

TWO TRIUMPHS TO GO, PLEASE...

BY John Shuck

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This adventure first had its initial spark when I was reading about the success of the Harley Davidson team in the first (1984) One Lap of America Rally. I then conceived that we could land a corporate sponsor for the 1985 event because we could attract a lot of attention with a Triumph. No one had expected a Triumph to run over 11,000 miles without self destructing, right? More the reason to try it.

Our participation in the One Lap was rejected for a couple of reasons. First, a change in the rules disallowed a back-up vehicle as our Harley friends had used. Second, the event was changed to run in the cold month of April. During this period, however, another organizer had started a rally of this type specifically designed for motorcycles. It was named appropriately enough, the "Iron Butt". Ten riders entered in the '84 running and all had finished. Obviously this sort of event attracts only those that know, not think, but know what they're doing.

The Iron Butt is an 8,600 mile rally that goes around the circumference of the United States, sort of like the One Lap of America except that we do on motorcycles instead of the cushy confines of a car. There are checkpoints along the way, to make sure nobody takes a shortcut, in such places as Gorham, Maine; Eau Claire, Wisconsin; Seattle, Washington; Costa Mesa, California, Muskogee, Oklahoma; Jacksonville, Florida and then back to the starting line at Montgomeryville, a suburb of Philadelphia. It takes, as we found, an incredible amount of physical endurance, savvy and determination.

According to the rules of the event, set up by organizer, Gary Patterson, each of the participants (sixteen people entered the event including myself) is allowed a 2 hour window at each of the

checkpoints, plus the opportunity to earn extra points by going to bonus cities that were out of the main route of travel. At each bonus city, there is a predetermined item particular to that city that must be retrieved to prove that you were there. These items ranged from toll-booth receipts at out of the way bridges, decals from accessory manufactures, to a souvenir for the Grand Canyon; postcards, not allowed. We each cheerfully paid the \$750 entry fee for the privilege of flogging ourselves around the entire country with the chance of winning the \$4500 winner's purse, determined by the amount of entries. Fifty dollars went to the Muscular Dystrophy Association (I think it should be mentioned here, which John humbly "forgot" to point out that he and his wife Suzie managed to raise over \$1500 in M.D. pledges themselves. Fellow "Butt" rider Ross Copas and Jim Plunkett each raised nearly a grand, with Malcolm Forbes donating \$1000 in the rally's name..Bravo!..Editor)

The story of the Iron Butt Triumphs actually begins with my entry in the '85 event. I had entered then riding a 1973 Triumph Trident that I bought for \$200 and brought home in 6 dry wall buckets and a rolling frame.



My sponsorship quest continued without success. Most replies were, "You're going to ride a Triumph how far?" I was getting fed up with constant British bike and Lucas jokes. My enthusiasm was gaining momentum.

My sister-in-law was planning a trip to the U.K so we ordered some parts from a London dealer Richard Hacker. The main item was a new crankshaft that my sister-in-law brought home in her bags. I should mention that I forget to tell her how much the "few parts" were going to weigh. She wasn't too upset. We now considered her a sponsor. Assembly of the Triumph was going along nicely until I noticed a long Allen headed bolt missing from the timing side of the engine. A trip to the local hardware supplier revealed that a new one could be had..for \$16.00! They comforted us with the knowledge that if it had been ¼ inch longer it would have been \$50.

Some of my requirements for the Trident were quite simple. It had to be “all-British”, it could not leak a drop of oil, and it had to disprove all those stupid jokes. Not much to ask, right?

The day finally arrived when everything was back together, all the new parts and hardware throughout the engine. It fired right up on the second kick, but I got a sick feeling in my gut when the oil pressure light on the headlamp glowed with the engine running. A quick check indicated that minimal flow was returning to the oil tank and no oil at all was going to the top end. After 3 hours of soul-searching and shop manual reading, we decided that there was nothing left to do but to yank the engine back out of the pristine bike and tear it down again.

Complete disassembly revealed that the new crank was shipped without the oilway being plugged. 3 new Allen screws and a lot of busted knuckles later, we had it back together. It ran perfectly and supplied good oil pressure both on supply and return. Then on the day of the event, the oil light came back on..Agghh! Upon investigation, I was relieved to find that yes, oil was pumping just fine; but the pouring rain had shirtd out the sending unit. I decided to ignore it throughout the trip, it flashed on and off intermittently..the “Prince of Darkness” trying to thwart our noble plans??

Once underway, everything was going well, until I received word at a checkpoint that my father was very ill. I immediately dropped out of the event, but vowed to return in '86. My dad made it though OK by the way.

My partner Gary Johnson, owner of Suburban Cycles a Triumph dealer in Shelton, Connecticut wanted to ride the '86 event in a bad way. (I suppose some would say that he picked just about the worst way). He had seen me ride off into the distance the year before, so inspired; he purchased a 1979 Triumph T140E 750 twin with 1,500 miles on it.

This is the European version with the low bars and a big tank, to which he added a Trident oil cooler and a BSA B50 oil filter. Norman Hyde rear sets and an '82 seat were added for long distance comfort, and we relocated the rear brake disc caliper from its vernable position below, to a safer and better looking position above the rotor. The alternator and the ignition remained stock, but a dual spark set-up was added. Although the twin started life as a Bonneville with a simple switch, it was converted to a single-carb Tiger for ease of running and better fuel economy. The finishing touches were BSA Gold Star style exhaust pipes with Bub mufflers, which looked great and just cleared his Clubman Racing café fairing.

For 1986, my Trident received an engine balance job and a conversion from the stock drum to a single disc rear brake. This caliper was also mounted overhead. Norman Hyde rear sets were bolted up, while aluminum rims and stainless spokes replaced the stock steel rims. The Lucas 3-phase alternator and Lucan Rita breakerless ignition were retained from last year, as were the stock pipes, mufflers and the Clubman fairing.

Both bikes were painted and set-up to appear as almost identical team mates. We wanted the bikes to look as “British” as possible, and we wanted to prove the stock equipment could go the distance. We were determined to put an end to all the Lucas jokes, so we were sure to use all Lucas electrical parts

even bulbs. Using all British parts meant that no Mikuni carbs or other “foreign” stuff would be considered. This proved to be an asset instead of the liability that many predicted because these parts are simple and easy to repair. Both motorcycles were equipped with radar detectors and CB radios. These proved invaluable and they paid for themselves the first day out, though they would not end up providing the total protection from The Law we had hoped, which I’ll explain later.



The start of the '86 Iron Butt was flagged off by Malcolm Forbes, the wealthy publisher of Forbes magazine, and an avid motorcycle fan. He told me that his son's first bike was a Trident, and that if anyone was to make it, he was pulling the most for me. Most of the starters were on Gold Wings, BMW's, Yamaha Ventures and a Harley named the Enola Gay II. (you history buff will remember that the Enola Gay was the name of the bomber that dropped the bomb on Hiroshima...Editor). All sixteen of us started on a warm Tuesday morning. One of the starting riders was a nice parking meter patrol lady named Fran Crane from California on her BMW K100. So much for the “Iron Man” image. Iron Person perhaps?

Only one mile out, my magnetic pickup leads decided to ground out. It was about 85 degrees, and there I was, standing by the roadside in leathers and full coverage helmets, unloading bags, finding tools, and getting off to a very dubious start. Competitors rolled by, probably muttering to themselves, “Well that Triumph went further than I expected..almost a full mile”. This happened four times during the rally till we finally figured out that it was the leads grounding. All along, the Lucas amplifier kept on ticking.

Knowing that we had a lot of ground to cover between each of the seven checkpoints, and only two hours leeway, "Team Triumph" had decided from the beginning to run the event from checkpoint to checkpoint, not worrying about the ones further down the line until their turn, or risking the extra mileage to garner those bonus points. We found that dealing with basically 1950's technology, it was very hard to keep the pace. The hot set-up for this run is a water cooled shaft drive bike that would run 350 miles on a tank of gas at 70-80 mph. We could run 70-80 mph, but our range was limited to 125 miles due to our smaller fuel tanks. We had to set the bikes up with tall gear ratios to keep the rpms down, and at 80 mph, both bikes were turning about 5000 rpm. My Trident, with a load; would top out at 105 mph, which wasn't too bad considering I weigh in at 225 and our gear added another 100 lbs.

As we rolled towards Maine, we got sort of lost north of New York City, and Gary and I were separated. This is only 20 miles from my home, but Gary missed a turn. While he was waiting patiently near the side of the road for me to come by, a guy in a Nissan 300ZX cut off a guy in an LTD. The ZX did a 360 and in turn ripped the front bumper off the big Ford. While Gary was standing there in disbelief, the ZX went one way and the bumper went the other and landed about 20ft from Gary. Welcome to New York City.

Feeling a bit vulnerable in that spot, Gary rode about a mile up the road and tried to figure out where he was. I was up the road about three miles further. While I was wondering where Gary might be, a motorist stopped next to me and said, "there's a guy dressed just like you back about three miles." I turned around and met up with Gary. The next day, we caught up with Mike Kneebone on his Venture. Seems he made a 400-mile wrong turn and had done his first 1400 mile day. Gary and I just looked at each other in disbelief.

We wanted oil consumption to be a minor consideration during the trip, so we used special Total Seal piston rings. These use a two-piece gapless second ring. Aided by good tight bronze valve guides, our consumption was kept down to a quart every 1,000 miles. We did lose a little oil out the vent pipes, but there weren't any jokes about Triumphs marking their spots.

By the second day, we were really enjoying the ride. Our first checkpoint in Maine was the scene of a great reception from 300 spectators. They even had home-made cookies prepared for us. We had to eat quickly, though because at the end of the two-hour window, we had to hit the road again.

On this part of the journey, we got lots of practice negotiating toll booths. We have money holders on our handlebars and as we would pull up to the tolls one at a time, we'd toss a quarter and a dime in the chute, drop into gear and roll; all without stopping. Coming into Eau Claire, the second stop, we discovered a detour off the freeway and onto a two-lane road. The folks here really like to motor, we found, as they were running 80 miles per hour. We cranked the Triumphs up to 100 mph and had a ball.

At the second checkpoint, we were down to 15 riders. The Harley had exploded a rear cylinder at 75 mph. All that was left was the pushrod tube and the exhaust pipe. This was rider Nick Nichols' second attempt at the Iron Butt, and both times his ride ended during the third day. We would all miss him. Things were getting a little crazy for Team Triumph. It was getting to the point that we weren't happy unless we were lying down flat on the tank going 80.

That night, Gary returned to his bike after a personal pit stop, and it had no compression. The clutch wasn't slipping, and the kicker was OK. After about 5 minutes of head scratching (ours not the bike's) the bike started right up..Huh??

Later we stopped at another rest stop for a little sleep. It was so cold that we slept in the bathrooms sitting on the "thrones". Gary was so cold that he kept his leathers and helmet on and he was resting his head against the door of the stall. I was awaked by someone screaming, but it was only a guy who thought Gary was a dead Martian. He had fallen on the floor when the guy opened the door to the stall.

Next morning, we were breezing though North Dakota and got pulled over for speeding. Our first ticket of the trip...not bad considering. The officer was real nice about it though. He told us about his Harley, gave us some maps and apologized for holding us up. Coming into the third check in Seattle was tough. 150 miles out, the wind was blowing so hard that my partner looked as if he was riding at a 30 degree angle. We hit the check 27 minutes late, but we were still within the two-hour limit. The entire crowd gathered gave us a standing ovation. Most of the competitors realized how difficult it was to ride British bikes that distance, and none could believe that we were still in the running. Some of the other riders gave us puzzled looks as we changed our oil and filters in the parking lot in the pouring rain. They just didn't understand what it took to ride a British bike.

Most of the people we met on the road had memories of British bikes. When we mentioned that we were doing, the folks would ask, "You're doing what on a Triumph?" There were others who had never seen a Triumph, much less heard those old pushrods ticking. The organizers had decided at the start of the rally to put hospital-type wrist bands on us. This got some unusual looks in restaurants. When we tried to explain, people would automatically take a step backward. We looked like escaped mental patients.

On Saturday, we left Seattle and got our second ticket, this time from an un-marked car. The radar detector couldn't save us here. We started to notice that the state with the best drivers had the least emphasis on speed enforcement. We arrived in Portland 3 hours late because of wrong turns, so we decided to sleep in and run non-stop to Los Angeles. We almost blew a bonus checkpoint at the California Agricultural Check in our haste. The guy manning the check grinned and asked, "Don't you want your receipts?" We grabbed them and took off down through the desert in the early morning quiet. Out of nowhere, a cop came upon us and got my attention, trying to tell me to slow down. He did the same to Gary, who was ahead of me, but he used the spot light and his loudspeaker. Gary almost fell off his bike! I thought I saw some liquid hit my windshield. Naaa..... Gary wouldn't do that.

When we finally hit Los Angeles, we found the motel and discovered a few other bikes there already, motors stone cold. We only had time for 4 hours sleep. Later that morning, we checked into Greer Fairings in Costa Mesa, and used the six-hour layover to install new chains and a new tire on Gary's bike at Irv Seaver's BMW shop. He opened up his doors for us on Labor Day and was a tremendous help. His shop has a BSA Gold Star and a couple classic BMW's hanging from the ceiling. After a little bench racing, we went back to the motel for another hour and a half sleep before the 2 pm re-start.

Coming out of Los Angeles, we encountered the heat of the desert. Things were going fine until we started to climb and Gary had to adjust his timing. It was late at night and Gary's exhaust pipes were getting so hot we could see right thru them. The red glow of the head pipes was an eerie contrast to the desert darkness. Now he thought that maybe he should have kept both carbs on the bike. We were getting identical mileage, about 45mpg at 80-85 and he's got one carb to my three.

We were scheduled to hit the Muskogee Oklahoma checkpoint at 8am. About 2am and 250 miles out of Muskogee, Gary's alternator started to put out a marginal charge. For the last miles, he rode with just my headlight for both of us, with Gary tailing me by about 2 feet. This got some weird looks, but luckily none from The Law. At Muskogee, after 3 hours sleep, we bought another battery. Then, we made jumper cables from my battery to the new battery. While a battery was charging in my saddle bags via the jumper cables, Gary would run total-loss with the other one. We traveled the last 3,000 miles this way switching batteries about every 500 miles. These bikes were going to finish.

When we stopped for gas, a 14 year old girl, obviously very pregnant walked up to us with a crowbar in her hand. Seems she needed help closing the hood on her dad's 62 Ford pickup. Her boyfriend and she, she explains; were running off to Arkansas to get married. We gave them a hand and wished them good luck. I think they'll need it.

By the time we reached Oklahoma, we had put in three 1,000 miles days in a row. This meant riding a solid 19-20 hours a day, leaving little time for sleep. The bikes had given us little trouble since leaving Philly besides having to replace Gary's tire and chains (all the rain had washed the chains dry even though we lubed them frequently) and the jury-rigged charging system. My speedometer quit working at one point, but Gary guessed that the cable had come out of the speedo drive at the rear wheel. He tapped it back into position with a convenient rock from the roadside. Little things like rejetting Gary's carb at the summit of a mountain, and then changing it back at the base were just ordinary maintenance after a while.

I was unable to find a tire in Muskogee, so one of the guys at the Suzuki/Kawasaki dealership that served as the checkpoint called around and found a tire at Wheeler Kawasaki in Fort Smith Arkansas. We made the one hour run to this dealership and asked about the tire. We started talking about the Iron Butt and they said yeah, they had remembered reading about last year's event in Cycle News. When we told them that we were running the event right that minute, and needed the tire to continue, they dropped their metric wrenches in disbelief. When they saw what we were riding, it really made their day. They jumped right on the tire change and had us back on the road in minutes.

As we rolled though Mississippi, I looked over on an onramp and saw one of our competitors asleep on his bike. The big Yamaha Venture was on its center stand and he was covered with a sleeping bag. We knew he had an alarm clock, so we continued on without disturbing him. That day I introduced Gary to Southern cuisine. Grits and country ham for breakfast, and RC and a Moon Pie for lunch. Up to this point, we had lived on "road food" plus Fig Newtons, and Gatorade.

The last leg from Jacksonville to Philadelphia was plagued with rain. We had been on our rain suits for three days now. We discovered that one of the great secrets to running the Iron Butt was to have

seamless underwear and a good supply of Johnson's Baby Powder. About 12 hours out of Philly, Gary decided to run ahead to conserve daylight, with me taking it easy and coming in a little later. The last 50 miles for me were undoubtedly the toughest of the entire rally. The expansion joints in the roadway were so high; they felt like small trees lying across the road. The fog was so thick that I was standing on the pegs with my face shield up trying to see the signs. This was at a blazing speed of 15mph.

I pulled into the finish, back at Montgomeryville Cycle Center, at 5 am. The last checkpoint was manned by a local club called the Blue Comets and one of the guys had a pickup truck with a mattress in the back which I called home for three hours. Thirteen riders finished the event. Ross Cops on a K100 BMW survived a collision with a car to go on to a win. The car was going thru a stop sign, Ross hit him, rolled over the hood, picked up the bike; and after exchanging a few words, he rode on. One rider on a turbocharged K100 wasn't so lucky. He was out with a broken arm after a collision with a deer. Another rider, on a BMW K75 went down after hitting a pot hole. He rode the last 2,000 miles with some broken ribs and no left foot peg. One of the Yamaha Ventures was out with a dead alternator. Too bad he wasn't running Lucas electrical.

We both made it in hours before the official finish. Although we finished last, we were the first British bikes to start and finish the rally. What's more, we were riding the only machines this year equipped with drive chains and kick starters. To celebrate our Triumph's triumph, we had a cold glass of champagne. I took a long sip, then remembering the faithful Trident; poured the remainder of the glass over the bike's windshield. I think I heard a sigh...

Many of the guys who had run the event before had wished us luck, but doubted our ability to finish. It was a pleasure to prove them all wrong. At the finish, I was asked why we had done it, to which I replied, "This run was attempted on Triumphs for all you folks out there with an old British bike sitting in your shed. So now get those bikes out and ride them!!"

Results

1. Ross Copas on a K100 BMW
2. Barry Norman Yamaha
3. (tie) Fran Crane on a K100 BMW and Gary Moore on a Gold Wing
5. Mike Kneebone on a Yamaha
6. Paul Persinger on a Yamaha
7. Nick Phillips on a Kawasaki
8. Jim Plunkett on a R100 BMW
9. Al Hostberry on a BMW
10. Gregg Smith on a Yamaha
11. Dave McQueeny on a K75 BMW
12. Gary Johnson on a T140 Triumph
13. John Shuck on a Triumph Trident
14. (DNF) Walt Deck on a Honda
15. (DNF) Joe Tracey on the turbo K100 BMW

16. (DNF) Nick Nichols on a Harley Davidson

Post Script.....

After 22 years, it is hard to believe we actually finished the event. I still can remember some of the places we passed thru to this day. We ran the event in the old days..There was a 55 mph speed limit, motorcycles were not nearly as advanced as today, motorcycle clothing was primitive, and there were no cell phones or GPS. We also had to use stock tanks which meant filling up 8-9 times a day. I still have the bike and I fire it up every once in a while. Its last great run was down to the Guggenheim for the opening of the Art and the Motorcycle exhibit. If the event taught me anything, it is to be well prepared. You have to look at every component and try to envision how it will fail and what will be your response when it happens.

I also remember many of the competitors. I can still see little Fran Crane in her white leathers, pony tail flying in the wind. I also remember flying along at what I thought was a fast rate only to see Susie Mann ride by me like I was tied to a rock. Susie rode in 85 and Fran rode in 86. Sadly, neither is still with us. Months before she died from cancer, Susie Mann was stopped for speeding on her bike. She told the officer, "Give me a ticket if you want, I'm dying and I'm doing what I want." Ross Copas obviously had the tricks down to go the distance. At the finish, I asked him how he had prepped for the ride the night before the start...he said in the bar at the motel. It was Mike Kneebone's first distance ride and he was a serious competitor. Little did we all know that it would be he who would lead us into the future.