



HOMER AK

Lynn LePelley



RIDING THE HOKA HEY



KEY WEST FL

THE HOOK

I think my wife was reading a motorcycle club newsletter that mentioned a member who was riding in something called the Hoka Hey Motorcycle Challenge. From the moment I went on the website, I was fascinated by the thought of riding to Alaska. ALASKA, can you imagine?? I mean we're talking *continents* here. Day after day I was involved in all sorts of dreams about conquering the road, on a distance that was almost 1/3 of the way around the globe. I mean *really*, if you went the other way wouldn't you end up in Santiago or something!? Of course I had to get to Key West first, a thousand miles from here, and then at the appointed hour sprint off onto the North American road, arriving in Alaska to cheering crowds like Hidalgo or Lindberg or something. I tried to figure if I had enough time and money for this, and find a means to get my bike back from Alaska. But the real scary thing was.....that I had to make hotel and plane reservations to *return* from a place in Alaska that I had to get to somehow on a motorcycle. But I couldn't get the idea out of my head.....

THE CHALLENGE

So I plunked down my thousand bucks, and signed up for what we later would laughingly call a \$500 coin and a \$500 bandana. The basic deal was that you had to ride from Key West to Homer on a Harley-Davidson air-cooled machine, on the exact route that they chose, with no outside assistance from spotters, extra tanks, substitute riders or motorcycles, navigation aids, etc., within a 14 day period from June 20th to July 4th. The first person to arrive would receive \$500,000, providing they passed the drug and polygraph tests and a nationwide crime check in the U.S. and Canada. Signed gas receipts would also be required of the first place finisher, to prove actual presence at those places. Sounds simple, doesn't it? So I tucked all these basic rules under my hat and started to get ready to go to Key West.

THE BLOG

One of the "benefits" of signing up was being included in the Hoka Hey Yahoo Group, and daily receiving a huge blast of postings that sometimes bordered on the supernatural! I did meet some interesting people on there, including a couple of Aussies who were doing the herculean task of shipping their bikes from Queensland to do the Challenge. But mostly the blog was all chaff; people bragging about what they could do or would do with great bravado, and a large amount of derisive chatter about any and all riders and machines. I'm sure some of these folks typed their way to Alaska and back several times. Among others, there was the "Iron Butt" thread, the GPS thread, the "oil cooler" thread, the "prescription medication" thread, the "pink panties" thread.....now *there* was a thread! Perhaps someone saved all the posts. If so, it would be possible with them to write a couple of comedy shows, and possibly revise a couple of thick psychological journals! Anyway, the one shining light of the Yahoo Group was that I met a couple of wonderful people who, as well as becoming great friends, were going to bring my bike back from Alaska.

KEY WEST

It was a great few days on my ride down to the keys, with good weather and excellent roads. Stopped to see my brother on the west coast of Florida and for a swim in the Gulf. Key West was as I remembered it, and I explored my nostalgic memory of our visit there when our kids were little. My wife flew down a couple of days before the start, and we rode around, as we did when we were first married and living in Hawaii, without helmets or a care in the world.

Everywhere we saw people who were part of the Hoka Hey and we met many of them, including folks like Jersey Pearl and Kelly, two riders that I shared the road with in a few spots and who arrived in Homer about the same time I did. Kelly always made a big splash with her wonderful adventurous spirit, and even though the Challenge is over and everyone has gone home, I'm sure that just her tattoos are still riding around down there somewhere!



THE FIRST DAY

Everybody started out with such bright dreams. Riding east into a beautiful sunrise, it seemed impossible that anything could dim our adventure, even though for a while we seemed to be heading in the wrong direction. But as we went through the Everglades, zigzagging our way through the back roads of Florida, the trip seemed to unravel a bit. I came to a place where there had been a crash and a biker helicoptered from the scene, and as I waited on the road with some other riders, it became apparent to us that this crash had occurred on a road that was not part of the course! I retraced my steps, and after riding 15 miles or so in the wrong direction I finally got back on the track. Continuing on, chagrined but mostly undaunted, I saw something that brought my bike, and my heart, to a stop. There was a cruiser parked by the road on a curve, and as I slowed and looked over the embankment, I saw a new motorcycle lying in the swamp, all crumpled and scraped. There was no one around. It was so sad that I pulled over and cried for a bit, thinking of this rider and their cherished dream that now just seemed to be cast away. The Challenge was not going to be an easy thing, and I continued on to Daytona older and wiser, to compare war stories and have a sweaty 3 hour sleep on the ground in the parking lot.



REALITY CHECK

Maybe it was in rural Georgia or Alabama, certainly in Arkansas, that I realized that I could not follow the prescribed directions and route, and still complete the Challenge in the time allotted. I heard different versions of my story from other riders, and what it boiled down to was – to define your personal goal and achieve it the best way you knew how. Some folks thought that it was the responsibility of the organizers to see that the path was cleared in all ways to just cruise to Alaska. But actually working all these things out was the actual challenge for each rider. When I arrived at the South Haven checkpoint, there seemed to be a fair amount of disgruntled people, who felt that various things were unfair and were aiming to exact some measure of retribution or at least compensation. There were several folks who were disappointed at having committed some horrible mistake; not following the route, having navigation aids, etc., which excluded them from the prize. I overheard one of the organizers counseling a discouraged rider, who felt that they had made some mistakes and thus were unworthy, disappointing the people, sponsors, etc. who were counting on them. The counsel being given was something that I will always remember; that your goals, your dreams, your strivings, should be saved and cherished as a gift, a part of your spirit to be held in trust for the people that love you. What a concept! I was just beginning to see what the Challenge was all about. A couple of days later, I was in a Subway in western Oklahoma, and the girl behind the counter commented on my Hoka Hey tee-shirt. "Yes, Hoka Hey", I said, "In the Sioux language it means....." "I know", she said, "I am Sioux." I had finally arrived in Hoka Hey country.



THE BAND-AID

A lot of people ask me “Well, how’d your butt feel after riding all those miles?” What I am starting to find out from this question is that one actually has to have done a ride like this in order to formulate a reasonable question about it. Sitting on a motorcycle seat for thousands of miles turns out not to be bad. But being out in the sun, wind, rain, heat, cold, dust, etc., for 12 to 15 hours per day for 14 days in a row, *that’s* the thing. I ran into several people who had been overcome by the elements in one way or another, including one superlative individual who had been laid up in a Birmingham hospital for 2 days with sun/skin poisoning and still caught up with the rest of the folks in Wyoming! In fact, a lot of my trip was spent trying to cool down somehow, or trying to warm up somehow. The sun was the worst of these environmental hazards, and since most of my face was covered with beard or goggles, there was only one significant part available for burning – the tip of my nose. Since the application of sunscreen to such a tiny area was quite difficult without a huge mess, permanent coverage was the best. Although constantly wearing a band-aid on my nose seemed weird at first, it had the added benefit of telling the giver of my first-aid kit that I had used it for something besides other people’s injuries.



THE SIGHTS

Let’s face it folks, all the really great scenery is out west! – All the breathtaking vistas that make you almost have a crash, pulling off the road to take a picture at the same point that another 20 people are pulling off. If you think that the scenery in Utah is great, you should see Montana! And if you think Montana has a picture postcard every five minutes, wait until you get to the Yukon and Alaska! I chose not to use a windshield for the Challenge, because I wanted to take a quantity of pictures and video from the bike, and the thought of looking/shooting through a varying amount of dirt day after day was beyond me. Having no windshield turned out to be a good choice, because cleaning my goggles was much easier and the speeds we were going on secondary roads didn’t require a huge wind block. Of course, as I headed north, my quantity of pictures was somewhat limited by lack of time, not wanting to be eaten by wildlife, and no waterproof camera.



THE ROAD

If difficulty was represented by weight, and all the roads in the lower 48 were placed on one side of a balance and the Alaska Highway on the other, the Alaska side of the balance would be headed for the center of the earth. In short, the Alaska Highway was the challenge. To quote a brochure “**It is the tremendous length of the highway, combined with its remoteness and the extremes of the Northern climate, that often result in surprises along this highway.**” Obviously this pamphlet is given to great understatement. Every possible road hazard known to man is up there; rain, fog, gravel, high winds, extreme cold, rockslides, potholes and huge wild animals sprinkled all over the place. There might be some variance as to which part of the road was the best, but as far as the nastiest road there is little disagreement. The 100 miles in the Yukon right before the Alaska line – yup, that’s the one! I’ve heard and read many accounts of the trip and practically everyone, including the first place finisher, concurs with this assessment. Stopping to eat at a café in Destruction Bay, I ran across some other Challenge riders and after breakfast we rode northward as a group toward Alaska. We had to stop a couple of times just to have some moments of actually sitting on the bikes, rather than getting constantly thrown into the air and wondering “Did I really bend the front wheel that time?”

However, the most *famous* bad road probably is that little section of Rt. 261 in Utah; a steep, washboardy, twisty, narrow gravel road which climbs about 3000 feet in just a couple of miles. Only the hairpin turns are paved. As I was almost at the top, I saw a huge 53’ semi inching its way around the curve above me. Burying my right foot peg in the embankment, we just barely cleared as he passed me, and looking over my shoulder I took a picture of the truck farther down, as he met another little Hoka Hey rider who was stopped in his tracks. Although this road was horrendous and you could only go around 5-8 MPH without flying off the mountain, this part of Rt. 261 was only about 5 miles long, just a blip on the radar of my overall experience.



THE WALL

This is the hardest part to write but the most important, because without the people mentioned herein, I might now not be walking the planet and able to tell this little story. Perhaps I had made some bad decisions earlier in the day about how far I thought I could get and what the weather was going to do, but when I pulled out of that gas station in Fort Nelson and headed into the mountains I definitely was not prepared for what was to come. It seemed that with every mile the weather conditions, and my condition, steadily worsened. The rain which before was just a drizzle now became a steady downpour. My \$30 raingear, with a lot of the rubber ablated by the wind, was not keeping any of the water out and I was wet to the bone. As the high mountains grew closer, I noticed that the snow line on them was getting lower and lower. As I got colder, I started to drive much slower in the rain and fog, and every time I went around a corner I would wonder how the road ahead could possibly go through the mountains I saw. After another hour or so I was in sorry shape indeed. I was shaking so hard that I could just barely ride, and before long I realized that, not only wasn't I going to get to my chosen gas point, but I might very well end my days out here. It was 28 degrees and starting to get pretty windy. I was all done and was ready to give up. But how do you give up in the middle of the Alaska Highway? Toad River. The town might be a myth for all I knew. I hadn't seen a vehicle, let alone a human, in many hours, and I was horrified at the thought that giving up might be harder than going on, and going on seemed impossible. I had seen a few cabins along the road. They were all abandoned, but I knew that I must find some shelter somewhere. I saw a little place at mile 497, and inched the bike off the shoulder to a building in a little clearing. I had made up my mind that if I tried the door and it didn't open, I would just sit down and rest against the building, perhaps forever. The door opened, I went inside, and my whole world changed. The couple that owned the establishment saw that I was in trouble indeed, and came immediately to my aid. I was quite embarrassed at being practically incapable of speech and shaking so hard that I couldn't remove my face mask or rain gear. But they helped me and gradually restored me to some semblance of normalcy. They soaked my forearms in warm water, cooked a meal for me, and had a room for me to stay, complete with a gas heater to dry my clothes. They did everything, short of setting me on their own beast, that a Good Samaritan would do. In my little room, once they cut off the generator to save gas at night, there were no lights or running water – just me with the soft hiss of the heater, being grateful and thinking my own thoughts. In the morning I was completely restored. They gave me a pair of rubber dishwashing gloves to put over my deerskin ones, I thanked them profusely and started out again. It was still raining the same old rain, but I rode along refreshed, basking in the glow of human kindness. So if you're ever in trouble on the road to Jericho, or even Toad River, I'm sure that there will be Samaritans around to help. Watch for them.

THE LAST DAY



As I was getting ready to leave Haines Junction, a little bird flew out of a bush and landed on my motorcycle pack. I thought that I would like to take a picture of him while it wasn't raining. As I readied the camera, he flew up and landed on the finger that I was using to press the shutter, so my first close-up of him was a huge wing blocking the lens. This bird then perched on my finger long enough for me to get several good shots of him. He would look at me as if to



say "Hey, if I can be out in this stuff all the time, what's the matter with you?" He seemed a very friendly chap, like a little totem, and I knew I was going to have a good day. After the previously described torturous road through the rest of the Yukon, we stopped to take obligatory tourist pictures of each other at the Alaska border. We then rode on into the 49th state, with no rain and a great road. I still had my tattered rain gear on but don't worry, I had plenty of use for it later. As a matter of fact, I had been wearing it for so long that it had to be surgically removed when I got to Homer. Even though I was moving along at a fairly good clip, the time just seemed to be disappearing on me, and this was the last day. Five o'clock in the afternoon found me sitting in a little café about a hundred miles north of Anchorage. I had to borrow someone's cell phone to call home, as mine was having the plague of the seven day rains or something. I met some Hoka Hey riders who seemed to be talking about Homer in a very familiar way, and I found that they had already *finished* the Challenge a couple of days before. I shuddered when they said they were riding home, over the same road that I had just been on – to Michigan!! But the thing that really scared

me was when they said “Yah, we left Homer at 8:30 this morning, and this is as far as we’ve gotten.” I thought to myself “Let’s see, 8:30AM to 5PM.....you mean I’ve got 8-1/2 more hours before I get there!!” If I left right then, it would be 1:30AM before I arrived in Homer, too late for the 14 days I guessed. And then there would be a problem getting gas. Where we were, there was no gas late at night – not like someplace like Newark where you pull in and fill ‘er up at 2 in the morning! I had almost run out of gas once coming into Teslin, and ended up coasting downhill for a few miles before switching it back on and crossing this horrible bridge to the gas station. Certainly gas was going to be a problem. I pressed on, gassing up in Anchorage, and again just outside of Seward just before they closed. It was still almost 200 miles to the goal and it had started raining again. The road was also getting very bumpy and slippery, and I went slower and slower so as not to suffer the indignity of crashing in the last 30 miles. Finally I was in Homer, but where was the finish line? I looked around desperately for someone to ask, and pulled hopefully into a couple of closed gas stations. But so far, Homer seemed to be a little town without people. Finally, a couple of kids in a pickup told me where the Spit was, and I went creeping on down there. Ah, this is the part of the story in which I get to answer some of the questions constantly put to me. Q: “What was the most beautiful thing you saw on the ride?” A: “The tiny star on the side of the road that became a TV light shining on me, telling me that I was at the end.” Q: “Did you have fun?” A: “Eventually. Some time after I pulled in to the finish and remembered to put the kickstand down.” Q: “What part of the ride was the most fulfilling?” A: “All the beautiful smiling faces welcoming me to Homer.” The picture at the right is one of my favorites. I didn’t take the picture, and it is not of me, but it best embodies the spirit of what it feels like to be home safe. I had finished at 1:06AM, and with the 4 hour time difference I was more than an hour before the deadline. Even though the people in Alaska don’t seem to know when it is time for sleeping at this time of the year, I desperately needed a little snooze. But I was so juiced from finishing that I talked with the hotel staff ‘till quarter of 4.



HOMER

Ever try to go shopping for gifts in a small Alaska town on a Sunday that just happens to be the 4th of July? It didn’t matter that I had to buy gifts in the Safeway supermarket. I was so euphoric that nothing mattered at all. I considered what I had just been through, and every part of the day seemed unbelievably easy. Have to figure out what change makes the laundry machines work? No problem! Got to find some milk to put on the cereal? No problem, got it covered! Even though I’d had less than 3 hours sleep, I walked out of the Driftwood Inn totally right with the world. In fact, I did find a nice gift shop that was open, with a couple of bald eagles making a nest in a tree across from the parking lot.



In the evening there was a large party for the finishers at a little place about 6 miles south of town. It was also a community event, and many people in the town took shuttle busses out for the ceremonies, including a touching tribute to the veterans. I rode my bike out there on the last of my gas, to leave my bike to be put on the trailer and to lie on the grass, looking out at the glaciers with my head in the clouds.

KICKIN’ BACK

I suppose before this is finished I should say something about my inability to keep my clothing and equipment with me. I lost my cell phone outside Tulsa. My spot tracker fell out of my pack in Missoula and was run over by a truck. Left a pair of goggles in a restroom in Idaho, looked for them for half an hour before buying another much crummier pair. As others on the ride will testify, I lost many gloves and found some gloves too – never quite equaling the amount I had lost. There were so many lost items, that if you would like to try some salvage, contact me and I will give you my exact route. You should be able to equip a small Boy Scout troop with the stuff that you find.

William Barclay was the first place finisher, riding the course to Homer in a little over 8 days. Of course I never saw him on the road. After he passed a given point, a fire-damaged forest would have had time to re-grow before I got there. Mr. Barclay is a great guy, well deserving of the prize. I went to South Dakota about 3 weeks after the event to shake his hand.

Sitting in the Anchorage airport waiting for my flight home, I had time to reflect on how fortunate I had been to be a part of the Hoka Hey Motorcycle Challenge. There were some people who didn’t feel

the way I did. Armchair quarterbacks all, and mostly non-riders, these folks couldn't find enough stuff to complain about; the ride was too hard, the maps were wrong, the roads were closed, the food at the party was too expensive, they were giving the money to the wrong charities – the list goes on and on. But Jim Red Cloud had said that it wouldn't be easy, and in my own case it took well over 150 gallons of gas and thousands of miles to prove that he was right. A lot of people dropped out of the Challenge, which made me consider the ideal for a moment. If a person does all the ride preparations, has a great motorcycle, knows all the rules, has all the proper clothes and follows the directions, what could possibly keep him from achieving the goal? It's fear. Fear, if unchecked, can not only erode your sense of purpose but also your physical well-being as well, and bring down the most stalwart warrior. I talked with a few riders about what gave them the greatest ability to conquer an obstacle, and the mental management of fear was the highest on the list, far above motorcycle mechanics, heated socks, adequate sleep, etc. You may have the greatest endurance and the best machine, but when you're afraid your normal, logical, healthful systems aren't working properly, and you can lose your sense of self worth pretty easily.

When the array of camera lenses had been withdrawn from my face, and when all the jokes about how wasted I looked at the finish had been told, came the inevitable question "Would you do this again?" A rhetorical question it's true, and one that's impossible to answer. We live in the constantly evolving present tense, so it's really not possible to repeat an experience from the past. New horizons are always the inevitable goal, so present regeneration becomes a constant boost – like refueling really – always remembering that anything worth achieving will always require more than one tank of gas.

HOKA HEY!

