



by Bob Bergman

Barcelona-Dakar 2005

A day by day diary of the event

The Route



29/12/04 Barcelona

Scrutineering

My bike only showed up yesterday afternoon. Despite leaving Canada over a week ago, British Airways decided it needed to have a little rest in London for a week. The bike had to go to scrutineering at 5:30 pm, that gave me the day to put all the finishing touches on it since it would have to sit in Parc Ferme and I wouldn't be able to touch it again before the start.

Scrutineering was a huge production held in a big arena where fans could come and see all the vehicles and pilots. It took over 3 hours to have all my documents checked, get the GPS unit, have photos taken, Sat phone checked, watch a video on how to use the Balise, etc, etc. Then the bike had to be checked, have the numbers applied, and have the operation of the safety equipment checked. Finally around 10 pm I was given a time card and road book and told to follow it to Parc Ferme. The roadbook took me out on to the streets of Barcelona to a CP down by the dockyards where my time card was stamped and then back thru the heart on the City to Placa du Espana where Parc Ferme was situated.

I had always heard stories about how popular the Dakar was in Europe but I was in for a shock when I rode up La Rambla, Barcelona's main drag. Flash bulbs started going off like I was going down the red carpet at the Oscars. Everytime I came to a stop people would run out and have their picture taken with me, I might as well have had Madonna riding on the back of the bike with me. It seemed like the whole town was out and they were all rally fans. After an hour I finally reached the solitude of Parc Ferme. I was instructed on how and where I was to park the bike and then sent back into the crowds where now autographs had to accompany the photos. I managed to find a subway stop a few metres away and in 15 minutes I was in my hotel, climbed into bed and watched the days proceedings on the T.V.

31/12/04 Barcelona-Barcelona

Liaison 27kms
Special 10kms
Liaison 17kms

Yesterday was my last day off. My wife Sharon and my Mom had come over from Canada and my brother flew in from Amsterdam. They were going to accompany me down to Granada and see me off from there. We spent the day doing some sight seeing and last minute details. I also hooked up with my friend Kevin Heath, I had met Kevin at the Nevada Rallye Experience in Las Vegas. Kevin was a privateer like myself, we both were riding KTM 660s, were both going to do this unsupported and had a similar mindset toward the race, so we naturally hooked up to help each other.

Today started with a riders meeting, it was a who's who of rallying, Alfie Cox, Meoni, Shlessor and me of course. I met the Rauseo boys, Charlie and Dave, 2 American brothers who were also attempting the Rallye on bikes they had rented thru Rallye Raid UK and a bunch of Brits.

After the meeting everyone milled around the entrance to Parc ferme waiting for his or her number to be called to start today's stage. An hour later I was let in to collect my bike, given a time card and sent back out into the crowds. The special was to be 10km run up and down the beach in Castelldefels, a small town outside Barcelona. I followed the roadbook out of town towards the beach and back into the crowds. The streets were closed to traffic and everywhere they were lined with people.

I knew that in the grand scheme of things that this stage meant nothing, 10kms out of 5500 wasn't even going to scratch the surface. My goal was simply not to fall down in front of the hundreds of thousands of people that had come out to watch. They were going to start us in pairs and I was up against a Dutchman on a 2-wheel drive Yamaha. When the flag dropped the Dutch sand master disappeared from site leaving me to fend for myself. The first hundred yards were covered in gravel and went off without a hitch, then we hit the beach. I've never quite seen sand like this before or since, it was very coarse and wet, sort of like wet cement without enough water in it.

I hadn't ridden a bike in over a month and this was no place to work out the rust. The ruts were over a foot deep and the bike had a mind of its own, it was all I could do to keep it pointed in the general direction of the course. Once I had come to grips with guiding the bike between the sides of this 50-foot wide track they decided it was time to introduce some jumps. I quickly learnt that as long as I kept the throttle pinned and my weight back, the bike would more or less go where I wanted, but the moment I crested the first jump and rolled off the gas, the front wheel bit in, launching me over the bars. So much for my plan of not falling! I jumped up, pick up my bike and set of for the next jump only to do it all over again. By now my heart rate was thru the roof, I had only gone 2kms, and already I was realizing the benefits of a year of cardiovascular training. I settled myself down, tried not to over grip and in what seemed like a lifetime, the turn at the far end of the course finally appeared. This of course, posed a brand new problem, turning. I took the turn so wide to avoid any ruts that I sent the photographers running for cover. The checked flag did eventually fall. Dripping with sweat and gasping for air, I had endured the longest 10 minutes of my life, I had barely made it thru a 10km special, what was I doing entering the Dakar?

01/01/05 Barcelona- Granada

Liaison 920kms

There was no special today, but a very long ride on the highway and I had a set of road tires mounted on the bike just for today. Once again we started at the Parc Ferme but this time we rode up on to a podium were we were met by Patrick Zaniroli and were introduced to the fans. Before we hit the highway we had to ride thru town to a check point in the middle of the city, so the people in town would have one last look at the equipment.

As I waited to have my time card stamped I heard someone call my name. By now, I was getting used to all the attention, but I didn't know we were all on a first name basis. It turns out that it was a friend of John Baxter's from England, John had told him I was coming over and to watch out for me.

I hooked up with Kevin and hit the highway, we rode the first 60kms to a fuel station where we met up with my family who were accompanying us down to Granada by car. Around the 250km mark we had to stop in at a CP in Castellon. They had set up a food tent where they served lunch, a well-balanced meal of coffee and pastries. As we milled around happy to be off the bikes, I noticed David Fretigne wearing a full on snowmobile suit despite it being a nice sunny day. What did he wear when he went snowmobling?

I hadn't been doing any riding before I left home and it didn't take long before my back and my butt were crying in pain. I began to invent new riding positions but as soon as I would get relief on one area something new would start to ache. I soon discovered what was going to be come my favourite position, because of the extremely high sitting position on the 660 you could take your feet off the pegs and hang both legs straight down without touching the ground. The beauty of this was that it would also straighten your back and it freed up my left hand to wave at the fans lining the bridges.

It didn't take long before it was dark and as we got closer the Granada we left the coast and headed into the mountains where the temperatures plummeted. We stopped and put on our warmest gear but we were now at over 3000 ft and I shivered away thinking about David Fretigne tucked up in his Snowmobile suit.

The streets of Granada were packed with people, it made Barcelona look like a ghost town. There was just space wide enough for a bike to get thru, like you see in the Tour du France. It was 10:30 by the time we got to the service parc, I quickly pulled the road tires off the rim a chucked them in the nearest ditch, mounted a fresh set of Michelin Deserts, put those on the airplane racks for transport. I repacked my truck with the stuff from the car and took my bike to the Parc Ferme. By the time we found our hotel and had something to eat (one of those sandwiches encased in plastic I got at a gas station) it was 1:00 am, I to get up at 5:30am.

02/01/05 Granada- Rabat

Liaison 6kms
Special 10kms
Liaison 557kms

I got about 2 hours of sleep, for some reason I just couldn't relax, I was too wound up about all the little details I needed to cover. I staggered thru breakfast like a zombie, starting to wonder what I had gotten myself into, we hadn't even gotten to Africa and I felt like I was starting to fall apart. Hopefully I'll get some sleep on the boat this afternoon and pull it together.

The days special was a smooth, fast "road course" style track built in the middle of a huge field. I loved it as much as I hated the beach in Barcelona. I quickly caught and passed riders who had started over a minute ahead of me. I was in my element, clipping apexes roadrace style, sliding both wheels. I had to keep telling myself to take it easy, as there was more to be lost by crashing, than there was to be gained by going fast. I really enjoyed it and it completely lifted my spirits, it was fun to be on the bike. I finished around 60th out of 230 and I was taking it easy.

I met back up with my family in the assistance parc and we changed back to the low front fender

for Africa. I gave away the high fender and fork guards to passing kids as souvenirs, it would be cheaper to buy new ones, than it would be send them home. I think we were all able to hold back the tears, except for my Mom, as we said our goodbyes and I set off for the boat to Africa on my own.

After 250 more kilometres of waving to the fans lining the bridges and having my photo taken at the tollbooths, I finally reached the port of Algeciras where the whole Dakar caravan were loaded onto ferries. Once I had my bike parked I went up onto one of the decks and made myself a little nest. I ate some tuna and tortillas I had brought from home and tried to sleep. I slept for a little while but sleeping was starting to be problem, I knew that I had to sleep as much as possible because as time went on the days were only going to get longer, but the more I worried about it, the harder it was to fall asleep.

It was dark when we got into Tangers, Morocco and there was still a 300km road section to cover before the day was over. Kevin and I, along with Charlie and Dave Rauseo all decided to ride to the bivouac together. I was one of the first to get off the boat and parked my bike to wait for the others. I walked over to where Scot Harden was parked to have a chat when suddenly there was a huge crash behind me, I spun around to see my bike lying on its side on the asphalt. KTM 660 Rallyes are built like tanks but someone snoozed on the sidestand design, they were flimsy aluminium units that had a tendency to snap like a twig under the slightest load. I picked up the spring to use later and kicked the sidestand across the parking lot in disgust, before we set off in to the wilds of Africa.

It was well past 11:00 when I arrived after a long cold ride. This was my first Bivouac and I had to figure out how it all worked, where were the bike boxes, where was the KTM truck, when was dinner, just more things to add to the stress. I finally got myself fed, got into my tent, did my road book for tomorrows stage and set my alarm for 5:30.

03/01/05 Rabat-Agadir

Liaison 122kms
Special 123kms
Liaison 421kms

At 2:00 am I woke again, I was so stressed out that I just couldn't sleep, the less I slept the more I worried about not sleeping. The more I worried about not sleeping, the less I slept. I was starting to have a full on panic attack. What had I gotten myself in to? I had taken all of my and my wife's savings and blown it on this cockamamie idea. Now here I was with only 20kms of special tests behind me and I was already starting to crumble like a stale soda cracker.

I was in quite a predicament, my only two options were to quit, or carry on, both of which appeared to be horrible. If I quit, how would I ever be able to face my wife and friends again, let alone deal with my own conscience for the rest of my life? Carrying on was so overwhelming that just the thoughts of the pain and suffering ahead made me feel sick!

The alarm woke me up at 5:30. I had obviously been asleep and now that was all I wanted to do. But on the Dakar, you don't get to do what you want to do! I got dressed and packed the tent and

sleeping bag in the dark. I choked down some breakfast and coffee, hopped on the bike and just made it to the CP for my start time. I had no idea where I was going, I just followed other bikes thru the fog and darkness. At the first fuel station we came to I stopped and loaded my roadbook, I had been so tired that I just stuffed it into my pocket but now, out on the liaison, I could stop for a breather.

The liaison took us out into the foothills of the Atlas Mountains. There had been thick fog on the coast but for some reason it was also inland into the mountains. I had to go so slowly that when I finally reached the start of the special I had taken more than the 2 hours allotted for the 120km liaison. When I arrived to have my time card stamped at the start of the Special I was told “pas du special”.

There would be no special today, the fog was so thick that the helicopters could not take off and therefore they could not assure our safety. We would ride the first 70kms of the special as a liaison then an extra 100kms on pavement to link up with next 421kms of liaison. I have to admit that I was somewhat relieved, it was nice to ride the special without the time pressure but it was going to be a long day on the road.

Morocco had quite a military presence out for the Dakar, there was a soldier about every Kilometre or so. This was great in the cities, as they would stop traffic whenever we approached, red lights simply meant you had roll off the throttle slightly and the seas would part before you.

Doctors say that falling asleep while riding a motorcycle can be hazardous to your health. It was mid afternoon and I could barely keep my eyes open, even thou travelling across the pavement at over 100kms an hour. I decided it was time for a coffee and pulled up to a café in the next town. It had a big patio that was full of men dressed in Berber coats sitting around sipping mint tea. For some reason I was the centre of attention when I walked up wearing my bright orange Sinasalo riding gear. I ordered a coffee in my best French and started enjoy this relaxing moment when I realized I didn't have any money. I had Euros and U.S. but no Dirhams. I tried to explain my problem to the owner but this just caused more confusion and strangely they didn't want anything to do with Euros. We all came to an agreement when I pulled out 2 U.S. dollars and stuck them in his hand. I figured this was fair, this is how much it would have cost at Starbucks!

The sun was just starting to go down when I rolled into the bivouac in Agadir, this was going to give me enough time to prepare for tomorrow. I was able to fit a fresh set Michelin desert tires and Bib mousse, change the oil and air filter, load the roadbook and GPS code and get to bed by 8:30. That was still only going to be eight hours of sleep since I was going to have to get up at 4:30 to do a 240km liaison before sunrise.

04/01/05 Agadir- Smara

Liaison 240kms

Special 381kms

Liaison 33kms

I had some Graval pills for the boat crossing and I took one of them last night before bed, it seemed to have knocked me out and for once I woke up feeling well rested. It was going to be tough to sleep in the bivouac at the best of times, it was always fully lit and there was a constant

racket of air tools, bike engines and generators thru out the night. Sleeping pills, eyeshades and earplugs were going to become standard equipment for bedtime.

Today was going to be the first real African stage, 380 kms on tight rocky tracks punctuated by high-speed runs across dry lakebeds. Traditionally the Moroccan stages are very rough on equipment and even the slightest slip up can fatally damage the bike and put you out of the race. My goal was to save the bike and wheels and get thru the stage unscathed, there was more to be lost by going fast than there was to be gained.

The stage started out fast thru some sweeping hills that were a lot of fun, of course it didn't last long before it became a slow rocky trial. It also didn't take long before other riders caught and passed me. This was fine with me, I wanted to ride my own pace, not get sucked into racing someone else. My plan quickly started to pay dividends, as usually only minutes after someone would blow past me, I would pass them back as they were picking their bike up out of the rocks, assessing the damage.

This was the first time that I really got to use the road book in a special stage and I rode cautiously as I tried to relate the notes of the roadbook to the trail ahead. When it showed a big ditch, just how big was it? I wasn't the only one with this problem, shortly I came to a huge ditch that had been marked with "!!!", 3 exclamation marks meant extreme danger. On the other side of the ditch I came across one of the Repsol factory bikes completely destroyed while it's rider still lay beside it receiving medical help. He had obviously not been watching the roadbook or had not understood how big the ditch was, and judging by the distance he and the bike had flown, had hit it at a very high speed.

I had been complaining about how much my butt had been aching on liaisons the day before, but now I couldn't wait for the Chotts (dry lake beds) to sit down. My lower back and arms were now screaming from the hours of standing up as I worked my way thru the rocks. Gradually the track eased up and became faster then I finally emerged onto an enormous chott that would take me to the end of the stage. It was completely flat as far as you could see in any direction, like being out in the middle of the ocean. I tucked in behind the fairing and relaxed as I followed the GPS arrow toward the Final CP.

Other riders began to burn past me at crazy speeds but I recalled the words of Guy Giroux, a fellow Canadian who I had bought the KTM 660 from. He had told me, that as long as you don't go over 120 kph the motor would last forever. And he had recounted the story of riders passing him on the flats only to eventually pass them all back when they destroyed their bikes. He finished 16th in his first Dakar, I figured he knew a thing or two.

It was around 3:30 when I arrived at the finish of the Special, it had taken five and a half-hours to cover the 380 kilometres, but I hadn't fallen once and I was pleased that it was still light out. I would have a reasonable amount of time to eat and work on the bike before bed. The days were only going to get longer and harder, but I felt better than I had a few days ago. Having gone thru those rough nights, I had learned a valuable lesson, if things got bad again, I now had the confidence of knowing that I would be able to pull it together and get thru it. I remembered the credo that Scot Harden had told me months ago "No matter how hard it gets, it's never as bad as it seems"

05/01/05 Smara - Zouerat

Liaison 121kms

Special 492kms

Liaison 6kms

It was an early start once again, I had to get up at 5:15 to make the start of the 120 km liaison. This was going to be the last early morning liaison for a while, from now on we would be starting the Specials only a few kilometres from the bivouac.

It was pitch dark when I left the airport, the liaison was going to take us to the Moroccan – Mauritanian border and the special would start once we were into Mauritania. The road section turned out to be a seldom-used dirt piste, and despite the military marking it out with little torches, I still managed to get lost for a while. Fortunately I managed to regain the main track before reaching the border area, the frontier had been heavily landmined during the Polisario disputes and this was no place for offroading.

The organizers had set up a refuelling point just before the start of the special so we could top up our tanks and hired a few locals as gas jockeys. I had been wearing wind pants and ski gloves to keep warm on the transfer sections and I figured this was going to be last time I would need them, I handed them off to my attendant, his face lit up like a Christmas tree, it was like I had given him a new car. Somehow it didn't seem right to be whizzing past these people on priceless racing equipment when a pair of gloves meant the world to them.

The stage started out on a tight rocky piste that was tough going on full tanks but once again it became extremely fast on dry lakebeds. It seemed that whenever the riding would become enjoyable there was always some element that would make it miserable and right on cue a sandstorm started to blow up. We were blasting along at 120kph, almost zero visibility, the bike keeled over roadrace style to brace against the crosswinds. This went on hours and by then my neck was screaming in pain for trying to keep my head upright in the Maelstrom. The chotts finally gave way to a sandy rolling plain but the wind was strong and it covered over the tracks from the riders' only minutes ahead. Fortunately by now I was within 30kms of the first CP and could navigate by using the GPS. I rolled across the plain following the arrow when I turned around to see a train of bikes behind me, I don't why they were following me, I was completely lost.

After refuelling we set off for the first of what would be the many dune crossings in the rallye. I think everyone must have some trepidation at this point as this is always the most daunting and spectacular feature of the Dakar and I was certainly no different. At first the sand was fairly firm and smooth, it was a relief from the constant pounding of the past days. But, like everything in the Dakar, as soon as you started to enjoy it, it ended, the monster dunes began to appear on the horizon.

I was able to follow the tracks left by the other riders and had a "crash" course in dune riding. It wasn't as bad as I thought, I think that being a frost bitten Canadian was an advantage here, sand dunes tended to form much like snow drifts, so I had some idea of where the hard and soft sand might be. The secret was to carry enough momentum to reach the top of the dune but go slow enough so you could stop at the crest to survey the path down the other side. Not carrying enough speed and coming up even a foot or two from the top would mean you would have to

turn the bike around and do it all again. Going too quickly meant you had to grab some brake at the top sending you over the bars. Both of these lessons were to be learnt the hard way.

The final dune crossing was just before CP3 at km 421. I had made an error at the refuelling and had not completely refilled the bike. I had been getting great mileage but now in the sand I was using more than I had predicted. I also made the mistake of following another rider and as we closed in on the CP I realized he had no idea where he was, and now, neither did I. I knew that if I followed the GPS straight through the dunes to the CP, I might not have the fuel to make it to the end and I began to get very worried. I decided to try and skirt around the dunes and find an easier way to the CP, going straight in was suicidal. This turned out to be the right decision and a very stressful hour later I rolled into the finish of the stage, the bike running on fumes. Again it was still light out when I parked the bike at the Airplane boxes, it had taken me about 10 hours to cover the 622kms.

I looked around for Kevin, but didn't find him, he had been riding a little quicker than me and had been getting in before I did. I didn't usually see him on the piste but we hung at the Bivouac and worked on the bikes together. I figured he must have gone thru the dunes at the end and was going to take some time to get in, I was smart to go around!

I never saw or heard from Kevin again.

Tomorrow was the first Marathon stage, and this meant there would be no assistance vehicles in the Bivouac tomorrow night. This didn't make much difference to me, since I had no assistance, but it did mean I was going to have to prepare the bike tonight for a two-day push. I knew that tomorrow's stage was going to be very hard and that it was designed to thin the field, it was the day I feared the most.

I took my wheels over to the Euromaster truck to have new tires fitted and after dropping them off I headed to the catering tent for a snack. It would be another half of an hour before the wheels were done so I headed back to the my tent and called Sharon on the Sat phone. It was amazing how much it lifted my spirits to hear her voice, she had been following along on the internet almost hourly and knew more about what was going on than I did.

It was dark by now and I headed back to the food tent for a full on dinner. The bivouac was always chaotic and somehow I got lost and couldn't find the catering tent. I swore this was where it was an hour ago but now there was nothing. I retraced my steps and returned to the same place, still no tent.

I later found out that it had completely burned to the ground in the 20 minutes I was on the phone!

06/01/05 Zouerat- Tichit

Liaison 9kms
Special 660kms

From the moment I first saw the route when it was published in November, I knew today was

going to be the day. Traditionally the organizers plan a few very difficult days, before the rest day, to separate the men from the boys. Tonight, I would know whether I was a man or a boy!

The first 70kms of the stage was the end of yesterday's stage, run in reverse. It was very rutted from the trucks and far more difficult than it was the day before. I passed the Aprilia sidecar, abandoned yesterday, already becoming a sand dune itself. Again, they tried the same trick they had used the day before and hid a waypoint on the far side of a difficult dune crossing. I'm quick learner and knew not to simply follow the GPS arrow. I stopped and rolled the roadbook forward to the notes for the waypoint, based on the compass bearings it showed, the correct path to the waypoint was going to take a huge semi circular path to the right. I let the other riders go straight into the dunes and I hung a sharp right heading away from the waypoint. After only a minute or two later the dunes to my left shrunk in size to the point where you could ride between them, on firm ground. Using the correct compass bearings instead of just simply following the GPS, I quickly found my way to the other side of the dunes and at the waypoint we were all searching for.

I followed a stony piste for short while before taking a sharp right into no mans land, the next 500kms were going to be "Hors Piste", off road. And after a taste of Camel grass and a few small dune crossing I found myself on some very fast, hard packed sand. It was very unique terrain, rolling with a few tufts of camel grass here and there, but really fast. I began to see and catch riders in the distance, I would gradually catch and pass them until I became the leader of a small freight train, and I was doing all the work. Another lesson learned, it was easy to go fast when you had a rabbit to show you where and, more importantly, where not to go. It didn't take long for me to figure this out and I rolled off the throttle and pretended to fiddle with something on the bike allowing the peloton to pass me by, then tucking in at the back, "Tour du France" style.

It was midday by the time we reached the "passé de Gallaouiya" at the 250 km mark. It was a narrow pass that was the only way up on to a plateau where the first CP and refuelling was located. This little valley was full of rocks of all sizes that lay in a bed of very soft sand and was extremely difficult to ride in, even the smallest mistake here could mean the end of the rallye. By the time I finally reached the CP only a few kilometres away the bike was badly beaten. All it took was one bobble, a small rock had kicked out the front wheel from under me, pitching the bike into the rocks and ripping out its soft underbelly. The side of the fairing was completely smashed to pieces and both front and rear tanks were all gouged up, dropping its resale value significantly.

The riding was supposed to become even more difficult with the finish of the stage being the hardest. It alternated between camel grass and dune crossings all of which were very soft. While in the dunes I prayed for the camel grass to return, in the camel grass I couldn't wait for the dunes. At the second CP and refuelling, the sand was so soft that when we stopped to have our time cards stamped everyone would get stuck up to the axles. We still had 263kms of sand to go until the end, but for some reason the fuel attendants were rationing fuel and didn't want to let us completely top up. I had filled my bike to the brim at the last fuel stop, and had a fair bit left, so it wasn't a big issue for me. But it turned out to be a big problem for others and I later learned that there were punches thrown by the competitors.

There was only a half of an hour of light left and I was completely exhausted. I was falling more and more frequently and growing so fatigued that I was starting to have trouble picking up the bike and when I did, I started to see stars. I still had about 200kms to go and it was starting to

become apparent that I might not make it. I knew that they were going to try and get rid of me today and it appeared that their plan was coming together right on schedule.

I left my bike lying on its side, sat down on little tuft of camel grass as the tears rolled down my cheeks and called my wife on the sat phone. She had been following along on the Internet and told me that only 9 bikes had made it so far and that there was talk of cancelling the stage and to just keep going. That was all fine and dandy but I could barely function, how was I going to ride 200kms of camel grass. She told me how they had just found a Tsunami victim in the middle of the ocean that had been clinging to a tree for the last week and if he could do that then I could do this. She was right, I was starting to feel a little pathetic and my self-inflicted problems seem kind of pointless compared to the suffering in South East Asia.

Suddenly I heard the sound of a 660 rallye come over the dune behind and as I turned around it plopped down in the sand beside mine. I quickly said goodbye to Sharon as the moto pilot dusted himself off. I got up and helped him pick up his bike, he looked at me and in English said "I'm so tired". He was an Estonian and looked about as bad as I felt, "misery loves company" and we commiserated for a few minutes before deciding to set off together. We made a pact that we would stop and help each other and get thru this together. He offered to help me pick up my bike and we set off to tackle the dunes ahead.

It wasn't long before it was completely dark and the HID lights that shone so bright at home now seemed completely useless. You couldn't see the tops of the dunes or even where the good lines where. The only saving grace is that by now the cars were starting to catch us and we could stop to watch where they would go before we would make our own attempt at the 60- 70 foot high monsters. I was starting to feel like I had more energy, I had eaten while I was talking on the phone and now I realized that I must have been starting to "bonk" which is why I was so tired and confused, maybe I would make it after all. Good things never last long on the Dakar, I had only covered about 10 kms in the last hour of darkness and I had lost my Estonian friend. I soldiered on, meeting up with different riders, stopping to help them if they needed it, as now the race had turned into a test of survival, which we were all fighting together.

I rode for a while with a French man, Etienne, whose battery was dead and needed a jump-start anytime he stalled it. He was very grateful that I would stop to jump him when he needed it and he immediately started to call me "Bobbie" even thou my bike and helmet said "Bob". We too, were eventually separated and I soon met up and rode with Simon Pavey, a Brit on a BMW 650. It wasn't long before I lost him as well, I was cresting a dune and when I saw what looked to be an easier way across it, this turned out to be a trap and I fell into a 50 foot hole of fine dust. That was it, no one knew I was here and I would never get out by myself and now my bike wouldn't start.

I got out my headlamp and wandered around. I discovered that I wasn't completely at the bottom of the hole but still on the side, so if I could get the bike to start, I could point it down hill and build some momentum, to try and get out.

It turned out that sand had gotten in the starter button and it wasn't making contact, this was soon fixed and I dragged the bike around so it pointed down hill. I fired it up, and revved it, to blow out all of the sand that had fill up the exhaust pipes. I stuck it in gear and built up some speed by riding around the sides of the hole, like I was being flushed down the toilet, then I popped out the other side to freedom.

I crossed a few more dunes on my own and stopped on the crest of a large one to scout the way down. At the bottom was one of the Schlessers buggies completely buried, the occupants, shovels in hand. But off in the distance I could see some strange metallic flickering. I rode down the other side, steering clear of the buggy and the hole it was in, and over to investigate the odd lights.

As it turned out, they were emergency blankets that I could see from atop the dune. I rode up and there were about 15 bikes, all parked, like wagons in a circle. There was the Estonian, Etienne, Simon Pavey and a whole bunch more. Someone had been in contact with the organizers and was told to stay put and come in, in the morning. There were obviously some Dakar vets in this group who knew more than me and I was happy to be amongst friends. Etienne, grateful for my help earlier, dug me a little hole on the leeward side of him and I crawled in, helmet, boots and all.

07/01/05

I only slept for an hour or so before I woke up shivering, my emergency blanket ripped to shreds by the sandstorm. I looked around to find everyone comfortably tucked up under what were obviously far superior quality space blankets. Canadian Tire is going to be getting a letter when I got home. I knew that shivering was not a good sign so early into the night. I had one Powerbar left which I was saving for breakfast and decided I had best eat it now, as it would help to give me energy to stay warm. My Sinisalo rally jacket had many pockets and I decided it was time to take stock of what I had, things were looking pretty grim when, like a miracle, I came across four chemical hand warmer packets. I had forgotten I even had them, I put them in my pocket in Barcelona thinking they may be useful on the long road down to Granada and they never entered my mind again.

I figured I needed to ration them, as I had no way of knowing how long they would last, so I took one stuck it under my jacket near my belly button to help raise my core temperature. I didn't let anyone know I had them, I had been learning that this rallye was like the game of Survivor where you helped others so that they be obliged to help you. At least this was the way the French did it. I was keeping my cards close to my chest.

I was fairly comfortable once I started to warm up, I had what was left of my blanket over my thighs and the drifting sand started to fill in the cracks to keep out the wind. I was wearing everything I had, balaclava, helmet, and goggles. My Shark helmet made for a surprisingly nice pillow, no matter which way you rolled, it kept your head at the perfect height. Then came the rain, I was in the middle of the Sahara desert and the one night I have to sleep out without a tent, it rains. But that's the way it works in the Dakar, once you come to terms with dealing with the hardships it just gets worse.

Eventually it started to get lighter and I could see that we were camped in the middle of a plain, completely exposed to the elements. Who the hell picked this for a campsite! Everyone began to stir to life and I finally got a chance to see my campmates for the first time. Luc Pagnon a very experienced "Dakarist" had done this rallye so many times that he had Patrick Zanarolis personal cell phone number and called him the moment he sat upright. As it turned out, today's stage was to be cancelled to allow the field to catch up, all we had to do was to get to Tichit and then there

would be a liaison directly to Tidjikja and we would be back on schedule.

I was completely out of food and as we saddled up I asked Simon whether he had anything to eat. He said, all he was one granola bar but he was happy to share it with me. This was nice of him, but as we rode together during the day, working together and becoming better friends he began to pull out more and more food, he had been playing his cards close to his chest.

It wasn't before we came across a lone rider standing in the piste with jumper cables in hand. Irishman, Gary Ennis had spent a lonely night in the desert camped by himself with a dead battery. He too, had been on the "Sat" phone to the "Mrs" to tell her he was out and would probably be home in a few days when she told him the news of the cancelled stage and that he still had a chance. We got Gary going and our little Anglophone trio set off for Tichit.

We were far from being out of the woods, the camel grass was just getting denser and the riding more and more difficult, but by noon we were beginning to near the finish. The sand was very soft and we had been consuming more fuel than we had predicted and now my bike was getting desperately low on fuel. The two others figured that they would probably have enough and maybe if I ran out they would be able to give me some. I short shifted and barely opened the throttle trying to preserve fuel as best as I could. We then started to come across other bikes and cars stopped on the side of the track and stopped to ask some of them if they had any fuel they could spare, but they were there because they had run out. Things were getting desperate, we had only 30kms to go, it was so close but still so far. Suddenly we saw a few military jeeps coming toward us, one with a huge machine gun mounted on a turret in the back. I flagged them down to see if they had any fuel, knowing that the locals would part with anything given the right price.

It turned out that they had, in fact, been sent by the organizers to bring fuel to the stranded vehicles that we had passed and were loaded with barrels of fuel. We were the first to get to them and each got 10 litres, more than enough to make it in and we set off for the bivouac and a well-deserved rest and lunch.

It was 2:30 in the afternoon as we rolled it to the final CP, it had been a very stressful 30 hrs since I had left Zouerat. I had made it thru what I figured would be the most difficult stage and all I had to do is get to Tidjikja this afternoon and then one more day to the rest day.

The relief was short lived, it turned out that the easy liaison to Tidjikja was 240kms of soft sand and camel grass. It had been used as a full days stage in 2001 and we only had two hours of light left in which to do it. The three of us set off again and were quickly back in the hateful sand ruts and camel grass. Simons' BMW began to overheat and we stopped to figure out what the problem was, he fiddled around a bit and told us to carry on. Gary's headlights weren't working and he had to cover as much ground as possible before it got dark. By the time we rolled into the village of Lekhcheb and the half waypoint of our "liaison" it was pitch black, but fortunately for us it was a well-defined 2 track thru deep sand to the finish and we could ride side by side sharing the lights from my KTM.

It seemed like a lifetime counting down the kilometres to the final CP but eventually our spirits rose as we saw the light of Tidjikja the distance. Next pavement appeared and finally the airport. It was 10:30 at night, I had just ridden two 15-hour days back-to-back, punctuated by a miserable night completely exposed to the elements. Now I had to eat, work on my bike, set up my tent, and be ready to ride another 400kms at 8:30 tomorrow morning.

08/01/05 Tidjikja- Atar

Liaison 3kms

Special 361kms

Liaison 35kms

Again, I woke up in the middle of the night, this time I was soaking wet. Somehow I had rolled over onto the bite cap of my “Camelbak” and now there was 2 litres of sticky “Cytomax” covering the floor of the tent. My sleeping bag had been doing a great job of cleaning it up, like a giant wick, it soaked it up off the floor, and covered me with it. I couldn’t believe the irony, just when you thought things were going bad, something like this would happen to make it worse, just to demonstrate that it wasn’t so bad before.

I was in a bad way, I was completely exhausted and it was all I could do to eat and put up my tent the evening before. I did no bike maintenance at all, other than buy a new air filter off the KTM truck and stick it in my pocket. By now I had begun to talk to the bike. I had made it a deal that if it didn’t break tomorrow, I would wash it and change its oil and put on a new chain and sprockets the next day in Atar. I didn’t know whether it accepted, but I promised to uphold my part of the deal, if it upheld its side.

The sandstorms started up on cue as I stuffed my soggy gear into my airplane box. Tomorrow was the rest day and so I would deal with it all then. Tonight I was going to get to see my wife, Sharon, as she was flying into Atar this afternoon. This would become my sole motivation for getting thru the day and every time I would think of her waiting there, tears would well up in my eyes. I would have to force myself to just concentrate on the job at hand and the end would come in due time.

The stages started out in soft sand winding between sparsely spaced trees. Navigating was tricky in the blowing sand and it didn’t take long before I had lost the track. Bikes started coming back toward me, so this was not the way, rather than just turn around and follow them back, I had now learned to stop and figure things out for myself. Thru the sandstorm I saw a helicopter off in the distance, it was due east of me and from what I could decipher from the road book this was more than likely the direction that the piste was in. I set off cross-country and eventually found the correct path right where the chopper had been, another lesson learned.

At the about the 100km mark we were faced with another dune crossing and even thou it was quite short, it was for some reason very difficult. I managed to get thru after a lot of digging and pushing when it dawned on me that the bike was low on power. It had gone two and a half days on the same air filter, which was probably clogged solid. I stopped on firm ground, pulled off the seat, opened the tool kit and proceeded to install the new filter I had stuffed in my pocket. I buttoned up the bike, chucked the old filter off into the dunes and set off on what felt like a brand new motorcycle.

Air filters are completely reusable, it’s just a matter of washing out oil and the debris in gasoline, and then blowing it dry with compressed air and reoiling it, a 20 minute job. I had been throwing them out and installing new ones at \$50 a pop, every 1 or 2 days. Fifty dollars well spent, if it meant I could get another 20 minutes of sleep!

By now the terrain had again become rocky and I was afraid of damaging the bike. I was riding along like a Grandma when I came across another rider on a 660 Rallye. He had crashed, braking off his clutch lever, he stopped me to see if I had a spare, Of course I did, you would have to be a fool to set off without one and as I began to open up my tool kit, I realized he obviously didn't have a spare, and if I gave him mine, neither would I. His problem could easily become my problem because he was unprepared. I pretended that I couldn't find it and I set off feeling guilty, sometimes it's everyman for himself.

I eventually ended up at the final dune crossing that guarded the finish of the stage. It was slow going and as usual they had placed the final CP behind the worst of them. Suddenly with only a few kilometres to go I crest a large dune to see a group of photographers gathered like vultures around a huge soft dune. Judging by all the tracks, this was going to be very difficult to cross. Dakar vet Lawrence Hacking had warned me about photographers, he told me that wherever they tell you to go, go somewhere else. They want you to get stuck, riding past trouble free doesn't make for great photos.

They all indicted to go straight up the dune, but from where I was I could see it looked like trouble. I'm sure they were all disappointed when I rode down to the firm base at the bottom of the dunes and made a sharp right working my way down the valley until the dunes shrank in size. At the lowest point I climbed a single 15 foot dune and emerged out the other side to the checkpoint. They didn't get any good photos and I didn't care, all I could think of was, in a half an hour I would get to see Sharon and I would be at the rest day. Statistically if you can make it to the rest day, you stand a very good chance of making it to Dakar and I knew this.

I could have kissed the pavement when it emerged, then gradually buildings started to appear and finally Atar. I was out of the desert and back into civilization, I could barely contain myself as I rolled thru town waving back at the locals. I had done it, they had tried to get rid of me but they couldn't, I had proven it to them and to myself. Suddenly, two European tourists appeared in the streets waving and clapping, I couldn't contain myself any longer and I cried like a baby behind my Smith goggles, as I rode toward the airport.

I couldn't wait to find Sharon, I half expected to see her at the CP, maybe she would stamp my time card. I rode around the bivouac looking for her when I came across the Estonian I had met in the desert a few days ago. You couldn't get the smiles off of our faces; we never ever thought we'd be standing here together. Then I felt someone put their arms around me from behind.

09/01/05 Atar
Restday

I didn't do any work on the bike that evening, I had all day to do it tomorrow. Sharon and I set up the big tent she had brought with her, inside the guests compound. It was nice to show her around and actually take the time to stop and look at things. We had our dinner in the catering tent with everyone else and then went to bed early for a change. Sharon had brought the Ipod with her and I listened to it as I lie in bed. It was so strange to hear the soft soothing sounds of Bjork on this tiny electronic gadget after having spent the last week in the desert hearing nothing but the sounds of engines. I lay there, for once completely relaxed, my wife at my side, knowing

I didn't have to ride a motorcycle the next day.

I was up by 9:00 and we took our time to get thru breakfast, but now the pressure was back on. I had a lot of work to do on the bike. It had been neglected over the last few days and today was my only chance to catch up, plus, I had all the maintenance that I had planned to do on the rest day on top of that. I wanted to get it done as soon as possible so I could take it easy the remainder for the day.

I rode into town and got the bike washed, then began to start work. I was under the bike removing the skid pan and stood up for some reason. All of a sudden everything started to spin and I was seeing stars again, I couldn't breathe and I thought I was going to faint. I could see the medical tent across the runway and I slowly started to walk toward it thinking that maybe I was having a heart attack. They checked me out and said that my cardiovascular system was in great shape and that I was probably suffering from exhaustion and I should rest today. It was a Catch-22, I was so stressed that I had to get the bike done that I couldn't relax but without some more rest I was too fatigued to work on the bike. The doctors gave me some sleeping pills and vitamins and I made my way back to the tent to find Sharon to tell her what had happened.

I slept for a few hours and woke up feeling a bit better. I ate some more and started back on the bike. The day had suddenly disappeared and I was back in the thick of things. By the time it was done it was pitch dark, I was used to working on the bike by headlight and even thou I had had a full day to get it finished, today was going to be no exception. So much for a restday!

10/01/05 Atar- Atar

Liaison 8kms
Special 483kms
Liaison 8kms

I knew that the next three days were going to be tough, but if I could make it thru them, I felt I could make it to Dakar. The final three days were in the Sahal and run on hard packed Laterite, which suited my riding style better. You had to break the Dakar into smaller chucks mentally, together it was too overwhelming to comprehend.

I wasn't looking forward to today, the route description said it was going to be very hard with 2 different dune crossings of 40kms each, as well as a difficult pass to negotiate. The saving grace is that the last 200kms was supposed to be smooth and fast. Again I mentally broke it down into chucks, knowing that once I got out of the deep sand and into CP2 at kilometre 293 it's smooth sailing home.

Sharon's plane left at 1:00 in the afternoon and my start time was at 8:30. We had breakfast together and we did our best to hold back the tears as she saw me off. The stage started out on some fast piste, but as usual we were in a sand storm and visibility was bad. Due to my poor finish in the stage before, I started towards the back of field and quickly began to pass other riders. I actually felt pretty good this morning, even with the dramas of yesterday. I must have recovered a bit.

It didn't take long before we entered the first of the dune crossings and I managed to get thru it with out any major dilemmas. I was starting to build confidence the more days I had behind me. I was now closer to the end than I was to the start and my fears that I wouldn't be physically and mentally up for the task had begun to subside. I knew that it was still going to be very difficult, but I'd already gone thru some tough times and survived. I now knew that I had the ability to do it again if I had to.

After another 90kms of really fast piste I arrived at CP1 and the start of the real test for the day. First we had to climb a pass of soft sand and rocks (my favourite), then 60kms of camel grass followed by 30kms of what some described as the biggest softest dunes in Dakar history. I climbed the pass, tipping over only once at the very top and set off into the sea of grass tufts. I was getting a lot better at the camel grass, you needed to look very far ahead to find the smoothest lines and it required patience, there was no way you were going to go fast, so there was no sense even trying. I just followed the GPS compass and made sure I saw some other tracks from time to time and counted down the kilometres.

I came across a French rider on another 660, who had completely run out of gas. I couldn't believe it, they told us fuel consumption would be a problem today and he had run out at the 250km mark. I felt like leaving him there because he was so stupid, but I only had about 50kms to the next refuelling point and my bike was still half full. I didn't need to haul all that weight thru the upcoming dunes, so we removed one of my rear tanks and poured it into his. I said "remember my number, 151, if you see me down the road and I need help, you must stop".

Just before the waypoint that designated the start of the huge Erg crossing, I ran into my old Irish buddy Gary Ennis. He was glad to see me, for some reason he always thought I was good in the dunes and liked to follow me. I wasn't sure why this was, I didn't think I was any good in the sand. Maybe this was so he could see where not to go! It was 30kms to get to CP2 where we could stop for 15 minutes to refuel and have something to eat and then it was a fast easy ride back to Atar. The dunes grew and grew to the point that they were literally over a hundred feet in height. We were patient and methodical, reading the sand and the tracks of the others as we worked our way thru the sand, and then suddenly, we were on the top of an enormous dune looking down at the CP far below us. We rode down the huge slope like the Grinch returning to Whoville, sliding to a stop to give back our time cards.

We gassed and ate, when I heard the thumping of a helicopter in the distance, I tapped Gary on the shoulder and pointed. Hanging below it on a long tether was a motorcycle like it had just been plucked from the sea. "You don't see that everyday," I said. It hovered not far from the CP, setting the bike on the ground and dropping the tether, before setting off back to the dunes for its next load.

The remaining 200kms was fast and smooth, as promised, but punctuated by tiny Oued beds now and then, just to keep it interesting. We burned thru the kilometres with ease as we rode side by side on the 2-track to avoid each other's dust. We would occasionally ride off to the side to find smoother lines. I quickly learned the dangers of this when I went off track to cross an Oued. At about 80 kph I clipped a small step on the far side, sending the rear wheel skyward. I grabbed the seat between my feet as it tried to throw me over the bars and pinned the throttle to use the centrifugal force of the motor and rear wheel to stop the bike from tumbling forward. The rear end came slamming back to earth and I landed back in the seat. I had just been micrometers from an enormous accident and I rode along in disbelief, I had just seen god.

This was probably the earliest I had ever gotten in and there was very little to do on the bike. I had finished 58th on what was supposed to be a really tough stage. I decided it was cause for celebration and I would treat myself to what would be my only shave of the rallye. Clean and refreshed I wandered over to the catering tent. In typical Dakar style, when things seem to be going all right for once, they pull the rug out from under you. Spanish rider, Jose Manual Perez had suffered a huge crash two days ago, this afternoon, he died.

11/01/05 Atar- Kiffa

Liaison 34kms
Special 400kms
Liaison 340kms

The sun began to rise as I set out on the liaison to the start of the stage. Today's special was originally going to be 656kms but after the fiasco of a few days ago they decided to shorten it. The special would now end at CP2 after 400kms and then be followed by a 340km road section to the bivouac in Kiffa. I was feeling confident after yesterday, today's stage was about 100kms shorter, and felt I would be able to get thru fairly quickly, I was wrong!

The special started out in a wide oued bed on soft sand, and finding a fast line was pretty much impossible. It wasn't long before I came across Kellon Walsh on one of the Red Bull U.S.A bikes stopped on the side of the piste. I turned back to see if I could help but he said he figured it was some kind electrical problem and he was going to wait for the race truck to come along. I set off again, and was soon caught by Gary who had started a few places behind me; naturally we rode together and helped each other navigate thru the maze of rocks, sand and trees. The terrain was like nothing we had encountered before and I can easily say that it was the least enjoyable riding to date. In and out of the oued bed, either soft sand or rocks, you could never gain any speed.

We began to encounter Fech-Fech, this was sand that was as fine as flour, but didn't look any different than the rest of the sand. If you hit a patch of it, your bike would immediately come to a grinding halt and sink up to the axles. It just became the luck of the draw whether you were going to hit it or not. My luck had obviously run out as I accelerated to climb a little step, as I went to pull on the handlebars and raise the front wheel, the bike stopped dead in its tracks slamming my chest into the roadbook. I lay on the ground seeing stars again, unable to breath. The impact was so severe that my entire neck was screaming in pain as my head was almost separated from my body. Fortunately I was wearing my Sinisalo body armour and it helped to dissipate the impact but I've still never felt pain like that before, it'll be months before I'll be able to cough or sneeze with out buckling in pain.

The oued soon ended as course turned in to camel grass, this time the tufts were small and very closely spaced. There was no way of weaving between them and the rough terrain beat the daylight out of me. In the oued, I prayed for anything but the oued, in the camel grass I prayed for anything but camel grass. From time to time we would come across a tiny chott, a smooth dry lake bed, a few hundred metres across. This would finally be a chance to sit down for maybe 30 seconds, just enough to taunt us before we headed back into the hateful camel grass.

The camel grass did eventually end as we approached the first CP and as usual they hid the CP behind a huge Erg crossing. This trick was getting old and it convinced Gary to trust me and not follow the tracks into the dunes. As before, I made a sharp 90-degree turn and rode along the face of the first dunes. It wasn't long before I found the tracks of local vehicles, and we followed them as they weaved between little dunes on a firm base. Minutes later we were on the far side and into the CP, while others floundered around in the soft sand behind us.

It had taken us 4 hours to cover the first 175kms of today's stage and we were starting to worry that we would not be able to make it out before dark as we still had 340kms of pavement to ride after that. We stopped long enough to refuel and stuff a few Powerbars down our necks. Our worst fears were soon realized when the trail soon returned to my beloved camel grass, but this time it was interspersed with some dune crossings and these dunes were interspersed with Fech-Fech. There was nothing on this day that made you enjoy riding and at this point I never wanted to see a motorcycle again.

The Fech- Fech was horrible, you would be riding along, taking the same high lines on firm ground that had gotten you thru all the other dunes when suddenly the front wheel would bury itself up to the fender. It would take a lot of time, patience and energy to extricate the bike from this quicksand and you never knew whether you were going to be doing it all again in a few kilometres or a few feet.

I had become separated from Gary in one of these erg crossings, I thought I was smart and took a different line than the other bikes had. It took me over a half of an hour to cover a few hundred metres. When I regained the track I didn't know if he was ahead or behind me so I stopped to wait. After about 10 minutes there was still no Gary so I figured he had continued on and I set out on my own. After hours of riding the sand and camel grass eventually began to give way to rocky piste. I couldn't have been happier to see it as the sun was starting to get low in the sky and I was able to cover ground a little quicker.

Without any notice, the bike suddenly stopped running and I coasted to the side of the piste to examine the problem. I had run out of gas, the bike was bone dry and I still had over 40kms to cover. I had burned more fuel in the extra soft sand than I had thought. So close but yet so far! Was this the way the Dakar was going to end for me, it was no ones fault but my own. I flagged down the first bikes that came along and asked them for gas in French but they couldn't understand me. I said in English "don't you speak French?" and they replied back in English "Of course we do". So asked them for gas in English and they still didn't understand. It seemed that they understood everything I said no matter what language I spoke, except for anything to do with giving me some of their fuel. God damn Frenchies, It's all "let's work together" when they need something, but if you need their help, they forget how to speak French.

Lucky for me, Charlie Rauseo was next to roll up and being an American he was able to understand my plea for help. He didn't have much fuel left but kindly gave me half what he had, he even refused offers of letting me help remove his fuel tank. With Charlie's help I was able to soldier on thru the remaining track, although my stress levels were now going off the scale. Short shifting and lugging the motor to save gas, I prayed it would make it to the end. The final CP eventually came into view and I breathed a sigh of relief, I figured I could push the thing from here if I had to.

It was now dark and I had just ridden 10 hours and 15 minutes of some of the worst trail of my life. I pushed my bike up to the fuel drums to get gas for the road section. As the pumpist filled the tanks I turned to another rider in line and said, "That was horrible", He said, "It is a very bad day, Fabrizio Meoni is dead". I couldn't believe my ears. I was in shock. I left my bike where it was and walked a few steps into the desert and started to cry. This was getting out of control, it wasn't worth it anymore, we were going thru hell and people were dieing. For what? To prove that we were tough? This was pointless!

I stood there for a few minutes and thought about his family and what they would have to go thru and I thought about mine. I was in the middle of nowhere and there was nothing else to do but get on the bike and ride it, I still had a very long way to go.

It was pitch dark and there are no streetlights in Africa, there aren't even lines painted on the road. It's not like driving at home in the dark, it's a challenge just to stay on the road here. It was hard just to go 80kph, and at that rate I would be riding all night. Finally, one of the cars caught and passed me, they had very powerful lights and could light up the road like it was daylight. I tucked in behind and followed in their draft, increasing my speed to over 100.

The Dakar had certainly taught me patience and even thou this liaison was going to take over four hours, I knew I would make it there eventually, all I had to do is sit here and concentrate. At around 11:00pm, I finally reached the bivouac at Kiffa. I rode up to the final checkpoint, came to a stop, and promptly fell over. I had just ridden 774kms in 15 hours. As the check workers helped pick up the bike they told me there would be no stage tomorrow, to honour Fabrizio, and that we would fly by airplane to Bamako. I was deeply saddened by the lost of this Dakar legend, who I had followed for so many years, but at the same time I was grateful for the rest.

12/01/05 Kiffa – Bamako

I didn't even look at the bike after I parked at the airplane boxes, I just got off off it and walked over to the catering tent, still in my riding gear. Gary and Simon were there, Gary had waited for me for a while after we were separated but it sounded like while I was waiting for him he was up the trail waiting for me.

I was beat, I threw up my tent and crawled in, I was glad I didn't have to ride tomorrow, it was like this rallye was playing with me. It would push me to the point of breaking and just before I would snap it would let off just enough for me to catch my breath, then it would reapply the pressure again. I felt like a mouse that had been captured by a cat and it was toying with me before it would finally put me out of my misery.

I was woken up at 6:00am by someone shaking my tent. It was one of the organizers and they said that the airplanes were leaving soon and that I needed to pack my tent before it's torn to pieces by the propwash, so much for sleeping in! I begrudgingly climbed out, packed up and went looking for coffee.

The Rauseo boys were camped out in one of the catering tents and I made a little nest and joined them. Dave had injured his foot and was lying on his back, keeping it elevated. It was every shade of purple imaginable, I'd never seen anything like it, he must have been in a lot of pain but

you could never tell, a smile never left the guys face. His plan was once he put his boot back on tomorrow he wasn't going to take it off until Dakar, his rationale was that it would support it and keep the swelling down. This plan was obviously sound, as he made it to the finish in Dakar but upon arriving home he had it checked out by his doctor, it was broken in four places.

Eventually we were kicked out and told to wait on the runway, as our plane was to arrive shortly. I kicked back with the U.S. KTM team and some of the other Anglos. We all gathered around as Scot Harden and Alfie Cox recounted racing stories of days gone by and 3 hours later we were finally loaded on the plane, my sides aching from the laughter.

I now knew that I was up to the task of finishing this thing, I was around 80th in the standings and at this point, no matter if I went really quick or really slow, I wasn't going to change position much. I decided to cruise to the finish, I didn't care if I was the last name on the result sheet everyday, just as long as my name was on the sheet. I vowed to be extra vigilant looking after the bike and ride well within my abilities as to not crash and in four days I would have a Dakar finishers medal in my pocket.

13/01/05 Bamako- Kayes

Liaison 205kms
Special 370kms
Liaison 93kms

This morning I had to get up at 4:30 am to make my start time for the 200km liaison at 5:40am. I think I was actually starting to get used to waking up at these crazy hours. It was sort of lucky we were starting out then since we had to ride right thru the heart of Bamako and out the other side, and it's a huge city jammed with vehicles by day. Getting thru the city in early morning was smooth sailing, it was after that the trouble started. The pavement ended outside of the city and the road turned to Laterite, a very dry, red clay like surface that's quite smooth but very dusty. I had about 90 bikes ahead of me due to my poor time on the last stage and by the time I got on the road the dust was as thick as fog, so much for my clean air filter. By the time I reached the start of the Special I was red from head to toe, I can't imagine what my lungs looked like. No matter where you are or what you're on, the Dakar always seems to add some element to make the experience miserable.

I was looking forward to this special, it was fast laterite with sections of fast pavement mixed in for good measure, the key word being "fast". Since I was an ex-roadracer this was more my style than the sand and rock of the past week. My goal today was to try and not drop the bike all day, if I did this and I was easy on the motor I'd get to Kayes in good shape. The stage started out relatively quick with huge potholes and ruts, these were marked out on the roadbook and it made for a busy ride watching the trail ahead, watching the roadbook and matching your mileage with the roadbook, all this while trying to pass other riders in the dust. I quickly caught other riders, but as Murray Walker says "catching them is one thing, passing them is very much another". The closer you got to other riders the dustier it got, and therefore the less you could see. Often you would have to sit behind them for 10-20 kilometres before you had a chance to pass. Eventually the course became paved and passing was no problem. The pavement was great, it was very bumpy and the bike jumped and bucked around as I tried to stay under my self-

imposed 120kph speed limit, feeling a little like Joey Dunlop at the Isle of Man.

I was in clear air and starting to enjoy the riding, but I kept telling myself to remember my goal of looking after the bike and to take it easy and not do anything stupid. Of course that's when the pavement ended. We crossed a huge hydroelectric dam in the village of Manantali, 152kms from the start, and from here we turned off into some small laterite piste and back into the dust. I recalled seeing these trails on the Dakar coverage in the years past and now here I was, all I needed was Toby Moody to do the narrating. But of course, there was little time for nostalgia as the trail quickly turned to rutted and rocky and I could no longer keep up my "Hairy Flatters" pace.

I didn't mind this riding, it was little more like what I used to from home and I still caught and passed a few riders. Things seemed to be going according to plan, I was staying out of trouble, I hadn't dropped the bike, and then disaster struck. The first car went by completely unannounced and the dust blinded me. I might well as just ridden along with my eyes closed, you couldn't see two feet in front of you, and you couldn't tell what was up or what was down and I immediately hit something. I tried to save it but that's kind of hard to do when you don't know where you are or where you're going.

I lay on, what I figured must be the ground, and took stock of my faculties. I taken a good hit but otherwise I was fine, which was more than I could say for the bike. It turned out that I had gone off the road and hit a stump. The fairing was all busted up and I had bent the entire roadbook assembly, the hand guard was completely ripped off and the clutch lever was busted. I was pissed off! I was riding along, minding my own business and now my bike is all smashed up, thru no fault of my own. I now have to stay up tonight and fix it. This wasn't in the plan. I picked it up and, of course, it started immediately, it had one of those clutch levers with a notch in it so I could still use it even thou it busted off.

This was just the beginning of the problem with the cars and the dust. When I arrived at CP2, the refuelling point, everyone was covered in dust to the point you could barely make out who they were and they were all recounting stories similar to mine. Kellon Walsh came in shortly after me, he had to start near the back after his mechanical problem in the previous stage and after running near the front for the whole rally was not enjoying his time back here in the dust with us privateers.

The last 120kms to end was on a freshly graded gravel road and I cruised along at 120kph. It wasn't long before Kellon came up beside me and we rode along together for a while, I picked up the pace a little to stay with him but he would still edge away. He would slow a little to let me catch up but it was obvious he could go much faster and I was holding him up. I waved him on and he took off, it was better that we both go our own pace. There were a lot of sections that were completely flat and straight, for some times kilometres on end. I later asked the U.S. KTM guys how fast they were going on these sections. "I hit 186 before the rev limiter kicked in" was Chris Blais' answer, I thought 120 was fast.

The 93km liaison started in the gold mining town of Sadiola and was the same dusty laterite we had been on for most of the day. The only difference was that about every kilometre or so there was a big concrete ditch running across the road to help prevent the road from being washed away in the rainy season. This was a real test of patience since each ditch required you to slow to first or second gear and then you would accelerate up thru the gears only to slow back down for

the next one.

It was about 4:00 when I got to Kayes, early by Dakar standards, I stopped, refuelled and got the bike washed before heading out to the bivouac at the airport. I had been living out the back of an airplane for the last two weeks. All the moto boxes would be stacked just outside of the loading ramp of the plane and the spare wheels were in racks inside. You would just walk thru the stacks of boxes looking for your number, when you found it you'd just pull it out and that's where you'd camp. It didn't matter that there might be a better campsite even ten feet away or that you were right beside the generator, you simply didn't have the energy to move it, so that's where you slept. Elf Oil Company supplied fluids and a workspace to all the unsupported privateers and this was also located beside the bike boxes. In the first few days of the rally this area was a beehive of activity with it being difficult to just get close to the lights. With only 3 days left in the rally, it was now a ghost town, almost all of the unsupported riders were out. The few of us who remained were on a first name basis with the Elf guys and most of the bike boxes sat untouched, like some kind of a memorial to the riders that were gone.

14/01/05 Kayes- Tambacounda

Liaison 93kms
Special 529kms
Liaison 8kms

I had two more days to go and at this point I just wanted it over. I was like an automaton, there was no happy, there was no sad, I was too tired for emotions anymore. All I thought about was, when was dinner, what was my start time, when would my wheels be done, what were the roadbook changes. I was just on autopilot and it seemed as thou I had been doing this for months. It was hard to believe that I had been at home for Christmas just over 3 weeks ago, it seemed like some distant lifetime ago.

The alarm went off at 4:30am. I knew the drill now, I could lay here for a few minutes, then I'd put my riding gear straight on, stuff my sleeping bag in its sack and roll my "Thermarest". I'd put them in the box, then pull out the 2 tent poles and stuff the tent right into the box without rolling it up or anything. Then lock the box and leave it where it sat. Maximum efficiency, it would all take less than 15 minutes.

As usual it was pitch dark as we set out on the liaison. I hooked up with Gary and we rode back out the same 93kms that we had come in on yesterday. As a matter of fact the first 120kms of the special was the same fast gravel road that was the finish of yesterdays stage, this time run in reverse. Dust was a problem, as the day before, but I quickly got past a few riders and into clear air. I wanted to make up as much time as possible this morning so I would be far down the track before the cars came past. The fast piste took us to the town of Kenieba and the whole town was out to welcome us, waving and singing as we went past. From there we left the fast track and took a tiny trail thru the bush toward the river crossing at the Senegalese border. It was very narrow and rutted, reminding me of the road allowances I rode back home, except for the villages of thatched roof huts that emerged from time to time.

They had warned us of the dangers of the river crossing at the meeting the evening before, they

told the bikers to get off and walk our bikes thru as it was very deep with a rough bottom. I was surprised how wide it was but it didn't look very deep. I was used to river crossings and knew a few tricks. I stopped and watched the bike ahead of me cross, to get an idea of where and where not to go. About half way across and off to one side, I could see some plants sticking out and there were photographers standing there up to their knees. I made a beeline over to this little submerged island and stopped to scout the rest of the crossing. I was used to spectators pointing out good lines but everyone just stood there waiting for someone to go for a swim. I could read where it was shallow from the ripples in the water and set out across the last half of the river using my own judgment. As I neared the far shore a guy in an official Dakar shirt began waving and indicating that I was far off course. I took a sharp right as indicated and the water instantly got deeper. I was now committed and the water just got deeper, this wouldn't have been any problem on a light weight Enduro bike but the huge skidpan and tanks of the Rallye displaced so much water that the bike began to feel like it was floating. I popped on to the far shore and accelerated up the steep bank past the official who had been pointing the lines. As I past him, I realized it was in fact Patrick Zaniroli the head of the Dakar organization and the same fellow that lays out the entire route year after year. No wonder his lines are bad, this is the same guy who thought putting us thru the endless camel grass day after day was a good idea! From the water crossing to CP2 at the 258km mark, the riding was my favourite of the whole rally, it was a very hard and very smooth 2-track that wound its way thru the bush on long sweeping turns. For once I was really enjoying being on the bike instead of watching the odometer waiting for the end. The slightest application of throttle would spin up the rear tire resulting in long lazy dirt track style drifts.

After awhile the bottoms of my feet began to irritate me but I couldn't figure out what the problem was. It was like athletes foot, times 10. No matter what I did it wouldn't go away and the discomfort was starting to grow unbearable. Then it dawned on me, my feet were being boiled alive in my own boots. They had filled with water during the river crossing, and the water was now transferring the heat from the exhaust pipes, which were located under the foot pegs, directly to the bottoms of my feet. There was nothing I could do but grin and bear it hoping the water was close to being completely evaporated.

As I stopped at CP2 to refuel, and have something to eat, the first car blew past. This wasn't a good sign, we still had another 250kms to go to the finish and as per usual Dakar protocol the trail immediately became dusty. This was a dangerous situation and I knew it. I had so many hard days behind me and I was so close to the finish of this thing that the pressure was almost unbearable again. I just didn't want to throw it all away now, especially thru no fault of my own. I decided it was time to slow down and ride like a tourist, only another 250kms today and then 220 tomorrow, nothing by Dakar standards, but they suddenly seemed very long.

Right on cue a car went by, I hit something and went down, I tumbled thru the fog, before I abruptly came to rest against something solid, my right hand and my back screaming in pain. I lay there as the dust cleared, evaluating the condition of my body. I was wrapped around a tree off to one side of the track, the bike laying on the other. My hand was in bad shape, I had been having problems with it already, my middle and index fingers had developed tendonitis and would stiffen up and lose feeling after an hour riding. Now the other two fingers were beginning to swell up after I had inadvertently punched a tree as I flew thru the dust.

At least the bike got off easy this time and was completely unscathed. I realized that this rallye was going to be a living hell right up to last few meters and even thou I was close to the end,

they were still going to find some kind of hardship to put me thru. I was back to counting down the kilometres, praying nothing more would happen. The cars continued to come past but now I would immediately come to a complete stop and wait for the dust to clear.

There were a few riders stopped on the side and I passed by giving them the usual “thumbs up” sign to see if things were fine. They had an emergency blanket out which was odd but it looked like they gave me the “thumbs up” in return. I had a feeling that something was wrong and kept looking over my shoulder but no one waved me back. I continued on, thru some very difficult and dangerous riding in deep dust filled ruts but from time to time I would think of the situation I had passed and tears would start to well up again. I was so close to the end that it was teasing me, but the dangers loomed so large that I knew I could be out at any second. I was an emotion, physical and mental wreck.

I arrived in Tamba roughly 9 hours after setting out from Kayes. It took forever to get my gear off as I could barely walk from the blisters on my feet. I sat there exhausted and one of the Elf guys handed me a cold Coke, it never tasted so good. Eventually I summoned the energy to get changed and I hobbled over to the medical tent to have someone look at my feet. As I neared the door I ran into Simon on his way out, he said, “Have you seen Gary?” “No” I said, “He crashed in the dust and broke his leg!” he replied. I was devastated, I always thought that Simon, Gary and me would make to the end, it just seemed to be in the cards. My feet now forgotten, I walked to the back of the tent to find him on a gurney, surrounded by his mechanics. I was speechless; there was nothing I could say that would be able to console him. What do you say, “Well you almost made it”, or “it wasn’t you fault”. He was in good spirits, joking as he always did. “You bastard”, he said, “you rode right by me, I saw ya!” Then it hit me the accident I had seen on the side of the trail had been him, and I had no idea. And even though we had helped each other day in and day out to get to this point, when he really needed me, I just rode past. Again my eyes began to well up, I tried to make some kind of joke about it. We milled around for a few minutes, trying to put on brave faces, before the doctors kicked us out to prepare him for a flight to Paris. We said our goodbyes and I walked back to my tent, tears, once again streaming down my face.

15/01/05 Tambacounda- Dakar

Liaison 108kms
Special 225kms
Liaison 236kms

This was it, hopefully tonight I would be in Dakar. Both Sharon and my mom had flown in for the finish and were probably there by now. All I had to do is ride 569kms, the special was a very short 225kms and I would be there, it would all be over. I got to sleep in this morning, I didn’t have to be on the bike until quarter to seven, so I got up at a leisurely 5:30am.

This was the last time I was going to have to pack up so I just threw everything into the airplane box in a big mess. As I was pulling down my tent a local came by asking if he could have it as a “cadeaux” since I wasn’t going to need it anymore. I did my best to explain to him I still needed it once I got home and offered him a dirty old “Vegas to Reno” t-shirt, which he instantly turned down. So much for the old saying” beggers can’t be choosers.

I fired up the bike and turned on the lights only to discover that they didn't work. It was still completely dark out and I was going to be riding on public roads for the first while. I couldn't figure out where the problem was and as my start time approached I headed over to the start CP in the darkness. Charlie Rauseo was waiting to start the road section when I rode up, I quickly explained my predicament and he agreed to let me ride along side him to share his lights. I started 2 minutes ahead of him and just pulled over and waited for him after I went thru the CP. It was still pretty hairy riding thru Tamba' as there was a fair bit of traffic on the roads at this time and I was virtually invisible to them.

All I wanted to do was nurse the bike to the finish, little problems like the lights were a sign that the bike was getting tired and eventually a bigger more terminal problem might arise. I had now run out of tires and was using whatever I had left. I had done the entire rallye on 2 front mousse and 3 rears and the ones in the front were so beaten that they felt like tubes with about 5 pounds of air in them. They would be great for tomorrows run up the beach, but right now they were letting the tires overheat on the pavement, forcing me to cruise along at 90kph.

The special started out on a firm 2-track with huge dusty holes in it, It was only 220kms long and I knew that I would be at the end in about 3 hours, this was nothing by Dakar standards. By now I knew that all you had to do was concentrate and the end would come eventually.

That was easier said than done, knowing that once I got the end of this stage the Rallye was pretty much in the bag and then a few more hours later, I'd be in a comfortable hotel room with Sharon at my side. Sure there was the run around the Pink lake, but that was nothing more than a victory parade.

It wasn't long before I caught riders ahead but as usual getting by them was tricky in the dust. I was extra careful today but with the end in sight, all I could think about was the finish. It was the longest 220kms I've ever ridden. I would count down "only 100kms to go", "only 80kms to go", "I'll be there in only an hour". After a lifetime of riding I emerged onto a brand new road that was very wide and fast and cruised thru the last 20kms at over 100kph.

As I rolled into the CP the entire check crew were applauding along with the tourists and crews that had come out to see the finish. I was relieved, I was happy, you couldn't get the smile of my face, but it wasn't long before I began to think about the road section ahead. It seemed as though you were always tricking yourself in to thinking that "once I get here, it'll be over" but that was never the case, there was always something else to do. This little game that helps make it seem less overwhelming also began to make it a little less gratifying, because you never reached the end.

Part way thru the final liaison, I stopped for some water to drink and noticed fluid in the skid plate. Rad coolant! I can't believe it, I have 150km of pavement to Dakar and I have a coolant leak and to top it off it's roasting hot out today. I knew this rallye would be torture all the way to the end. The Dakar just didn't give up! There was a small split in one of the hoses and the rad still had most of its fluid, I topped it back up with the water I had just gotten out to drink and set off again. I stopped every few minutes to check the fluid height and topped it up whenever I passed a gas station, finally realizing that it would make it to Dakar.

The traffic in Dakar was the worst I've ever encountered, I've ridden bikes in some pretty crazy

places like Thailand, India and Ghana, but for some reason Dakar drivers were the worst, the place was complete gridlock. I finally resorted to riding up sidewalks, thru ditches, whatever it took, as my patience had completely run out. I was now counting down the mileage to the end like the countdown of a shuttle launch. 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, Meridian hotel!

The entrance to the hotel and CP was lined with family, friends and crew awaiting their pilots. Everyone was waving and clapping as I rode up to hand back my timecard and receive my final roadbook, "Dakar to Dakar". The check crew patted me on the back and congratulated me as I scanned the crowd for my wife. I put the bike back into gear and rode ahead waving back at everyone, and then suddenly I picked her out of the crowd. I rolled to a stop in front of her and she put her arms around me before I had a chance to kill the engine.

16/01/05 Dakar-Dakar

Liaison 37kms
Special 31kms

Sharon and my mom snuck me into their room at the Club Med. A bed with clean sheets, a shower and an all you could eat buffet. I just lay on the bed, still in my riding gear, as they begged me to get the stinky gear off and throw it out onto the balcony. All I wanted was food, I ate anything they had, oranges they had gotten at lunch, Powerbars, snacks from the airplane. I tried to have a nap but they both said I smelled too bad and I had to have a shower first. I finally summoned the energy to get my gear off and it was immediately quarantined out on the porch. I didn't recognize myself when I looked in the mirror, I had lost so much weight and my eyes were completely sunken from the lack of sleep. I was in the shower forever, I just stood there letting the warm water run over me.

If the Dakar had taught me anything, it had given me a renewed appreciation for the little things we enjoy everyday, the shower, clean bed, I couldn't wait to be at home and lay on the couch watching T.V. with the dog. But most of all it made me appreciate my family and how important they are to me, I had spent the last year, neglecting them, dreaming of the Dakar, but once I was here, I dreamed of being back home with them.

Even thou we only had 68kms to ride today we still had to get up in the dark. I made my way down to the buffet, bacon and eggs, "Pain au Chocolat", fresh coffee, the breakfast of champions!

The mood was completely different than the days before, everyone was happy and joking around as we waited on the beach. There were group photos as well as lots of snapshots with friends. Etienne Lavigne and Patrick Zaniroli made a speech, then a sobering minute of silence for the riders no longer with us.

They dropped the flare and we were off! The tide was too high this year to run down on the smooth part of the beach, like I had always seen on television, so we were forced up high on the soft stuff. I was used to riding in the soft sand now but I was still disappointed that I didn't get to let it rip down the fast stuff. After about 10kms of beach the course turned inland on a rutted out track thru the dunes, this would have been quite intimidating a few weeks ago but didn't pose much of a problem anymore. The route was now completely lined with fans everyone waving

and cheering, I was beginning to get used to this superstar status! The ground then turned hard and fast and the famous Lac Rose soon appeared, true to its name the water was completely pink. A few more kilometres of weaving thru the salt beds and I rolled past the chequered flag. That was it, it was over, the bike could now explode into a million pieces and it wouldn't matter. The pressure was finally off.

We all milled around congratulating each other, shaking hands and hugging. I saw the Estonian that I had meet so many days ago in the desert and walked over to shake his hand, we didn't say a word, we just looked at each and laughed, knowing exactly what each other was thinking. I gave Simon a hug and then they began to line us up for the podium.

I heard someone call my name, I saw Sharon and Elmer Symonds, one of the U.S. KTM mechanics at the fence. They wouldn't let friends and family into where the bikes were like they said they would, so Elmer helped her jump the fence before coming over himself. There were more hugs and congratulations and then my number was called. I told Sharon to hop on the back of the bike and both rode up the ramp to the top of the podium.

I was kind of nervous, I didn't want to come to a stop and fall over in front of everyone. Etienne Lavigne gave me a pat on the back and told me "I should be very proud, as this rally has been very difficult". A Senegalese woman in traditional dress handed me a velvet case containing a Dakar finishers medal and a fellow with a microphone began to ask me questions about what it was like to be a finisher. I had dreamt of this moment, thinking it would be very emotional but now, all I could think about was saying something intelligent into the microphone. I made something up on the spot, spewing out meaningless rhetoric that would have made a "Nascar" driver proud. But then I thanked my wife for the sacrifices she had made to get me here and the emotions came pouring back out. I fought back the tears one last time.

At the bottom, the television cameras waited to interview the riders. Being a Canadian no one could have cared less about me, had I been French or Dutch I would have gotten a five minute spot on television everyday, even if I was in last place. At home we were lucky if it was even on T.V. Then out of the blue, Toby Moody appeared and he also asked me what it was like to finish. I really had no idea what it was like, I couldn't really understand what had happened, it was really just a mind-numbing blur. I had run now out of intelligent things to say (really I was star struck by the fact that Toby Moody was talking to ME) and blabbed out something stupid. Realizing they weren't going to get anything newsworthy out of me they turned off the cameras and Toby turned to me and said "Don't play this down, you have no idea how many people would like to be in your shoes right now, I don't think you realize what you have done, boy!"

I parked the bike and went over to the catering tent they had set up for the sponsors, guests and pilots. We sat at one of the tables and had a bite to eat, they had cans of Heineken and I sat back drinking my first beer in months. Toby Moody was absolutely right, I had no idea what I had done. I had just finished one of the most difficult Dakars in years, and I had done it against all odds. Traditionally only about 30% of the first timers even make it to the end but I had done it in my first attempt, without any assistance, all by myself, a feat I doubt anyone else achieved this year. But right now I couldn't have cared any less about all this things, right now all I wanted was to go to sleep.

I really need to thank everyone who helped to make this possible:
Jim, Colin, Richard and the crew at Cycle Improvements.
Michel, Paul and Jocelyn at Kimpex.
Guy, Patrick, Bill and Mario from KTM Canada.
Digby and the ODSC posse.
Lawrence Hacking.
The Harden Off road crew
Everyone on the U.S. Red bull KTM team
And of course Sharon McCrindle

Story as posted on Bob's web site forum here: <http://dakar.odsc.on.ca>





For Those That Dream...



Dakar Awaits...