



He had silver eagles on his shoulders, crossed sabers on his lapel

Gus fixes up a retreat

By MARTIN BUNN

THE big limousine that drove into the Model Garage driveway was a good make and almost as old as it was good. As Gus Wilson slid open the shop door in response to repeated honkings of its horn, a brisk little Army sergeant hopped from the driver's seat. Gus noted that the hash stripes extended almost up to his elbow and that his legs had a bow not acquired in automobiles.

An officer stepped out as the sergeant opened the door of the tonneau and stood at stiff attention. He had silver eagles on his shoulders, crossed sabers on his lapel, and a mustache that verged on the handlebar style and was startlingly white on a weather-beaten face. His complexion reminded Gus of the rich color that years of use, saddle soap, and care give good leather.

"Colonel Hawkesbury!" boomed the little sergeant in a big voice.

"Good morning, Colonel," Gus said.

"Mornin'," Colonel Hawkesbury replied with surprising mildness. "We've been havin' so much trouble I thought we'd better get some expert assistance—both Sergeant Brady and I bein' pretty much on the

amateur side when it comes to automotive equipment."

Sergeant Brady's red face turned purple, and he muttered something under his breath. The Colonel fixed him with a cold, gray eye. "What was that, Sergeant?" he demanded.

"I didn't say anything, sir!" Sergeant Brady snapped.

"Oh—I thought you did," the Colonel said. He looked at Gus and winked. "The Sergeant's a good man with horses, but he soon gets beyond his depth when he has to deal with transmissions. I have completed an Army course in motor mechanics, but—what's that, Sergeant?"

Sergeant Brady had emitted an involuntary choking sound. He cleared his throat. "Nothing, sir. I just coughed, sir."

"Oh, you just coughed," the Colonel repeated, and turned back to Gus. "As I was sayin' when the Sergeant coughed, I have completed an Army course in motor mechanics, but my practical experience has been limited. The Sergeant and I are changing stations, and are en route from Texas to Boston. We got along well enough until yesterday afternoon when the car began to behave in a most uncomfortable manner . . . Just what were the symptoms, Sergeant?"

"Engine began to skip, sir," Sergeant Brady said. "After I'd slow down in traffic, the car would rush ahead in spurts no matter what I did with the accelerator. Pretty near ran us into a truck, sir."

"Yes—it was most uncomfortable and embarrassin'," Colonel Hawkesbury agreed. "The Sergeant suspected the fuel pump. What did you do with it, Sergeant?"

"Took the fuel pump off and disassembled it, sir," Sergeant Brady said. "Cleaned it thoroughly. When I put it back on, the engine ran better. Once we got out on the road we did 35 as smooth as you please. But when we hit the next city it was the same old story—miss and jolt whenever I had to slow down below 20. Then half the time I couldn't speed up again. Sometimes even, all that stamping the accelerator pedal down to the floor boards did was to make the engine skip and jolt worse—it would start to race and all of a sudden go dead. Never had a car act like that before."

"My own diagnosis was that it was the distributor," Colonel Hawkesbury put in. "But, so far as is possible, I refrain from interferin' with an NCO who is in charge of a job, so I told him to do what he thought best. What then, Sergeant?"

"Well," said Sergeant Brady, "when I had disassembled and put back the fuel pump, the engine idled as smooth as anyone could ask. But as soon as we hit traffic it began to act up again. That made me think that mebbe it was the carburetor, sir."

Colonel Hawkesbury snorted. "Carburetor! We bucked and jolted into a town, and you worked on the carburetor all evening."

Sergeant Brady looked straight ahead and spoke briefly. "I examined it, sir. Took off the air cleaner. Checked and cleaned the float chamber and all parts. Blew the carburetor out with compressed air. Reinstalled it. Cleaned and checked all spark plugs—got a strong spark at each. Started the engine. There was a nice stream of gas flowing into the float chamber, and it idled smoothly. Road-tested the car. Same trouble as before, sir."

The Colonel gave Gus another wink. "Well, what did you do then?" he demanded.

Sergeant Brady looked injured. "One-thirty by then, sir. I went to bed."

"First sensible thing you'd done all day!" Colonel Hawkesbury said. "You never looked at the distributor, of course." He turned to Gus. "The Sergeant will tell you the rest of the story, and I hope you'll be able to find what's wrong. I must put in a long-distance call. May I use your phone?"

Gus took him into the office. "Thanks," the Colonel told him. "By the way—I wouldn't pay too much attention to what Sergeant Brady *thinks* the trouble is. He used to be the best stable sergeant in the Army, but since they've mechanized the cavalry he hasn't been able to keep up. No mechanical ability—none at all!"

Gus left the Colonel calling his number and went back into the shop. An astonishing change had come over Sergeant Brady. He had pushed his overseas cap far back on his head, disclosing a bald dome fringed by ginger-colored hair that was beginning to go gray, and he had a cigarette hanging from the corner of his mouth.

"What's the old buzzard doing?" he asked. "Phoning? Good. Once he starts shooting the breeze he's good for 15 minutes. I've got to have a smoke—he's been riding me so hard I got butterflies crawling all over me. He used to be the best cavalry officer in the Army when they had hosses, but what he don't know about cars would fill a shelf of technical manuals."

Gus raised the hood of the venerable limousine. "I should think it would be pretty hard for an officer who doesn't know anything about automotive equipment to command a regiment these days," he remarked.

Sergeant Brady grinned, but his face wasn't happy. "The Colonel ain't commanding a regiment these days," he said grimly. "He's commanding an office full of Wacs—and I have to sit out there with them and listen to their talk about their dates. Me and the Colonel—we're just retreads."

"Huh?" Gus asked.

"Retreads," the Sergeant repeated. "Injun fighters, if you like that any better. Guys who have been on the retired list and have got back in for the war. The Colonel retired 10 years ago, and I went with him—I've been with him, one way or another, most of the time since he was a second looney fresh out of the Point."

"The Colonel's a fighter—he didn't get all those ribbons for sitting around GHQ looking wise—and he says we've got to get back in the Army. I told him we'd get put on some desk job, but he says he knows a way

"A State cop comes up and tells us you're a motor wizard"



to beat that—he'll get us sent to a motor-mechanics school, and after that we'll get back in the cavalry. He gets us sent to the motors school, all right. Of course he don't learn anything at it—no head for machinery. And then they put us on a desk job, just like I'd told him they would."

"I see," Gus said. "Well, now, about your car—"

"There's something the matter with the carburetor," Sergeant Brady offered. "Or maybe the clutch is slipping. Must be one or the other—can't be anything else because I've checked everything. When we started out this morning, I had to toe the clutch in and out to give the engine a chance to get up some revs.

"We went along that way for miles. Then we had to stop because the Colonel said he smelled something burning. While I had my head under the hood, a State cop comes along on a motorcycle and wants to know what's the matter. Then he tells us you're a motor wizard and that your place is only a couple of miles up the road. So we make it here.

"Say," the sergeant continued earnestly, "don't pay any attention to what the Colonel says about the distributor. He don't know anything about distributors—and before we started on this trip I—" He stopped abruptly.

Gus looked up. Colonel Hawkesbury was coming through the office doorway. Sergeant Brady had undergone another quick transformation. His cigarette had vanished, his cap was at just the correct angle, his red face had lost all expression.

"Found the difficulty?" asked the Colonel.

"Not yet—but it won't be long," Gus said confidently. "I'll have to do a little checking."

Gus Wilson never seems to hurry, but he works fast. He went over the gasoline line from tank to carburetor without finding anything wrong. "Nothing the matter with the carburetor," he said.

"I told the sergeant that yesterday," Colonel Hawkesbury said triumphantly.

Gus got into the car and started the engine. It took off well enough and ran

smoothly at idling speed, but when he pressed his foot on the accelerator it began to miss badly. He turned the ignition key and got out.

"Try the distributor," said the Colonel.

"I'm going to," Gus told him. "From the way your engine runs, I'd say there's something wrong with the ignition." He took off the distributor cap and examined the points. They were badly burned and pitted from excessive arcing. "Yes," he said, "the trouble is in the ignition—and my guess is that it is caused by the condenser."

The Colonel looked at the Sergeant, and the Sergeant stared straight ahead.

Gus smothered a grin as he reached behind the massive old distributor to where the condenser was grounded to its housing by a screw.

"Here's the cause of your trouble," Gus reported. "Whoever installed that distributor forgot to tighten the condenser grounding screw. After a good many miles of driving, vibration—or maybe rough roads—shook the condenser loose, with the result that the arcing of the high-tension current across the distributor points made your ignition go haywire. You'll need new points and—to be on the safe side—a new condenser."

Sergeant Brady looked at Colonel Hawkesbury, and Gus saw that his blue eyes were blazing. The Colonel's face was red under its mahogany hue. "Do whatever is necessary, please," he told Gus.

Gus installed a new condenser and points, and the Colonel handed him a bill. When he came back from the office with the change, Colonel Hawkesbury and the sergeant were already in the car. Their faces were flushed, and they were quarreling.

"Sergeant," the Colonel snapped, "I told you yesterday it was the distributor. If you hadn't been so bull-headed—"

"It was your fault, sir!" Sergeant Brady interrupted. "I caught you fooling with that distributor the day before we started this trip. When you give a man a job to do, sir, it's only fair to let him do it without interference—"

"I've already told you I'm sorry, Sergeant," the Colonel said. "From now on, do what you please with the car. I'll never touch it again. Now, if it were a horse—"

Sergeant Brady grinned widely over his shoulder. "If it was a horse, sir," he said, "we'd both know a lot more about it!"

The old limousine rolled out of the shop, its engine purring.

Gus was still chuckling when his partner Joe Clark came in and asked, "What you been doing, Gus?"

"Oh," Gus said solemnly, "just a little job of fixing up a retread."

GUS SAYS:

With cold weather due, remember that short runs which don't let the motor warm up increase condensation and oil dilution. If you must make short runs, change the oil often. Better still, don't start your engine unless you can let it get thoroughly warm.