

Missile from the East

The inside story of a new movie about biking's greatest escape ever – Ernst Degner's defection to the West

Sixty years ago this week, East German MZ racer Ernst Degner defected to the west – and to mark the anniversary, a brand-new, British-made, 90-minute TV drama documentary is being premiered. The film portrays in more detail than ever the story of motorcycling's greatest escape, and the tragedy that followed – and MCN has spoken exclusively to its makers.

Missile from the East tells the story of rider and engineer Degner's rise to the top of 125cc GP racing with the pioneering, expansion-chambered MZ, despite the constraints and oppression of East Germany's communist regime. It recreates his cloak and dagger escape at the 1961 Swedish GP to take his secrets to rivals Suzuki. It also portrays Degner's subsequent championship win for Suzuki in 1962 before his fortunes spiralled downwards after a near-fatal crash in 1965 at Suzuka, ultimately leading to his early death in Tenerife in 1983, aged just 51.

Based not on MCN contributor Mat Oxley's well-known book version, *Stealing Speed*, the film instead comes from a collaboration with Team Suzuki author Ray Battersby, whose own book on the story is nearing publication.

It features exclusive interviews with those involved or present at the time including the late Murray Walker (his last), Jimmy Matsumiya – the Suzuki team manager who organized Degner's escape, Degner's son Olaf, and many more. It also includes extensive, dramatised reconstructions using historic bikes from the Sammy Miller Museum, Goodwood race circuit and even a reconstruction of the MZ racing team's workshop.

Ten years in the making, the film is the work of director **Justin Stokes**, a schoolfriend of Matsumiya's son, and producer Mike Wells. *Missile from the East* premiered on Sky Documentaries on Saturday, and is now available on demand.

Seen here at the 1965 Ulster GP, Degner has been an enigma



'It took three years to get the files the Stasi had on Degner'

Stokes and Wells told MCN how it all came about.

Stokes: "The instigation was really meeting Jimmy Matsumiya. I went to school with his son, we met up 15 years later, I mentioned I'd been looking into the story and went to meet Jimmy. It was a brilliant experience because he's a larger than life character, loves to tell a story and is very vivid with his descriptions. When I got back and played Mike the recording we just thought it could be a great documentary."

Wells: "Another key relationship was with Ray Battersby. We discussed the project with Ray over a number of years and it became clear he had an equal interest in this particular part of the Suzuki story. Ray's research is absolutely spot-on. We formed a collaboration and ended up optioning the manuscript Ray has written."

"Mat Oxley's book (*Stealing Speed*) was one of the original books we read on the subject. We talked to Mat and there was definitely a will to collaborate. But I think Mat's particular focus is very much from a motorsport perspective. Our view on the story is that the background is motor racing but fundamentally this is a story about an individual, so we agreed that we're on slightly different paths, hence the relationship with Ray was a stronger for us."

The biggest challenges?

Stokes: "Firstly, getting to 'know' Degner – simply because he's not as well documented as he would be today. It's not like with that recent F1 film *Senna* where there's an almost endless archive available. It was a real struggle. We went to all the

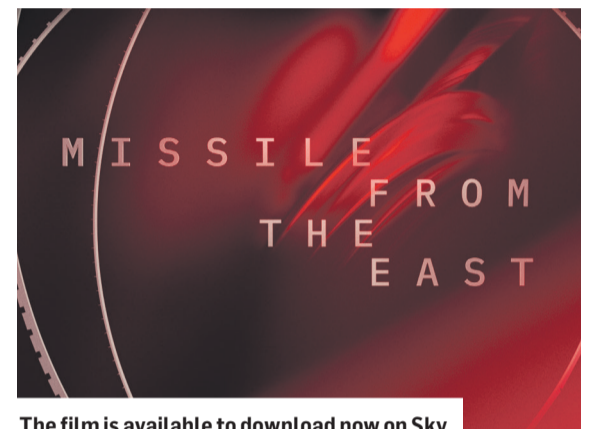
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Actor James G Nunn recreates Degner's Monza victory



The docu-drama explores Degner's extraordinary life



The film is available to download now on Sky



Action sequences are recreated at Goodwood Circuit



Degner suffered serious burns at the Japanese GP



Life behind the Iron Curtain was harsh

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MZ's workshops were meticulously recreated



Stokes and Wells examine archive material

'Speaking to Degner's son opened up the film ending'

normal places but exhausted that quite quickly. Equally, the Stasi (former East Germany security service) files we got hold of – that took about three years. Everything took a long time because it's buried information. Even getting hold of Olaf Degner was tricky. That took five years because he's someone who doesn't trust people to tell the story. He's had this story told many times and actually just wants to be left alone. Ray is good friends with him, that opened up a connection. We got to know Olaf really well, and that actually changed the whole end of the film. At the end of the film, he tells us about how he found his father and it's a very difficult moment.

"Reconstructing the era was a challenge, too. We were making it during the height of the pandemic so that was tricky, but it was also actually a joy because we had so much imagery and footage of how the MZ workshop looked, right down to the windows and the kind of benches which the bikes are sat on – those are recreated exactly..."

The 'hero' bike, meanwhile is an actual period MZ racer – from Sammy Miller's Museum.

Stokes: "Sammy was absolutely brilliant. We had our Walter Kaaden [MZ's engineering genius] actor next to the bike and you know that the actual Kaaden would have been touching it and putting it together..."

Wells: "That bike has got [Luigi, 3 x 125 world champ] Taveri's signature on it... it's a wonderful thing. It was slightly spine-tingling, actually to have it up on that plinth and lit in our little workshop studio..."

Stokes: "We couldn't start that bike and could only use it as a static so when the actor is in 'Sweden' on the grid he's holding that bike and pushes it to bump start but once he's moving we used a recreated replica, which was a DKW. But also in the background of that gridshot in Sweden we've got more Sammy Miller bikes, including an old Bultaco and an MV."

Wells: "Recreating that period theme was difficult. We were on a very, very limited budget with very limited resources so Justin had to think very carefully about framing and about how to extract the 'essence' of the time without having the opportunity to shoot massive wide shots."

A controversial ending

Stokes: "Olaf really opened up the ending for us, as did Ray Battersby, who had a cassette tape of an interview with Degner from 1980. Apart from one other shortly after the defection it's the only recording with Degner we know about."

"Within it Degner describes some of the defection, what happened in Sweden with the over-revving of the engine [Degner, like Maverick Viñales more recently, was accused of deliberately breaking his engine, supposedly to aid his defection] but he also describes some of the crash which happened at Suzuka which felt like a really emotional part of the story which we needed to include."

"It's an emotional moment but also very important one to understand his psychology. Near the start of the film we talk about Degner's childhood. It was really traumatic. He was fleeing from Poland, managed to get to East Germany in the middle of winter with his mother and his sister, his mother dies from pneumonia but he makes it with his sister to East Germany."

"So he had this really hard upbringing which made him this determined, single-minded person but at the end he also had trouble communicating with the rest of his family which eventually made him very separated and caused him to be on his own in Tenerife."

"He couldn't race any more, tried to start a car hire business but he didn't know how so after a few months let it go. These words are from Olaf. The mystery of it is very much unravelled by Olaf because he told us how he found his father. He was sent by his mother because

everyone was concerned about his dad. So Olaf went to Tenerife. That was a moment that I thought was very, very important."

"But then we 'lift' the back end of the film again with a summary from Murray Walker who talks about what Degner did to the motorcycle industry, how he changed things."

Wells: "We've tried to keep away from sensationalism. Some aspects of Degner's story have been sensationalised and the inclusion of Olaf has given it a very personal slant. Olaf's testimony really helped us see that we needed to tell the full picture. After his extraordinary racing career and extraordinary effort to get his family out of East Germany, there's no doubt that Degner was also a slightly tragic figure. I hope people will see we've tried to present the truth as we found it and as Ray helped us unpick, and hopefully people will feel that they understand Degner a little better as an individual, let alone a champion rider." **MCN**



'Working at the height of the pandemic was a challenge'

Covid-19 made life hard but the team pulled out the stops



Shooting race footage for the docu-drama



Actor James G Nunn on set as Ernst Degner



The team used numerous period race bikes from Sammy Miller's collection

WHO WAS ERNST DEGNER?



Ernst Degner (in leathers) with the MZ team

'He fled with MZ's tech know-how'

Ernst Degner was the star rider of the early 1960s East German MZ racing team, then world leaders in two-stroke technology, who defected to the West in 1961, taking his secrets to Suzuki with whom he won the 1962 50cc world championship. Tragedy, however, followed. He received horrific burns at the 1963 Japanese GP and, although winning three more GPs, retired through injury at the end of 1966.

Born in 1931 in Upper Silesia (now Poland), Degner's father died at the end of WWII then, with his sister and mother, he fled to Luckau, his mother dying shortly after.

A capable engineer, Degner began racing in 1952, then, after coming second in the 1955 East German championship, was signed by Walter Kaaden, manager of the state-sponsored MZ team.

In the late 1950s Kaaden significantly improved two-

stroke performance with expansion chambers and other developments. After dominating the 1957 125cc national series, MZ and Degner entered the world championship, winning their first GP in 1959 before coming third in the 1960 championship.

By 1961, however, having witnessed western riders' lifestyles and suffering constant surveillance by the Stasi, Degner decided to defect, encouraged by Suzuki in return for MZ technical know-how.

Degner fled that year's Swedish GP while his family escaped into West Germany.

Later, his racing over, Degner's life spiralled. He became addicted to painkillers, his marriage collapsed and he moved to Tenerife to start a failed car hire business. His death in 1983 aged 51 is the stuff of conspiracy theories but is recorded as a heart attack.



Riding for his new team Suzuki at the 1962 West German GP