

Joe Troise Talks About Nigel Shiftright

By Larry Sanata

If you've never had the opportunity to read a Nigel Shiftright cartoon, stop immediately! Read one of those featured with this story or go out and find another. Whatever you decide, savor the wonderful humor within.

It has been nearly a decade since Joe Troise and Phil Frank collaborated on the very last episode of "Nigel Shiftright, Automotive Anachronism". But those who grew up reading about Nigel are not likely to have forgotten the harrowing exploits of this incredible adventurer in his trusty MG TC.

Classic MG Magazine caught up with Joe Troise in San Francisco where he chatted about himself, his close friend Phil Frank and the Quixote-like character who won the hearts of many.

"Nigel actually was born while Phil and I were driving across the Golden Gate Bridge in Phil's TC," Troise recalled.

As was typical of the two, who

collaborated on a number of cartoon projects, they were talking about different scenarios and how they might lend themselves into a cartoon, illustration or some other project.

"At the time, we got into one of those 'what if' discussions. In this case, it was what if some English car nut started to fantasize that he was back in World War II."

The art director at *Road & Track* magazine was approached and hired the pair to develop the character.

It didn't take long for Troise and Frank to create what eventually became a winning formula, which centered upon an eccentric British MG owner, with a thin mustache and penchant for leather goggles, gloves and driving cap.

Shortly before his death in 2007, Frank described Nigel as "an Anglophile, loving all things British and imagining himself to be an unrecognized member of British royalty living in the United States with a fleet of spindly-wheeled old cars at his estate on Flapping Bonnet Lane."

What made Nigel unique, however, were his fantastic fantasies, Troise noted.

"Nigel would go into these fantasies about where he was or who he was. And only at the very end of the strip did he get jolted back to reality. That was kind of the formula," Troise explained.

In that first episode, called Dawn Patrol, Wing Commander Shiftright is crossing the Golden Gate Bridge when he finds himself in his fighter plane with his arch-rival Baron von Stockbroker in his sights. A dogfight ensues and using an Buick Electra 225 for cover, Nigel fires on the Baron, in his BMW.

In the last panel, a bewildered BMW driver is covered with little suction cup darts and mutters to a policeman, "This old coot in an ancient MG started shooting darts at me."

Despite its success, Nigel appeared as a full-page cartoon only every couple months in the magazine, which was fine for Troise. Having to come up new stories any more often, the cartoon would have gotten stale, he said.

Eventually, Nigel appeared as a single panel in different sections of the magazine. And as part of an April fool's special, *Road & Track* traveled to Nigel's imaginary castle to road test his MG TC.

Unfortunately, Troise said, the castle was "shrouded in fog that day so they had to meet in a cafeteria."

While Frank handled the illustrations, Troise concentrated on the content.

"I wasn't really good enough to draw commercially, but Phil was really great at that. He worked very quickly and he had a great style. There are a lot of cartoonists who are crappy artists, but they're funny."

Phil Frank possessed all of those qualities, Troise said about his friend. Working together, "we got pretty good as a team."



Joe Troise, left, and Phil Frank working on a "Nigel Shiftright, Automotive anachronism" cartoon inside Phil's studio. During his cartoon lifetime, Nigel also was known as "Lord of the Manor of Catsup-on-Fryes" and "Serial No. 77212978." (Courtesy of Joe Troise)



Joe Troise and Phil Frank, in Phil's MG TC, rounding a turn at Sears Point Raceway, now Sonoma Raceway. The TC was the ride of choice for Nigel Shiftright, the cartoon character created by Troise and Frank. (Courtesy of Joe Troise)

Asked about his favorite Nigel cartoons, Troise chose two – Dawn Patrol and Rappin' with Nigel and the Mechanics.

In the latter, Nigel is confronted by a government man, with blow torch in hand, who warns that old cars will no longer be permitted on roadways because of new safety regulations.

Nigel, who is distraught and traumatized, screams aloud. And, finally, in the last frame, Nigel, wearing British flag pajamas, realizes it was just a dream and promises to give up late-night pizza and MTV.

While the cartoons seem simple enough, Troise said he and Frank were always challenged to come up with good material for a well-informed and sophisticated audience, and for Nigel too.

The wastepaper basket became “a best friend,” Troise recalled. At the same time, however, “We had to be loyal to Nigel. He became almost alive to us.”

During the course of his lifetime,

Nigel was known by a variety of titles. Among those was “Lord of the Manor of Catsup-on-Fryes” and “Serial No. 77212978.”

Fortunately for Nigel’s fans, both Troise and Frank were car guys, and had a special affection for classic British metal.

“Nigel drove a TC because Phil had a TC, and both Phil and I were

both members of the TC Club here in northern California, called the Rough Riders.”

Although Troise never owned an MG TC, which was a bit compact for him, he had a long list of other British cars, including an MGA, a Magnette and a couple MGBs, as well as an Austin-Healey Sprite, a Jaguar XK 140 coupe, Jaguar XK140 road-



ster, Jaguar 3.8 Sedan and a Morgan Plus-4.

"I also had a Triumph Herald, for about a minute and a half." At the time he and Frank launched "Nigel Shiftright, Automotive anachronism", Troise owned an Alfa Romeo Spyder.

Although he has no classic sports cars at the moment, he sometimes dreams about owning another MGB, like his old 1971 MGB, equipped with overdrive and a hotter cam. "It was just a pretty great running car."

Although semi-retired, Troise manages to keep busy.

He works for Edmunds.com Automotive Forums as an online host and is an expert advisor for Edmunds.com Answers website, something he's done for about 14 years. He also is an appraiser of antique and classic automobiles, and conducts pre-purchase inspections of select classic cars.

"I sometimes have been surprised at the level of restoration I have seen," he said. "I looked at 246 Dino not long ago and it was just spectacular. I couldn't find a fly speck on it."

He also recently had the opportunity to appraise a Ferrari Enzo. "There you are appraising car worth \$1.3 million."

Asked what Nigel Shiftright would think of today's new generation of sports car, Troise chuckled.

"He would loathe them, because there's no experience. You've got all the comforts, but you're not experiencing being in a machine, or in the case of a TC, riding on top of a machine.

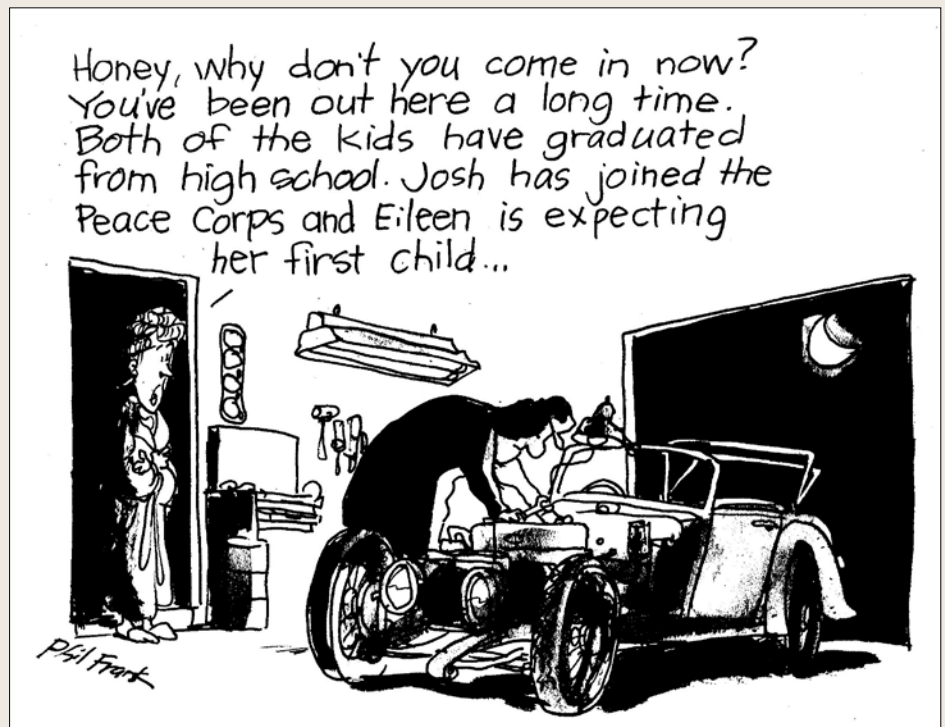
"There's no smell. There's no vibration. There's very little noise. Nigel would consider these cars heresy."

More Nigel Shiftright

You can see more Nigel Shiftright cartoons at the following websites:

http://bradleyrestoration.com/technical_resources/nigel-shiftright-automotive/

<http://abingdonroughriders.org/Cartoon.html?C=Nigel>



Regalia and Special "Wing Commander's" Rally

Fans of Nigel Shiftright soon will have access to clothing and memorabilia dedicated to that Anglophile extraordinaire.

Joe Troise, who co-founded the popular cartoon "Nigel Shiftright, Automotive Anachronism," is collaborating with Bob DeShane on a new website, www.mowoguniversity.com.

The site currently is under construction. But when completed, Nigel accessories will be available for fans of the cartoon, which ran nearly 20 years in *Road & Track* magazine.

"We'll be selling Nigel Shiftright clothing and some decal paraphernalia," said Troise, who with his close friend, Phil Frank, created the Nigel Shiftright cartoon in 1986. Frank died in 2007.

Bob DeShane of the Little Britain Motor Company also is involved in the "Brits on the Lake Festival" in Port Perry, Ontario, which this year is holding a Nigel Shiftright "Wing Commander's" Rally Tour.

More information about the tour, which is scheduled for Aug. 9, is available at www.mowoguniversity.com, in the Links section.