

In a Van Named "Moron" in a Louisiana Swamp in the Middle of the Night
August 14, 2003
Day 3

The Spider's Web

As noted yesterday, the 110 riders who survived the desert's oppressive heat to arrive at the first checkpoint in southern Nevada had a serious choice to make for the following leg: If they wanted to win this rally, they would take the red route package. If they wanted simply to finish with a gold, silver, or bronze medal, they would take the blue route. There was one other problem: They weren't permitted to see either package of bonuses before making a choice. Mike Kneebone took questions, but it all came down to asking yourself whether you wanted to win or not. When the dark muttering subsided, 30% of the field was seeing red and the rest were turning blue.

With a pack now divided, most of the blues headed to Mt. Evans (west of Denver, Colorado), the highest paved road in North America, and then would complete a downward arc to the southeast and the checkpoint in Lake City, Florida. A few of the blues, mostly those in the Hopeless Class of underpowered bike or rider, would aim straight for the East Coast, where a tropical storm in the Gulf of Mexico is wobbling around, not sure where to strike next.

For the red group, life was about to become more intricate still. Between 6:00 and 9:00 this morning all but a few of the 33 reds met legendary motorcyclist Dave Barr at a Korean war memorial northeast of Bakersfield, California. Years ago Barr lost both legs to an Angolan land mine. That slowed down, but hardly stopped, his big rides. First he rode his Harley around the world, then he crossed the width of Europe and Russia with a sidecar in the middle of winter. Meeting someone like Barr would be worth it for even negative bonus points.

From there the group headed for the leg's largest bonus, "Kiecker's Nightmare," a serpentine, bumpy road that crawls up into the Sierras and dead ends at Mono Hot Springs. The final 13 miles are single lane with rumors of guard rails. Don't miss a corner or you and the bike will reach terminal velocity long before you impale yourselves on the rocks below. On the 2001 IBR, after reaching the Springs, Mark Kiecker called the rallymaster's cell phone and left this impression of the trip: "Kneebone, you suck."

The last worthwhile bonus of the day required showing up at Pat Widder's vacation house in Lake Isabella between 6:00 and 9:00 p.m. Having worn out their spirits in the Sierras and their tires in the scorching heat of the San Joaquin valley, all 33 members of the red brigade found themselves at day's end not eight miles from where they had met Dave Barr that morning. This perfectly illustrates the Iron Butt water torture: Wander around for the entire day only to realize as the sun goes down that you have not advanced so much as one inch toward your goal in Florida.

But was the goal still Florida? At Widder's house the reds were handed another set of route instructions. The choices in that package --- pick just one --- were:

- 1) Aim due east for the Florida checkpoint and congratulate yourself for a good day's work. You'll be ahead of all the blue riders, but this route will not win the rally.

2) Show up at Ira Agins' house in Santa Fe, New Mexico on the evening of Thursday, August 14 and receive still another set of route instructions. Those will tell you to: a) Continue on to Florida as if nothing had happened, in which case you'll still be ahead of the blues but will have no chance to win the rally; or b) Point your motorcycle north for a couple of bonuses near Anchorage, Alaska and then, skipping the checkpoints in Florida and Maine, return directly to the finish in Missoula. This route is geared for those who hate the traffic, politics, and power outages of the East Coast. Successfully completing this ride will beat the blue guys but it won't win the rally. Still, if I were an entrant this year, I might take this route just to minimize the chances of running into Hillary Clinton.

3) Visit Goose Bay, Labrador. The ride to there from Pat Widder's front door is just over 4,000 miles, the last 550 of which run over bad dirt. Did I mention that Goose Bay is also at the end of a dead end road? Add another 550 miles of ugly dirt for your retreat. In heavy rain, and there's always heavy rain at the latitude of Hudson Bay, the road can be impassable. This route isn't worth quite as much as option #4, but it's about 300 miles shorter. Take this ride and two things will happen: 1) You can legitimately skip showing up at the Florida checkpoint and 2) You will be behind any of the riders who have succeeded in completing the fourth, and mercifully last, route.

4) Take a ride to Bella Coola, British Columbia. "Bella Coola" is an Eskimo phrase meaning "Please stop beating me with that caribou horn." If you are a crow in Vancouver, Bella Coola is just 266 flight miles to the northwest. The distance by road exceeds 600 miles. Because of road construction near the destination, there may be delays of up to four hours. Like option #3, if you take this route, you are permitted to skip the Florida checkpoint. But, and that's a big "but," survive the trip, avoid the caribou horns, make it to Maine on time, and you'll be leading the 2003 Iron Butt Rally with just one leg remaining.

Fun, huh? At Primm the field was divided into potential winners and everyone else. At Widder's the winners were further divided further still. Tonight the Butts are crawling around a dozen routes like spiders in a web. The strands cover the four corners of North America, but eventually they will all lead back to the center of the web, Missoula, where the two biggest spiders of all --- Landry and Kneebone --- await.

The Falling, the Fallen, and the Revived

Alan LeDuc and Jack Tollett, enormously popular riders from Indiana and Texas, experienced rally-ending accidents during the first leg. Alan encountered an especially bad section of the notorious Jungo Road in Nevada and went down. Jack is believed to have been the victim of a catastrophic rear tire failure. Both were banged up and lost some cosmetic points for their experiences but are expected to make quick recoveries.

A truck blew a tire in front of Bill Shaw, causing a three-vehicle crash in Phoenix, Arizona. In a couple of seconds his gorgeous BMW K1200LT rearranged itself into the world's largest paperweight. Unable to find a replacement ride, he has been forced to withdraw.

BMW's relentless drive to shut down dealerships in North America in the face of a free fall in sales came home to roost with Jeff Powell when the charging system in his R1100RT blew up in Needles, California. Before the shop in Las Vegas was shut down, that would have been the closest dealer, a 114-mile haul.

Now he faced a tow of twice that distance either to Pomona, California or to Phoenix. Cost: A mere \$700, plus whatever it takes to fix the machine.

A trail of dripping oil from a truck brought down Rob Nye, the Yankee Beemers' favorite son, in Moab, Utah. A truck's oil filter apparently had not been tightened properly by a mechanic during an oil change. Nye got a lift to a welder who repaired the shaved-down valve cover. In his last report, Nye said that he was up and over Mt. Evans and heading for Florida.

Bob Higdon

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