials. Four “avec brac. cuir” (leather straps) and two “avec brac. acier” (stainless-steel bracelets), a spare leather strap and an extra stainless-steel bracelet. Four plus two equals six.

In the film, McQueen always wears a Monaco with a leather strap. Mr. Nunley says that he and his assistants easily swapped the steel bracelets for leather straps. Other items on the invoice are the watches for other drivers and additional timing equipment.

Where are the Heuer Monacos now?

When the film wrapped, Mr. Nunley and Jack Heuer reached agreement on a price for the watches and some of the additional equipment. A few of the cast and crew left Le Mans with Heuer products purchased at bargain prices.

In a letter dated Nov. 13, 1970, Mr. Nunley writes to Jack Heuer: “Mr. McQueen has kept two of the watches for himself.”

What Don Nunley didn’t know at the time is that Steve McQueen gifted the watches to people he trusted and admired. One went to William (Bill) Maher, the management consultant who saved McQueen from financial ruin in 1970. McQueen had the case back engraved “W. J. Maher.” In 1974, Mr. Maher gave the watch to his nephew, whose name and date of birth are also engraved on the case back. The auction house Antiquorum sold the watch in New York on June 11, 2009 for \$87,600. The buyer was Josh Bonifas of Fourtané Jewelers in Carmel-by-the-Sea, Ca. Mr. Bonifas sold the watch the following year to an anonymous buyer.

McQueen presented the other watch to Haig Altounian, his mechanic on the film. Mr. Altounian had also been the mechanic for McQueen and his co-driver Peter Revson at the 1970 Sebring 12-hour race, in which they came second.

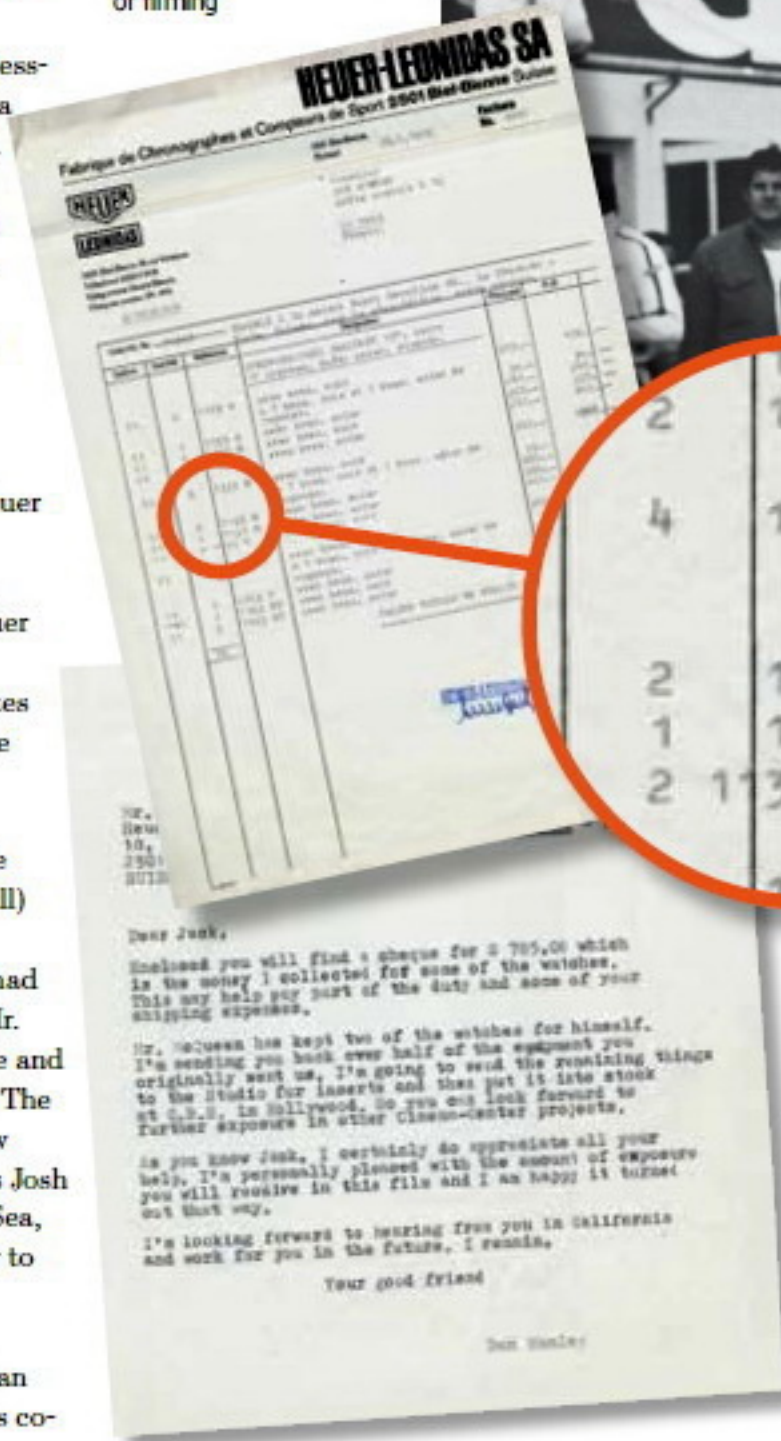
When McQueen finished his final scene on the last day of shooting “Le Mans,” he climbed out of his Porsche 917K, unstrapped the watch and handed it to Mr. Altounian. McQueen then expressed his gratitude to the astonished mechanic for “keeping me alive all these months.” The watch was already engraved with Mr. Altounian’s name.

Mr. Altounian recounts the story in the 2015 documentary “Steve McQueen: The Man & Le Mans.”

On the phone from California, Mr. Altounian confirms that the watch is securely lodged in a safe-

CRUCIAL EVIDENCE:

Don Nunley’s invoice for props received from Heuer covers three pages, but on its second page, six Heuers, four with leather straps and two with stainless-steel bracelets, were delivered. McQueen wearing one of the watches on set, right; and bottom, Mr. Nunley’s letter to Jack Heuer at the end of filming



deposit box. He also says that there were six blue Monacos on the set.

The other four blue Monacos returned home with Mr. Nunley, including the one Steve McQueen wore most often in the film. Mr. Nunley gave one to a friend, who then gave it to his son.

Mr. Nunley wore one on occasion, as did his father. After a few years the watches were consigned to a closet.

In the early 2000s, Mr. Nunley sold two of the watches simultaneously on eBay. David DeVos, a Connecticut collector, bought one for about \$9,100.

Unbeknown to Mr. DeVos, his then wife Elisabeth, wanting a surprise present for her husband, bought the other for a little more: about \$9,200. So it happened that one day two blue Monaco watches worn by Steve McQueen were delivered to the DeVos household.

The one purchased by the then Mrs. DeVos is what Mr. Nunley calls the hero watch, maintained in near-pristine condition and only placed on McQueen’s wrist for publicity stills. Almost immediately, the couple sold that watch to a European collector.

Mr. DeVos sold the other watch to the TAG Heuer Museum for \$20,000 in March 2007.

In 2009, Mr. Nunley sold the Monaco worn most often by Steve McQueen to an anonymous collector. And in 2011, Mr. Nunley’s friend’s son sold his watch to the real-estate developer and eminent film memorabilia collector Mike Eisenberg, who also owns one tuxedo worn by every James Bond, and a dress worn by Judy Garland in “The Wizard of Oz.”

The hero watch changed hands a few times until July 2012 when the California-based film memorabilia auction house Profiles in History sold it for \$799,500.

The final word in this saga has to belong to Mr. Nunley: “I am amazed that 46 years later we are still talking about those watches.”