

August 11, 2003
Day 0

The Visitor

Just before the banquet began last evening, the Typhoid Mary of motorcycling, Michael Charles Gasper, rode into the Holiday Inn parking lot. You may know him by one of his aliases: Speedracer, Gary Gonefar, Biff, Bob Ransbottom (an identity theft of a 1995 IBR finisher), The 2K Kid, Psycho Mikey, Brad Beckley, Ray Poisson (a combination of "Rey" [Spanish for "king"] and "Poisson" [French for "fish"], hence "Kingfish"), Chuck LaDeux, and most recently Charles Ladue. No matter what name he's using, this is one dude you don't want to meet.

Gasper's history of lies and sociopathic behavior is so well known in the long-distance motorcycling community that it would actually be comical were it not for the occasional felony conviction. In recent years, however, because of his multiple threats against other riders he has been turned away from every endurance rally of any consequence in North America and permanently banned from participation on the Long Distance Riders e-mail list. Unhappily, and ironically, for Psycho Mikey, riding a bike for endless miles under difficult conditions is one thing that he can actually do with some skill. Now the boys and girls won't play with him anymore.

The drums had banged out the news of Gasper's arrival before he was even off his bike. The police were called because at least three riders at the dinner have keep-away orders against him. He muttered a few epithets and rode off but, like the Energizer Bunny, he'll keep coming back. If he shows up at any of the rally's checkpoints, however, he'll find the state police waiting for him.

It took Mike Kneebone a few minutes to arrange for security guards to patrol the parking lot last night, an unexpected expense that the riders Gasper so desperately wants to associate with will ultimately bear through their entry fees. But soon the drama subsided, rallymaster Lisa Landry strode into the banquet room wearing the executioner's robe that Mike Kneebone had first used in 2001, and the riders quickly resumed their positions of whipped-dog submissiveness.

Bill Shaw's Surprise

Landry was wearing the same ominous shroud when she appeared in the parking lot at 9:40 this morning. Eager motorcyclists immediately clotted around her like white blood cells attacking an infection. They had been told at the riders' meeting the day before that they would be exiting through the south end of the lot. The rallymaster slowly lifted her nose skyward, took in the scent of smoke from forest fires to the west of the city, and concluded upon further reflection that it would be better for riders to use the north exit.

I glanced at rookie Bill Shaw. He has been writing a series of articles for "Motorcycle Consumer News" about preparing both a motorcycle and one's soul for the IBR. A look of uncomprehending pain was creasing his face. His bike was positioned 6' from the sawhorse at the south entrance. One minute earlier he would have been the first bike out of the lot; now the entire field would be lined up ahead of him. I smiled cruelly and thought, "Welcome to the Butt, Bill. Let the mind games begin."

Shaw's loss was Paul and Voni Graves' gain. In a motorcycle popularity contest these two would receive about 112% of the vote. Voni won a BMW Motorcycle Owners of America club mileage contest a few years ago with 73,000 miles in six months. Paul is a former president of the same club. Their bikes were parked at the north end of the lot. As a reward for their quiet willingness to be last out of the gate, they became the first. Rick Rohlf's BMW was third in line. Five minutes before the 10:00 a.m. start, I walked over to him. ""You know what they do with jets that stall on the carrier's flight deck?"" I asked.

""They throw them over the side,"" he answered correctly.

As the Graves began to roll toward the exit moments later, Rohlf punched his starter button. Nothing happened. We threw him over the side. Twenty minutes later all but one of the machines had disappeared into the hazy smoke that still swirled through the city.

The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse

The plan in 1997 was for Mike Kneebone and me to rent a Lincoln and follow the rally around the country, checkpoint to checkpoint, from Chicago back to Chicago. We weren't out of the city limits on the first leg of the event before we realized we had made a monumental mistake. A big road trip on a bike is an adventure; a big road trip in a car is idiocy. I vowed never to be associated with such foolishness again.

It is 3:55 p.m. MDT as I type these words. Somewhere in northeastern Idaho I sit in a van, a Pontiac Montana --- the Spanish word for ""moron"" --- that sways rhythmically from side to side. In another 304,000 oscillations I will be green enough to hang my head out the window and leave lunch on the highway that winds through this beautiful landscape. But there are no windows where I sit in the back of the Moron. That means we will have to stop. No one wants that. Bringing this unwieldy pig to a halt and discharging its passengers could take up to a week.

Why a van? That's what I wonder. Sure, we have doubled the space of the old Lincoln, but we have also doubled the crew: Lisa (rallymaster) and Warren Harhay (rally cinematographer) are now with Mike and me. We have doubled the bladders that need draining, tripled the luggage, and quadrupled the angst. I was told a few days ago that a pool was taking bets on when my fellow travelers would either throw me out of the Moron or strap me onto the luggage rack on its roof.

I don't want to think about that. Instead I try to remember who these horsemen were. Death, disease, famine, and Oprah? I can't do it. Whoever they were, we have channeled them in a Pontiac Moron. I'm seeing shades of green. Just 22,000 more oscillations and . . . well, I don't want to think about that either.

Casualty Report

Two of the five bikes in the Hopeless Class --- motorcycles challenged by age, power, ugly paint, or a combination of the above --- have chalk outlines around them tonight.

At 2:55 this afternoon we received a call that Ken Morton's '82 Honda Silver Wing was having electrical problems north of Idaho Falls. Exactly 90 minutes later we passed him. The roadside temperature was over 100F. We would have stopped but we didn't want to let the cold air out of the Moron. Besides, the tow truck was there.

At 4:39 we learned that Jim Winterer's '81 Yamaha 500cc single, a motor that completed the last IBR, had rolled to a stop at a farm access road near Riggins, Idaho. Diagnosis: Transmission failure. Prognosis: Toe tag. The owner of the property is a BMW MOA member. He knows MOA board member and Iron Butt vet Karol Patzer. Winterer knows Karol, and tonight he has a place to sleep.

Within seven hours of the start two bikes bit the dust. Two hundred fifty-seven hours remain.

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