

Lisle, Illinois

8/25/97 0430 --- The Iron

At 0330 this morning I am walking around the Hilton's parking lot, smoking a cigarette, and nipping on a nicely-iced Bailey's from time to time. This is my pre-flight inspection of the weapons to be used in the 1997 Iron Butt Rally (IBR). Arrayed before me in the dim light of a waning moon and hotel's crime lights are four score of the sorts of motorcycles that most bikers would die for.

I do not intend the pun about motorcycles versus life. Of the riders sleeping tonight as I review their bikes, there is not one among them who believes that he (or she) might not live to see the conclusion of this event. That is because motorcyclists are the most optimistic sorts of people one could meet. They need to be in the face of crushing statistical data that proves not one in four of the riders today will make it out of the parking lot in one piece. Yet they will soon sally forth, smiling and confident, on a ride that many would consider terminally daunting. They trust these machines not to kill them.

There is decent reason for that optimism. If you like transcendent focus, you should see these bikes. In this parking lot I am at the apex of the designer's and machinist's art, motorcycles which laugh at the feebleness of their own grandfathers. Just over a year ago, in an article that commented on the brilliance of one of BMW's new two-wheeled creations, I suggested that the mechanical advances of motorcycles in the past thirty years had outpaced the development of every other technology except that of clocks, computers, and cameras. I stand by that even now, especially when I see what is resting in this lot tonight.

Since these riders can routinely hang onto their bikes until the gas runs out --- hence the name "Iron Butt," duh --- they like big gas tanks, metastatic versions or their forefathers. Morris Kruemcke, on the short list of favorites in this rally, can carry 39 gallons on his Gold Wing and has a documented straight-line run of over 1,200 miles without his feet hitting the ground. He solved the rest stop problem with a drain tube. And besides, with enough gasoline on board to incinerate Dresden all over again, he has more to worry about than where to take a pee. As someone pointed out during the rider's meeting, if you're going to work on Morris' bike, you really should be wearing gloves.

But if the Iron Butt was about nothing more than measuring the guy or gal with the biggest gas tank and hardest ass, we could do that in the hotel parking lot with a volumetric tub and a hammer. The rally restricts on-board gas capacity to not more than eleven gallons and reserves the right to impound finishing motorcycles to check for compliance. To date there has been no minimal requirement for butt hardness, something that tends to be self-revealing over the course of eleven days and five checkpoints.

The iron sits, waiting. They're in beautiful shape. When this grueling trial is through, most of the bikes will still be in better shape than their owners.

1045 - The Butts Mike Kneebone is going to hand out the last section of route information in five minutes. Seventy-eight riders, upon receiving that envelope, will be free to depart at any time after 1100. They then have thirty hours to reach Gorham, Maine just west of Portland. For each rider there seems to be three or four well-wishers. The parking lot is packed. The video crew is grabbing final interviews. Local reporters scurry for last moment quotable quotes. Kneebone alone seems unpreturbed by the almost palpable tension surrounding him. Yet I may be the happiest person here, content in the

knowledge that I don't have to compete in this brain-bruising rally. Sometimes it really is the little things in life that count, even negatively.

"Number one!" Kneebone yells.

Rider #1 edges through the crowd. He's Gary Eagan, the winner of the '95 Butt following the disqualifications of Tom Loegering and Eddie James. That he is here at all is surprising. That he is actually competing is unbelievable. Fifteen months ago he had a horrific crash. When I heard about the extent of the injuries, I predicted he'd be lucky ever to sit on a bike again, much less ride one.

"Number two!"

Van Singley, my BMW instructor at the American Motorcycle Institute, steps up with his usual big smile. He's a rookie with more than a million motorcycle miles behind him, sponsored by Motorcycle Consumer News magazine, and riding an F650ST, a bike provided by BMW of North America. And if along the way the bike should be brazen enough to stop working, Van is capable of tearing it down to its atomic components and straightening out its problems with his bare hands. Some rookie, huh?

The list goes on. Fran Crane, a co-holder (with Kneebone) of the record for the shortest time through the lower 48 states and the only rider here whose picture is in the American Motorcyclist Association's museum; Marty Jones, a DEA agent who will win this event before his career is through; '91 IBR winner Ron Major; the hard-riding Kruemcke with more than 100 thousand-mile days in his log book; the chastened and uncharacteristically somber Eddie James; Ron Ayres, author of a book detailing his trials and tribulations on the '95 rally; Asa McFadden, who once rode from Key West to Prudhoe Bay, Alaska in less than seven days; Canadians Herb Anderson, Horst Haak, and Peter Hoogeveen. A win by any of these riding animals would shock no one

And if they're not riding in the event, they're working on it --- '86 IBR winner Ross Copas is waiting at a bonus stop in Ontario, Dave McQueeney in southern California, and four-time IBR finisher Gregg Smith in Florida. You can't swing a cat in this crowd without hitting a legend.

At 1100 CDT precisely the starting flag dropped. Just one rider, Ken Hatton, was sitting at the line, staring fixedly in front of him, a picture of impatience. He holds the record, under 42 hours, for the fastest time from New York to San Francisco. As soon as the starter nodded, Hatton's Kawasaki ZX-11 shot out of the box. There are three basic routes to Maine; it is almost a certainty that Hatton will be taking the hardest one.

That's what they do best, these people. They don't look back.

Bob Higdon