

Ely, Nevada
9/14/99 - Iron Butt
Epilog

Antoine de St. Exupery's novelette, "The Little Prince," is usually found in the children's section of bookstores. Like most good children's stories, of course, the tale of the diminutive visitor from asteroid B612 is really an allegory for adults. It is a story about life and death and letting go.

St. Exupery knew those subjects first-hand. He had been one of the first French aviators, had flown mail routes through the Andes in the 1930s, and had crashed in the Sahara during an air race from Paris to Saigon. He seemed able to survive anything. But on a routine reconnaissance flight in northern France during World War II, he disappeared, as they say, without a trace.

I once knew a woman from St. Exupery's asteroid B612. She was a motorcyclist, a very fast and efficient motorcyclist, and she could stay on her bike for so long that it seemed as if she and the machine had bonded together. One day we rode together for about fifty yards. That's when I figured out that she wasn't from around here.

It was at a CLASS session at the Willow Springs race track. I had jumped into the sub-novice "B" group and was plowing around the course on my K75 at speeds that were slow even by sub-novice standards. But I was learning. Even the downhill, off-camber, left-hand corner that had been designed by the devil himself was succumbing to my iron will.

By the middle of the day, I was hammering through there at speeds well in excess of eighteen miles-per-hour. As I approached the corner for perhaps the 30th time, I slung the bike over to a frightening angle of maybe ten degrees off vertical, geared down, cranked up the throttle to 2,500 rpm, clamped both hands on the grips, and hung on for dear life. At that moment my eyes were blurred, naturally, but I still could see a rider coming around the outside of that hellish corner at an unbelievable speed, pointing at me with a left thumb up in the air and grinning. In a couple of moments the bike and rider had disappeared, as they say, without a trace.

Kennewick Checkpoint - 1999 IBR

I am not easily impressed, but that particular feat stepped me back so much that I came into the pits and made an inquiry about the little guy in the gray leathers on the K-bike. I was told that the little guy was Fran Crane and that she was one of the CLASS instructors. That was the only time I ever saw her ride, those fifty yards. It was enough. It told me that she wasn't from around here. But, hell, everybody knew that.

If it was a motorcycle endurance competition, at one time or another Fran held the record. The quickest time touching each of the 48 states? In 1988 she and Mike Kneebone did it in 6.6 days, shattering the old record by more than four days and establishing a new one that would stand for ten years. Forty-eight hours later, she went back home across the U.S. in record time from New York to San Francisco. When the American Motorcyclist Association's museum did a tribute to women in motorcycling some years ago, the rider from asteroid B612 was a significant part of the exhibition.

Now she has gone, the target of a perverse concatenation of bad luck. With 96% of the Iron Butt Rally behind her and only minutes after filling the bike's tank, she mysteriously lost control of the motorcycle

on an interstate highway. A helmet that should not fail failed, but she was otherwise injured only slightly. She was taken to a modern, reputable hospital suffering from nothing more critical than a concussion. She began to recover, but then was mistakenly administered a drug that ended her life. At any point the fracture of a single link in that inexorable chain of circumstances would today have Fran alive and well. But nothing intervened. When people speak of cruel fate, this is what they mean.

It is neither surprising nor ironic to me that the airplane which gave St. Exupery's life such meaning and expression was also the instrument of his death. Thus it is with Fran and her motorcycle. No machines that toy with gravity the way airplanes and motorcycles do will ever be safe. Those who love to fly them or ride them appreciate that inchoate risk and accept it for what it is worth. You hope your bet won't be called; but you know that if you fly or ride long enough and fast enough, it likely will be. When that happens, sadness reigns. It is inevitable.

St. Exupery left us his beautiful words and images; Fran has left us her beautiful grace, skill, and spirit. We cannot ask any more of them than that. We are lucky to have known these magnificent people at all, however tangentially and however briefly. In their deaths they have taught us about life.

Along the lonely roads of Nevada at night, you simply cannot believe the light show that the heavens produce. The stars literally are without number. They wink and sputter and rip across the sky joyously. You can almost hear them laughing. There are comets and meteors and space junk, constellations and nebulae and galaxies, and worlds without end.

There are asteroids up there, too. Look for the one called B612. Any child can point it out to you. That one's my favorite. I once knew a person from there.

Bob Higdon