

Haul Road

kill switch to stop the engine, then carefully let out the clutch until the desired amount of engine braking gets to the rear wheel. This got me safely down the first hill, and many more later.

At this point I didn't have much hope of making it. What kept me going forward was the fear of trying to get back up that first steep hill I had miraculously come down. If I could just get through another 50 miles of mud to the Yukon Crossing, there would be people, gasoline, food and rest.

I settled into a slow routine of weaving through the mud, mostly in second gear and often killing the engine on the steep downhills. I tried to keep my feet on the pegs, though this is scary. The weather cleared to a medium twilight as I reached the broad and gentle Yukon River at midnight. The bridge, about 800 meters long, was decked with longitudinal wooden planks, wet and slippery. I crossed very slowly, trying to stay on one line of planks as the bike made dizzying lurches whenever I crossed a crack.

The first café was closed for both food and gas, no exceptions. I swiped some stale thick coffee anyway. The next place, about ten miles north, was the Hot Spot Café. It was an eerie ghost town in the gloom. No people were to be seen, but neat café tables were set amongst the planter boxes filled with flowers, and lights were on in the raised trailer that served as indoor diner. I walked around quietly for several minutes wondering how I was going to get food and gasoline.

Just then a huge truck pulled in and shut down. I approached the driver, whom I'll call Eggor since that was the company name on the side of the cab. He told me in a whisper that we must not disturb these café people after hours; they needed their sleep especially during the perpetual daylight of summer. He led me into the diner where there was cold beef stew in a crockpot, with a note telling customers to put \$5 in a basket nearby.

We ladled the stew into plates using a plastic cup. I spilled the cold grease on my hand, and trying to wipe it off with a napkin only succeeded in smearing it all over. "Oh, great!" I remember thinking,

"now when I meet Mr. Bear I'm gonna smell like beef gravy!"

Before we finished, the lady manager did roust herself and came in to talk. She was sympathetic to my desperation for some gasoline, but her pump was broken and none was available.

Eggor cheered me up by saying that the road up ahead was paved, most of the way to Coldfoot, if I could just get through the next 25 miles of mud. It was still 120 miles to Coldfoot and refuge, but I could possibly make it with the gas I had if conditions suddenly got very good. The rain had let up but it was still dark and threatening. Eggor himself was going to continue driving to the paved road, where he would pull off and sleep until morning. Now it was about 1 a.m. Again I rashly decided to go ahead, though I knew that the prudent decision would be to camp here and ride south to the Yukon River for gas in the morning.

I suited up, said farewell to Eggor, and hit the dirt road for Coldfoot. Almost immediately it started to drizzle again and I could hardly see the track, which became slicker than ever. I had made only a few miles in half an hour, reaching a section where I began to slide wildly every few seconds, even while going slowly in second gear and avoiding all braking. I kept recovering by luck but knew I couldn't keep this up. Finally both wheels flew up and I went down hard on the right. This was a very low point in my life.

I wasn't hurt as far as I knew. The instant I stopped moving, hundreds of voracious mosquitoes were hitting any exposed skin, even diving with an impact into my eyes. I carefully focused all my energy into lifting the bike, bags and all. It had to be first time or never, and by golly it came right up and rested on the sidestand. What a relief. I fetched the shattered right mirror out of the mud and shoved it under the tank bag rain cover. My newly installed stalk mirrors were OK.

I tried to start

the engine. It coughed, backfired and died. Oh crap. I tried again, same result. On the third try I gave it more gas, and one cylinder caught, running roughly and sounding like an F650 engine.

About this time Eggor's truck passed me. He slowed to reduce the mud spray and waved. I just waved back, knowing there was really nothing he could do to help.

So I started riding the mud again on the one-lunger engine, which stalled out every so often if I cut the throttle back too much. Otherwise it was slow steady riding in first or second gear, desperately looking for the best traction in the gloom.

And then came my worst nightmare. A blur ahead to the left, and a young wolf jumped out of the bog onto the road beside me! It was a perfect specimen, like a small german shepherd. This must be a bad dream! At great risk I looked back for a few seconds through my open visor, seeing a horror I will never forget. The wolf was running up on my left system case, gaining steadily on my calf. His paws were finding their own sure way, as his eyes were fixed intently on mine, calculating the ability and condition of what he was chasing.

I couldn't risk any more backward looks. I kicked up the speed to about 10 mph, checked the mirror, and there he was right behind me!

This really must be a dream, I thought. I am over-tired, over-stressed, and such things do not happen to anybody! When I next look in the mirror he'll be gone. But no, there he was, still pacing me, every time I looked!



I tried to start Steve Sady (left) gives the author a hand at bike repair.