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CANOL ZONE

Gravel and bears but few bridges--oh, my--as Alcan 5000 cyclists take on a 'more difficult course'

By Paul Duchene

Special to the Tribune
Published October 15, 2006

ROSS RIVER, Yukon Territory -- Two years ago, 15 dual-sport motorcycle riders took part in the summer Alcan 5000 Rally. At the closing banquet, they demanded a more difficult course. In August, they got their wish.

Sixteen riders tackled the obscure, 577-mile Canol Highway as part of the 22nd anniversary Alcan Rally. It was the pinnacle of a trip that saw 22 riders and nine cars travel 5,000 miles from Seattle to Anchorage in eight days, via Dawson City and the Arctic Circle. Half the trip was dirt and gravel, and half of that was traversed in heavy rain and near-freezing temperatures.

But at least there was a town at the end of each grueling 600-mile day. When 16 die-hards boarded the ferry Ross River across the Pelly River to the North Canol Highway at Ross River, they were on a 280-mile dirt ride to a sleeping bag in the middle of nowhere.

Built in just 18 months in 1942, right after the 1,500-mile Alcan Highway, the Canol (Canadian Oil) Highway brought a 4-inch pipeline from the Northwest Territories to Alaska, in case the Japanese attacked. Oil from Norman Wells, 75 miles from the Arctic Circle, is high in paraffin content and can be pumped in temperatures down to 70 degrees below zero Fahrenheit.

The winding gravel South Canol Highway runs 150 miles to the town of Ross River from Johnson's Crossing, 80 miles east of Whitehorse. From Ross River the North Canol stretches another 130 miles to the NWT border. Beyond the Mackenzie Mountains, the road literally falls into Tsichu River and the remaining 277 miles has deteriorated. A dozen bridges washed out in the 1950s, leaving rugged hikers to ford chest-deep rivers, report snowfall in June and battle mosquitoes as big as bats.

Along the North Canol, equipment that broke or whose job was finished, was dumped by now-sagging buildings. The cold desert climate means metal barely rusts, but it is an unforgiving country. Biblical storms boom out of the barren mountains; cataclysmic fires devastate 100-mile long valleys of emaciated trees; winter does not steal in like a thief.

Arctic Adventures tour guide Jamie Gleason, who lives in Whitehorse, where the pipeline fed a refinery, says the North Canol is open to the border, though it was closed until June. But the surface is a mix of dirt and razor-edged shale. Punctures are common on the bikes and a support truck spears a tire on an old Bailey bridge and runs into a ditch.

Riders hail from 15 states, from Florida to Washington and California to New Hampshire. They range in age from Tennessean Dave Jordan at 30 to Californian Ned Marandino, 69, returning for a

second time, complete with a loosely tied boot because an SUV hit him and broke his foot a week before. He cut off the cast. Dean Scheel of Lake Oswego, Ore., was in the hospital a week before the event with a bleeding ulcer, but "I wasn't going to miss this." The bikes are all big dual sports: 10 BMWs, seven KTMs, three Kawasakis and two Suzukis, mostly armed with GPS.

The riders see bear, lynx, wolves, eagles, owls, foxes, wild turkeys, moose and porcupine. Rich Henrion of Norway, Mich., and Dan Petterson of Ludington, Mich., outrun a wolf near the Artic Circle.

Wild animals are to be taken very seriously. The hardware store in Dawson City sells UDAP bear spray for \$39.95. It shoots 25 feet, and you must hit the bear on the nose to stop it. It takes a bear 2 seconds to run 25 feet. "I'm guessing you don't get many complaints if it doesn't work?" the storekeeper is asked. He shakes his head but isn't smiling.

The old ferryman at the swirling Ross River crossing notes all the bike plates to make sure everybody comes back (he misses one on the return, causing a brief panic). Once across, the riders swarm along the gravel Canol, which quickly narrows.

Rob Lisey from Wadsworth, Ohio, discovers highway crews are still working when he zips around a corner to confront a semi with a backhoe on its trailer. Caught between a river and a hard place, he tries to squeeze by and almost makes it. He's unhurt but his bike is battered.

By mile 85 grass is sprouting in the center of the road; stubby aspens crowd the sides. Shrunken black spruce show evidence of an old fire clear to the horizon and the Mackenzie Mountains glow mineral colors of green and ochre, beneath towering glaciers and a sudden rainbow.

At the border, Kevin Barrows' big Dodge support truck refuels the Kawasaki of Ken Westfall from Port Crane, N.Y. Westfall wants to go as far as he can into the NWT. He's back in half an hour.

"I was about 5 miles over the border, when the road forked," he tells us. "I couldn't tell which way to go, it was getting dark and I thought this is an adventure for another time."

At the closing banquet in Anchorage, which is reeling from 9-inches of rain in three days and road closures galore, organizer Jerry Hines responds to complaints that bikes can't do the winter rally (when temperatures can dip to 60 degrees below zero.)

"I've thought about that," he says. "Next winter rally [February 2008] I want to run the ice road as far as we can down the Mackenzie River--about 500-600 miles. If you want to bring bikes with spiked tires in the back of a truck or on a trailer, I'll set up several stages." Everybody cheers.

Alcan 5000 entry fees were \$2,000 for a bike and \$2,600 for a car. Everybody calls it a bargain.

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Dumped trucks

Where the road turns to grass on the North Canol, rallyists come across three truck dumps.

- More than 1,200 soldiers and numerous civilians came in to build the road in 1942. They brought along hundreds of new dump trucks, bulldozers, drilling rigs and Jeeps from Detroit and South Bend. When the vehicles broke down or crashed, they were parked and scavenged for parts. The pipeline was completed in 1944, and most trucks that ran were driven out, leaving the others.

- The first dump includes Fords and Studebakers looking like they were moved by a bulldozer. In fact, they were by a Yukon Territory cleanup crew in the 1980s. They stand as artifacts of the project.

- "Please preserve our heritage," say Yukon Territory signs, hoping to deter parts hunters. Several trucks still say "Canol" and one crashed Studebaker says "Canol Convoy," which suggests it didn't even make it to work. Farther into the Northwest Territories, they didn't, and the trucks lie where

they stopped when the bridges washed out in the 1950s and the road was abandoned.

--Paul Duchene

Learn about the Alcan 5000 at www.alcan5000.com/

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