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KIEFER SUTHERLAND PHOTOGRAPHED FOR ESQUIRE BY LORENZO ARBUS



MICHAEL CAINE + THE WHITE STRIPES + THE NEW SEINFELD + ULTIMATE SNOWBOARDING

Esquire Magazine, April 2003. Article "The Real Miami Vice"



The man and his motorboats Left to right, top to bottom: Don Aronow as a lifeguard at Conroy Island, 1944; Donzi Baby overtakes Holocaust, driven by Lord Lucan, in an Aronow-design double-header boat, the 1964 Miami-Key West Race; Donzi Blue Devil catches air in the 1967 Around Long Island Marathon; Aronow and his son Michael with The Beatles, in Miami for "The Ed Sullivan Show", 1964; piloting Cigarette to a record-breaking win in the the 1969 Long Beach-Ensenada Race; celebrating another win in the 1969 Miami-Nassau Race; such was his hero status, he appeared in ads for Rolex and Hennessy



Aronow turned down a film role as Tarzan, made a million in construction and



Esquire Magazine, April 2003. Article "The Real Miami Vice"

FOR 25 YEARS, Don Aronow was the fastest man in the world. Millionaire, speedboat racer and boat builder, he designed craft that could ride the water at speeds of up to 175 mph – and frequently accelerated so fast that they actually took off. In the course of his career, these machines won him 350 international races and 11 world titles, breaking more than 25 world speed records in the process.

Aronow was the undisputed king of offshore powerboat racing. Presidents and royal families from Malaysia to Monaco loved him. Everybody knew him. So he was not fazed when, at 3.10pm on 3 February 1987, a sandy-haired stranger drove up alongside his Mercedes and gestured for him to pull over. Aronow stopped, shifted into neutral and leaned out of the window. "What's up?" he asked. The sandy-haired stranger didn't answer. Instead, he pulled out a Star 45 semi-automatic, leaned into Aronow's car and shot him five times in the chest.

Sixteen years after the most infamous murder in the city's history, Esquire travelled to Miami to investigate. Who killed the most famous powerboat racer the world has ever known? And why?

AT 39 FEET IN LENGTH, the US Customs Service's Midnight Express is bigger than your average powerboat. Generating nearly 1,000hp from the bank of refrigerator-sized outboard engines bolted onto the back, it is also quite a lot faster. Midnight Expresses run at speeds so preposterous that private buyers are required to prove to builder Tom Mason that they are capable of handling them safely before they're even allowed to touch the keys. Fully equipped, the boats go for \$225,500 to \$325,000 apiece. Customs has 17, which they use – at great velocity – to catch narcotics traffickers.

As they clock a Midnight Express passing by, local boaters' mouths fall open. Transfixed, they nudge their friends and point. Asked about this reaction, Zach Mann of US Customs chuckles like an indulgent dad: "Those kids? They've just never seen anything with four 250-horsepower engines before."

But if Midnight Expresses are impressive to look at, they are more impressive to drive. Perched in the back of a pre-delivery vessel on your way to the open water, you feel a bit like the flight commander at the end of *Dr*

the most dangerous sporting events. People got killed attempting the run, making it a magnet for rich daredevils from all over the world. For Aronow, now 34, retired and bored, the temptation was irresistible. He built himself a boat, entered the race as a novice and came in fourth. Disgusted at his failure to win, he built himself a bigger one and vowed to do better next year.

When the new boat was finished, Aronow took his son, Michael, out for a spin. Over 40 years later, Michael still remembers the ride: "Oh my God! It's an incredible feeling! I remember at school we were shown these pictures of the first astronauts at take-off, their faces going all over the place because of the G-forces. Well, when I first got into a boat with my father for a run, I looked over at him and his face was all over the place! The boat was in and out of the water the whole time and I'm standing there, holding on for my life, just screaming, like, 'Waaaaah!' BOOM! 'Waaaaah!' BOOM! It was a pretty wild ride."

Michael's comparisons with space flight are appropriate: offshore racing was rough. In one Miami-Key West race, accelerometers were installed in a race boat to measure the shocks experienced by the crew. The meters revealed that the drivers had endured forces of up to 25G: well over twice those inflicted on any astronaut, anywhere, ever. When Rocky Marciano crewed a boat on the Miami-Nassau race, he begged to be let off halfway through. "It's too tough," he said. "At least in the ring I can hit back."

Aronow's throttleman, Norris "Knocky" House, bore testament to the hazards of the sport. In his time with the powerboat king, Knocky suffered three broken ribs, a broken nose and a shattered hip and he lost two teeth. By the end of Aronow's career, Knocky was the only throttleman in the world who would race with him: "Everyone else refused," says Michael today. "They couldn't take the punishment." But Aronow just laughed off his injuries: "It's not a race unless someone gets hurt."

Getting hurt was a risk that seemed to appeal to Aronow. During the 1967 Long Beach-San Francisco Challenge, his boat was travelling so fast that it hit a wave and took off – colliding in midair with the race's safety helicopter. When it made contact with the water again there was a stunned silence. Aronow eventually turned to House: "What's the first thing

> KEEP ON RUNNIN' RIDING ON THE FASTEST POWERBOAT IN THE WORLD



Sixteen years after Aronow's death, his legend lives on. This is why Esquire has put me in an Aronow-designed Midnight Express that looks like it might lift off at any moment, with an immense stretch of water to test it in. "How fast does this thing go, anyway?" I ask. Tom Mason, who still makes Midnight Expresses, rubs his chin. "How fast do you want it to go?" Silly question: as fast as possible, obviously. He nods.

When Esquire's photographer tries to move up to the bow of the boat to get a shot of our upcoming offshore speed experience, Mason stops him. "No. Not there. Stand here. And see that?" He points to a handrail. "Hold on to it."

When we're cruising at about 45 knots – twice the speed of a water-ski boat – I feel like I'm starting to get the hang of it. The engines are roaring, the nose is lifting and the boat is beginning to butt the surface of the water. "See these?" Mason yells. He's pointing at the control console. I nod. Without any further warning, he shoves all four throttles all the way forward. There is a discernible jolt and the boat just takes off.

Simultaneously, all the flight labels on my bags disappear in the slipstream. And then all of a sudden this huge Customs torpedo is doing 60, 65. I'm grinning like an idiot, my stomach somewhere in the white, crashing wake which is erupting on itself 100ft behind me. It's a great feeling. Really.

Sadly, not many people get to experience this any more. Since Don Aronow's death, offshore racing has largely stopped. Boats go faster now – some over twice as fast – but they do it on lakes, where there are no waves. Racers drive in crash helmets and protective gear. They sit inside safety cages, and canopies that don't let you feel the wind in your hair. The era of leaping about at 60 on the open water for six hours, shaking your bones to pieces and tearing up your eardrums, is gone. "None of the guys could walk any more," says Mason.

retired to Miami. It was there he discovered his real calling: powerboat racing

Strangleme, sitting astride the payload in the bomb bay of his B-52, waiting for the ride to begin. And what a ride it is.

Born in Brooklyn in 1927, Don Aronow was one of those larger-than-life characters that shouldn't exist outside action movies. Brains, confidence, charm – he had them in spades. And looks, too: while working as a lifeguard on Coney Island at the age of 21, he was offered a film role as Tarzan. He turned it down. Instead, he went into construction, made a million and retired to Miami. It was there, in 1961, he discovered his real calling: powerboat racing.

When Aronow arrived in Florida, the 184-mile Miami-Nassau race had a reputation as one of

you're gonna do when we get to Morro Bay, Knocky?" he asked. "The first thing I'm gonna do," replied the startled throttleman, "is get in the shower. I just shit my pants."

THAT SAME YEAR, Aronow created his masterpiece, the Cigarette, a boat so fast that every time he raced it he broke a speed record. By 1969, the Cigarette was running so well that Aronow won eight out of 11 international races in it. At the end of the year, Aronow was British, Swedish, Bahamian and American national champion – all for the third year running. It was rumoured that if he was going to race the next year, other teams would refuse to take part:

they knew they couldn't beat him. Advertisers fell over each other to get him to endorse their products and he became the face of Rolex, Hennessy Cognac and Champion spark plugs.

Thanks to Aronow's exploits, Cigarettes became the toast of the international jet set. The kings of Sweden, Spain and Jordan bought them. Presidents Nixon, Johnson and Bush bought them. Prince Johor of Malaysia bought a couple. The Shah of Iran bought one – then came back for five more. Israel bought 12, filled them full of explosives and rammed them into Arab warships in the Six Day War.

Foreign dignitaries weren't alone in appreciating the Cigarette. As the Seventies arrived, a

new breed of boat connoisseur emerged: the drug trafficker. Originally, Florida's marijuana smugglers moved their cargo in light planes, but it wasn't long before they discovered that boats held more. And from there it was only a matter of time before they discovered the Cigarette. Allen Long, who smuggled over 40 tons of marijuana into the US in the period, explains the advantages: "Customs had clippers that went, like, eight knots - maybe a little bit faster but not much. And the Cigarettes went, like, 70. They couldn't keep up. I had 10 Cigarette boats - paid in cash, of course."

As builder of the boats that facilitated the

Michael Aronow, who had by now joined his father in the Cigarette business, recalls, "Miami changed overnight. Suddenly all the rules were gone. You could feel it in the air. Things just weren't happy-go-lucky any more."

Things became even less happy-go-lucky when Vice President George Bush Sr established a federal taskforce to combat Miami's drug trade. Bush, who owned a Cigarette himself, called Aronow. What he needed to catch the smugglers, he explained, was something that could outrun the Cigarette. Was such a machine possible? "Oh yes," said Aronow, who promptly began work on a 39ft, 1,200hp monster called Blue Thunder.

with a suitcase full of dildoes. History does not relate what happened to the girlfriend or the dildoes. But Kramer got life for conspiracy to distribute 500,000lbs of marijuana.

Not that this helped the Miami-Dade police department, which, with few witnesses, was unable to pin the murder on its lead suspect.

Two years later, however, Smith received a tip-off. Aronow's killer, he was told, was a sandy-haired hitman called Bobby Young. Not only was Young found to have been in town at the time of the hit but one of his friends admitted to selling him a rare handgun immediately prior to the crime. The gun was a Star

"When cocaine arrived, Miami changed overnight. Suddenly, all the rules were

trafficking operations, Aronow unwittingly found himself at the heart of a gold rush. By the mid-Seventies, Miami was a playground for a new breed of young, long-haired cowboys. So much drug money accumulated in the city that in 1979 the Florida state bank reported an excess of \$5.5 billion - more than all the other 12 state depositories in the US combined. Florida was forced to export cash to the rest of the US, which was running out.

Tom Mason, who makes Midnight Expresses today, recalls the atmosphere in the late Seventies: "It was the Wild, Wild West. There were bags of cash, briefcases full of cash - anything you wanted. Everything was possible. Watch Miami Vice - it was pretty close. It was actually more decadent than Miami Vice."

Allen Long, then busy importing tons of Santa Marta Gold - Colombia's most potent marijuana - agrees: "We were all rolling hot, rolling fast and riding high, both figuratively and literally. There were millions of dollars being made every day. It was pretty festive!"

Not for long... In the early Seventies, the smugglers were dope-smokers like Long, in it for the adventure. But when cocaine - more lucrative, more expensive and much more dangerous - arrived in the late Seventies, it all went wrong. Colombians began showing up. And "festive" was not part of their vocabulary.

By 1980, the three most dangerous cities in the US were all in Florida. Miami, at that time only the 41st largest city in the country, topped the national murder tables, with twice as many killings as New York - which had a population 20 times greater. There were so many drug-related homicides that in 1981 Dade County was forced to hire refrigerated trucks to handle all the corpses. A quarter of all the bodies turned out to have been shot with machine guns.

Miami-Dade Detective Greg Smith, who handled the Aronow murder case, shakes his head: "We were getting slam-dunked on a regular basis. Our murder rate was just ridiculous... I personally had one case in 1983 where a - probably Hispanic - male was found in the Everglades. He had been cut in half at the waist, decapitated, disembowelled, was stabbed, like, 17 times. All I was able to determine was that this guy really pissed somebody off. And that was my conclusion. Crazy."

Smith was not the only one to notice the change brought about by the arrival of cocaine.

Bush ordered 13 for the US Customs Service.

Building boats for both traffickers and government simultaneously, Aronow's situation was now becoming extremely precarious. In February 1985, news of the Blue Thunder contract was splashed over the media. A year later, the contract was renewed. A year after that, Aronow was dead.

EVERYONE HAD A THEORY about the hit. It was said that it was the work of a jealous husband (Aronow was known for his appreciation of women), that the Mafia was involved, that a Colombian cartel had carried it out. Some even speculated that the Arab nations, angry at the use of Aronow's boats during the Six Day War, had done it to get even.

For Detective Greg Smith, however, the main suspect was a guy called Ben Kramer who had established a boat-building company next to Aronow's. The way Smith saw it, there was no shortage of motives.

Kramer was a drug trafficker. According to former DEA agent Gene Francar, he had perfected a technique that involved using marijuana as ballast for tankers entering the Eastern Seaboard - in ton quantities. In August 1987, just six months after the killing, he and his girlfriend were arrested in Biscayne Cove, Miami. He was charged with conspiracy to distribute over half-a-million pounds of marijuana.

Kramer had also fallen out with Aronow. No sooner had Aronow been awarded the US Customs Blue Thunder contract than Kramer had bought his company from him - assuming that the contract went along with the sale. The government, however, outraged that one of the nation's most prolific drug traffickers might be employed manufacturing boats designed to stop drug trafficking, threatened to cancel the deal. Kramer was eventually forced to sell the company back to Aronow, who resumed the Blue Thunder deal without him.

Most importantly, however, according to Smith, Aronow had secretly agreed to testify about Kramer's mysterious business dealings. And Kramer had heard about it.

When the FBI arrested Kramer in Biscayne Cove, he was cool. His girlfriend, however, was not. According to one account, she wriggled around "like a dog trying to shit a peach pit". A brief search of her possessions revealed why: she was carrying a bag of marijuana - along

.45 semi-automatic - the same weapon used to kill Aronow. Young had also boasted about the hit to a number of people, including an attorney called Paul Silverman. Smith immediately subpoenaed Silverman to testify. Then things went seriously wrong.

The very same day that Smith's subpoena for Silverman was granted, the lawyer's car was bombed. Clearly, someone didn't want him to talk. Unfortunately for that someone, however, Silverman's car was a soft-top Wrangler jeep. The blast blew him clean through the roof. He survived and testified. Young got 20 years.

But for the Miami police department one problem remained: who had hired the hitman? Attempting to discover a link between Young and his employer, Smith now requested copies of Kramer's prison phone calls (in the US, all calls to penitentiaries are recorded). These revealed that Kramer, who claimed not to know Young, was actually paying his legal bills. Things were looking up. But then events took another bizarre turn.

On 17 April 1989, warders at Miami's Metropolitan Correctional Centre were surprised to see a light helicopter approaching the jail's exercise yard. When the chopper touched down, Kramer made a dash for it and jumped onto the skid. The helicopter then lifted off, banked steeply and headed for the perimeter wall.

Kramer's plan, while smart, was not without its little flaws - the most notable of which concerned the simple physical relationship between mass and lift. Put simply, the trafficker had put on so much weight in jail that the helicopter did not have enough power to carry him. Instead of lifting him over the wall, it ploughed him into it. He still walks with a limp.

In 1996, Kramer finally gave up the fight and pleaded "no contest" to the crime of killing Don Aronow. It made little difference: he was already serving a life sentence anyway. He refused to be interviewed for this article.

Powerboat racing has changed. Miami has changed. Don Aronow is dead. Today, all that's left of the offshore pioneers is a handful of ageing racers with bad hips, screwed-up backs and stupid medical bills. And memories. **Deployed all along America's coastline, US Customs Service go-fasts have confiscated over 10,000lbs of marijuana and 11,000lbs of cocaine so far this year. You can apply for a job driving one - and find action footage of real-life busts - at www.customs.gov**