

Primm, Nevada
August 12, 2003
Day 1

Ernie Pyle And Me

Someone, maybe von Clausewitz, called it the fog of war. Information comes in. It sounds good, but it turns out to be bad. You think it's true, but it's crap. Yesterday morning a woman walked by me in the motel parking lot. Smoke from fires in the mountains west of the city wafted through downtown Missoula. It looked like Los Angeles during the riots. A woman walked by me. "Lolo pass is closed," she said. "I just heard it on the radio."

There are really only two main ways through the Bitterroot Mountains. One is via I-90, which once was a U.S. highway and before that a state highway and before that a wagon trail and before that a trapper's route and before that an Indian path and before that a deer track. In that sense, I suppose, it's fair to say that I-90 was originally mapped out by a jack rabbit.

The other route is by way of U.S. 12. It runs west over Lolo pass toward Lowell, Idaho. On the Montana side is Lolo Hot Springs where in the movie "A River Runs Through It" Norman MacLean's brother was beaten to death in a bar. The real Paul MacLean was actually murdered in Chicago. The fog of poetic license.

The Montana-Idaho border lies at the top of the pass. To the west one of the world's great motorcycle roads begins, a section of uninterrupted curves for 77 continuous miles. At least some of the riders would have taken that road to reach bonuses in central Washington. If Lolo were really closed, they might not have gotten through. At that point, I thought, they might have backtracked to run south on U.S. 93, a highway that has been closed off and on because of fires during much of the past several weeks.

I went inside to the hotel receptionist. She had just been on the telephone with fire and highway officials in Montana and Idaho. Lolo was open. Really? Really. But was it really? Is a radio faster or more accurate than a telephone? Fog, fog.

Sometimes I tell people that I know what Ernie Pyle's life was like. He was a war correspondent in the Pacific during World War II. It is a tough, scary job. Accurate information is rare. Fog is everywhere. People really are out to get you. Ernie was killed by machine gun fire near Okinawa. A nation mourned. Some motorcyclist, angry that I have commented unfavorably on his riding style, will one day rearrange the back of my skull with a brick. The last thing I will see is fog.

How To Get From Montana To Nevada

The first thing a rider must decide when the list of bonus locations is dispensed at the beginning of a leg is the route to be taken to the next checkpoint. Some factors to be considered are the length of the proposed ride, the value of the bonuses, and the kinds of conditions --- principally roads and weather --- likely to be encountered. Additionally, experienced riders know that as the rally progresses, the bonuses invariably increase in value. The vagaries of human emotion also must be recognized and controlled. Conservative riding will trump greed every time.

In the first leg of the 2003 Iron Butt, there were three basic rides that looked appealing: 1) Ride west to Washington, south to the Nevada desert to reel in some easy bonus points, pass up the hard ones (like Bristlecone Pine forest and the charcoal kilns in Death Valley), and then to the checkpoint; 2) Ride south to the Nevada desert, pick up all the difficult bonuses there, and head to the checkpoint; 3) Ride south to the Nevada desert, skip the difficult desert bonuses, and grab the bonuses in downtown Las Vegas and Boulder City. Stay out of the desert as much as possible, especially in the afternoon. Conserve your strength. It only gets harder.

Before this first leg began, the administrators felt that Route #1 was a poor choice because it was much too long for this early in the rally. Route #2 fared little better because some of the desert bonuses would be challenging for even highly-skilled motorcyclists. That left Route #3.

Did the length of the Montana-Washington-Nevada route deter any hot shoes? Not a chance; seven of the top ten riders listed below went that way. Was the weather much of a factor? Bob Ryan and Bob Cox started this morning with the temperature seven degrees above freezing. In the late afternoon they were riding in heat of 114F. Did road conditions affect the ride? The Jungo Road in northern Nevada, as usual, took no prisoners, and the normally hard-pan, dry lake bed of the Black Rock Desert at Gerlach was wet enough in places this morning to trap more than a few bikes. Fortunately, volunteers were able to yank them out. Mark Kiecker, trying desperately to escape the mire, burned the clutch out in his Honda VFR800. He used a piece of a Folger's coffee can to repair the damage and made it to the finish.

When the dust had settled at the scoring table, the guys below were setting the pace. The www.ironbutt.com web site will soon list complete scores, along with the bonuses that each of the 117 starting riders earned:

1. Eric Jewell
2. John O'Keefe
3. Jeff Earls
4. Jim Owen
5. Todd Witte
6. Tom Loftus
7. Manny Sameiro
8. Paul Pelland
9. Jeff Powell
10. Leonard Roy

The Casualties Continue

There are five cell phones, six laptop computers, and two satellite radios in Moron, the van from Hell. Warren Harhay says that the contents are worth more than the vehicle that's carrying them. Cell phones are the worst annoyance; the closer we are to a checkpoint, the more frequently they ring. Sometimes two go off at once. I shudder when even one lights up. No one ever calls with good news.

Yesterday we reported that Ken Morton's beater had crumped due to electrical issues north of Idaho Falls. He revised his diagnosis to blame carburetor gunk. If he's right, we'll move him from the category of In The Toilet to In the Bathroom. It's not anywhere close to On The Podium, of course, and it may not sound like much of an improvement to you, but Morton will take it.

Homer Krout called late yesterday afternoon. His Harley had overheated in a 25-mile traffic jam north of Ogden, Utah. He was unable to restart it. Fearing a burned out something or other, he was towed into town. The mechanics found nothing fried. Krout is back in the hunt.

Speaking of fire, Dennis ("Sparky") Kessler saw enough of it this morning to last him a lifetime. He and Paul Taylor had just bagged the large bonus in the Ancient Bristlecone Pine Forest, the home of some of the oldest living things on Earth. Kessler suddenly noticed that both he and his Aprilia Capo Nord were on fire. He jumped away from the flaming machine and rolled in the dirt to extinguish himself. The bike's tank then exploded. A moment later his four-gallon fuel cell also erupted. A ball of blistering, stinking, black smoke shot high into the air. Could Kessler's day possibly get any worse?

Yes. Before he could regain his footing, flames from the bike started a brush fire. Think of it: For 4,500 years those aged trees have withstood everything the planet could throw at them --- rain, hail, lightning, snow, and sandstorms. Then an Iron Butt rider shows up on his blazing steed. The horror, the horror.

Fortunately for everyone, the fires were quickly controlled. Dennis headed for Los Angeles in a rental car to borrow a bike and rejoin the rally. He was time-barred at the checkpoint tonight, lost all the points he had accumulated during the first leg (including the points in the bristlecone forest), and will be barred from chasing any bonus points on the next leg. Then it gets worse: Changing machines in mid-rally invokes a 10,000-point penalty. When Dennis arrives at the second checkpoint in Florida in a few days, his total score will be -10,000. It is the rare and nightmarish triple crown of Iron Butt disasters. And it's no wonder those old trees have lived so long; they always get the last laugh.

Other stories from the day weren't nearly so humorous. Dan Lowery, who had retreated to Wyoming before the rally started to pick up a repaired bike, managed to return to Missoula, hours behind the other riders, only to develop an intractable clutch problem. That was the stake through his BMW's heart. A forest rat --- you may know these vile animals as "deer" --- jumped in front of Russell Stephan near the Oregon-Nevada border early this morning. The front end of the Honda was demolished; Russell, shaken, didn't have a scratch. Finally, Patrick Jacobson's Harley sidecar rig was another to be hammered by the Black Rock Desert. His suspension system may have suffered damage that cannot easily be repaired in time for him to continue.

But at least he didn't burn down anything.

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