

The 2013 Iron Butt Rally: Day 0 (Part I)

Howard's End

The day was young, but for Howard it was quickly heading toward the dumper. When you have the man who wrote the rules about auxiliary fuel cells (Tom Austin), the chief of technical inspection (Dale Wilson), the rallymaster (Lisa Landry), and one of Wilson's most aggressive assistants (John Harrison) all standing around your bike and staring at your aux tank, that constitutes a bad day for you almost by definition. Only Landry has her Gioconda smile working, for she knows that Howard's problem for once isn't going to be her problem.



(L-R: Howard Entman, Tom Austin, Dale Wilson, Lisa Landry, and John Harrison)

No, Howard's problem was irritable bowel syndrome, a condition that he is uniquely prepared by education, training, and experience to treat inasmuch as he is known to most of humanity not as "Howard" but as "Dr. Entman," a board-certified physician and a fellow of all sorts of royal, academic, and occult societies. The proximate cause of his IBS was, of course, the motorcycle's

accessory gas tank. I use the word “accessory” advisedly, for the tank is something so de rigueur in the long-distance riding community as to be almost a requirement for membership. When properly mounted to a rider’s bike, it can cut in half the number of fuel stops needed during a rally. But therein lay Howard’s difficulty: was the aux tank properly mounted?

Harrison was the first rally official to view the cell. It sat on the passenger seat, strapped in position, trying to appear inoffensive. “No good,” Harrison declared. “It’s not secure.” At this juncture Howard’s bedside manner deserted him. He evidently forgot that John was not a second-year medical student in need of a lecture on standards of care. Contempt of rally volunteers is the sin that has no name; commit it and you could be on your way home without passing Go.

John called for backup. Dale Wilson appeared, looking as if he’d just finished ingesting his second rookie of the day. Howard surged ahead. “Dale, you yourself approved this very cell two years ago.” Wilson snorted. “Are you kidding me? That was a different bike, and I told you then that this was a lame setup and you needed to get all your shit in one sock. As John told you, it still isn’t.”

Things have spiraled out of control now, but Howard does not heed the small craft warnings. He sends out an appeal to Mrs. Landry. She, now in charge of her sixth Iron Butt Rally, is not known for cutting her staff off at the knees. Assessing Howard’s mood as intractable and his position as defenseless, Lisa quickly adjudicates the plea with a dismissive wave of the back of her hand.

But Howard is breathing still, however faintly, so Wilson calls for Tom Austin to administer a short, sharp shock to the back of the physician’s neck. Tom is practiced in that ninja art. He customarily deals with cases of IBS by making them worse. He told Howard to fix the rig.

All bridges burned and all routes of retreat by now saturated with land mines, Howard began to secure the damned cell to the damned bike with sutures, butterfly bandages, orthopedic epoxies, tourniquets, unguents, and magic potions. After dinner I saw him huddled with Mike Kneebone, but only Mike was talking. The day evidently wasn’t ending much better for the good doctor than it had begun.

Bumps in the road there will be in the next two weeks, for riders and staff alike. Better to sort things out now while everyone is fresh than to deal with worse storms later when everyone is sinking like a bag of hammers. After all, to paraphrase Hamlet, considering the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to in an Iron Butt Rally, a case of irritable bowel syndrome is hardly the end of the world. I’m guessing that in a week or so a round of IBS might even come as welcome relief.

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