

## The 2006 Alcan 5000 Rally (part 1) by Bob Holcomb

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### Deja Vu

*Imagine this: You're back in 1973, sitting on your saddle blipping the throttle as your group readies. A silent race track beckons while you consider one last chance at the portapoti... You glance over at your buddy and...Who the heck is that?!!!*

*So familiar, yet so strange...You haven't seen that guy in 33 years, yet there he is like it was just another Sunday back in the day. The only thing, it's not 1973. It's 2006, and 250 miles of the Canol roads await you. Angst not felt in decades grips you once again: "Look through the turns; the front brake is your friend; ride your own line..."*

### Prologue

Over the last 18 months I've posted a series of articles here on adventure touring. The ultimate objective was always to compete in the 2006 Alcan 5000 Rally. I finished it on August 22<sup>nd</sup>. This is my report.

### The Rally

Hosted by the Rainier Auto Sports Club, The Alcan5000 is a time, speed, and distance competition (TSD) that has run biennially since 1984. Motorcycles have been invited since 2002.

The 2006 version followed a path north from Seattle, through the Yukon to the Arctic Circle, then turned west over the mountains to Fairbanks before finishing in Anchorage. It spanned 4500 miles of varying roads from pavement to dirt tracks over permafrost. We passed through strange places with names like Whitehorse, Dawson and Eagle Plains.

The event ran 9 days. Each day had TSD sections imbedded in them, while working us steadily towards our nightly destination. Of the 500 miles/day we averaged, some 200 were along dirt roads. TSD sections ranged from 15 to 60 miles in length and ran on all surfaces. The route between TSD sections was not timed and is called a "transit". I expected them to offer sight seeing opportunities, but TSD start times were spaced so tightly they allowed barely enough time for gas station food and fueling!

The Rainier Club provided nightly lodging, some meals, route charts, support vehicles and a radio communications system for safety. **Subaru** was the primary sponsor along with **Touratech** for the bikes. At least two support trucks swept the daily route for stragglers, breakdowns, and the injured. One truck even spotted gas for us along the most remote routes.

## **The Competition**

The objective of a TSD rally is to navigate a route chart while pacing perfectly at assigned speeds. Checkpoints were hidden along TSD sections, where crews scored rider's exact passage. 1 point was awarded for every second early or late, with the lowest score winning. As you might expect, it was easy to get behind on some of the dirt roads.

This type of TSD rally is called "brisk". That means there are no gimmicks and the pace is intended to be quick enough to test driver skill. However, it is not a race but rather a time keeping exercise similar to an enduro. Adding to the challenge, optional routes were included purely for their endurance and rider skill qualities. We rode those sections in small groups as fast as we possibly could. I learned a lot about riding my big my KTM during them.

22 motorcycles and 9 cars made the field. The bikes: 2 KTM twins, 2 Suzuki twins, 8 BMW twins, 5 KTM singles, 3 Kawasaki singles, and 2 BMW singles.

## **Ned Marandino**

Upon reading up on the Alcan 5000, I recognized a name from my motorcycle racing days over 30 years ago. I contacted the Rainier club to see if they could put me in touch with a 2004 competitor named Ned Marandino. He was late 60's so he seemed the right age to be my guy.

The Ned Marandino I knew was my boss at Grand Prix Cycles in Santa Clara, CA. I worked there through college and raced motorcycles with him and the rest of the staff on Sundays. It was a very fun time in my life and Ned taught me about many things. I was hoping I could finally say thanks.

A few days later I got an email that started out; "HOLESHOT!!!" .... Sure enough, he was my Ned and he would prove to be 'THE MAN' in 2006!

## **The Beginning Stages**

The paddock shaped up like any other; bikes, parts, tools and beer were scattered everywhere with people hovering over them. The only weird thing is that the paddock was the parking lot of a Baymont Hotel! Many of us were late and despite having two years to prepare, we finished up in the wee hours before the start. Sound familiar?

Scrutineering made sure we had legal machines, the right stickers, numbers, and a Snell approved helmet. Bikes left the lot on 1 minute intervals starting at 8:11am. The first TSD was pavement, starting at a rest stop on I-5. After a few minutes on the Interstate, the route took to the country roads inland and crossed into Canada. It was fortunate this first TSD was so docile. I struggled mightily not to run off the road while trying to read all my instruments and roll chart.

Several hours later, we were well north in the Canadian Cascades and going like stink. There were no Mouny's to be seen, and it wouldn't have mattered anyway. I followed my old boss, Ned, and even at age 70 he was shockingly

hooligan! It's a good thing he was aboard a thumper because it could barely break a hundred.

Late on that first day we had our first dirt TSD. Even though one rider crashed, it was a gentle affair, winding through the countryside and generating modest speeds for most of us. Had this section been near the end of the rally we would have scorched it! Day 1 was a mere glimpse of the task ahead.

### **The Longest Day**

The 2<sup>nd</sup> stage was grueling. We had to make Dease Lake, high on the Cassiar Trail some 700 miles away. Inside that 700 miles were three of the most awesome dirt roads I have ridden in a long time. 250 miles of them!

Starting at 7am, our first TSD started almost immediately on a dirt road called the Blackwater. It cut northwest from Quesnel to link up with Hwy 16 some 100 miles later. It climbed into the lower mountains from the Fraser River and wound its way along lakes and valleys for hours. It started out fast, but got progressively slower as we made our way north.

Mid-afternoon we picked up the last TSD along the Kispiox Valley. This was a combination of dirt road and forest service track. As we went along, the road got progressively technical. The cars took a real beating because of rocks, deadfall and washouts. This section also featured assigned speeds that were hard to meet. Another 100 miles north, we spilled out onto the Cassiar Highway for a 250 mile blast to make Dease Lake by dark.

I hooked up with Marandino and Jim Robertson for the transit. After running the 2004 Alcan, they had been training together so I figured they were a good pair to follow when I could. The Cassiar is mostly paved so we started out running as fast as their little BMW 650's would allow. By 9:30 we were 60 miles short of our destination and hit deep gravel in the dark. In blinding dust, we followed two rally cars the rest of the way at about 70mph. I was terrified at first as the bike took on a gentle wobble in the gravel and felt unconnected to the ground. It didn't do much, but I was relieved when we were done with it.

We rolled into Dease Lake about 10:30, but bikes trickled in for a long time after. Notably, the sweep vehicles were loaded.

### **The Canol Roads!**

Day 3 offered two choices: Take a TSD followed by a 350 mi. shot to Whitehorse; or skip the TSD and take a 150 mile trip to Telegraph Creek before the dash to Whitehorse. I opted for the TSD, which turned out a penalty option. The ride to Telegraph was a dirt path intended to challenge tired riders, while the TSD was for those wanting a rest. Had I read the instructions more carefully (and not been so tired), I could have saved myself 150 points and likely earned 3<sup>rd</sup> place in my class. Instead, I dropped to 9<sup>th</sup> !

My pain was not to last, however, as the fantastic Canol roads were up the next day. They were 250 miles of the very best dirt roads I've ever ridden. Hours and hours of them. It was the signature ride of the 2006 Alcan5000.

We started at 7:30am in Whitehorse and picked up the South Canol at Johnson's Crossing. South Canol was a fast undulating dirt road that snaked its way northeast for 125 miles to a tiny crossroads called Ross River. The road was full of climbing and descending sweepers with mixed surfaces. Ned rode it like a cushion mile, while I mainly struggled to get my KTM whoa'd for hidden turns and plowed the front alot. We crossed several ranges, valleys and little one-lane wooden bridges.

Struggling early, I ended up riding by myself for an hour. Later I hooked up with the fast group again and was able to hang with them. It started becoming easier as I learned to read the terrain better for sudden turns that hid behind rises. I also discovered the big KTM would carve a much tighter line if I just pushed the inside bar down harder and picked up a little more throttle. Pretty soon the KTM was no longer running wide, but squaring apexes and firing out fast. As the hours went by it only got better.

Along this section my riding partner, Fred Baldrige, fell off his KTM 950 and broke his collarbone. We waited for the sweep truck, but then Fred was an old hand at the big dirt ovals and very familiar with his injury. He had us rig up his Camelbak straps to pull his shoulders back tight; then remounted and rode the rest of the way to Ross River. Fred is one tough guy.

Ross River had a 2-pumper storefront so we fueled, ate box lunches, and crossed the river on a wooden cable barge to the North Canol Road. The North Canol ran another 130 miles into the wilderness where it ended on the border of Canada's Northwest Territories.

The North Canol was a tighter and sharper rollercoaster. It also featured small weather systems that added drama as we passed through them. It was the very best riding experience I've ever had. It's too bad you need a fuel truck at the other end because every dual sporter should have a shot at that road just once.

### **The Holeshot**

Our group was made up of mostly aging baby boomers with some sort of motorcycle racing in our past. A group like that on a road like the Canols is a recipe for behavior that would shame our kids.

We filled the Ross River barge 2 across and end to end. The two guys up front saw the wooden ramp as a starting gate. As soon as it hit mud, Bob Lisey grabbed the holeshot on his KTM640 and promptly smacked a tractor/trailer head-on! Bob is a very fast motorcycle rider and great adventurer, but jeez... Fortunately the rig was inching its way down to the barge and Bob only suffered raspberries and a slightly tweaked KTM.

We had more excitement too. By this time Jim Robertson and Ned were leading the points 1-2. Along the South Canol, Bob Lisey and Ken Westfall came up behind them and went by. Suddenly a race broke out. First Ned powered into the point with Robertson in tow. While Lisey indicated he wanted no part of that foolishness, Jim barged by both and took over the lead... then promptly ran wide and down a steep bank. Remarkably, Jim stayed on the gas and would have re-entered without losing much except for a hidden stump. It was almost the greatest 'save' ever witnessed. As Robertson gathered himself and machine, Ned offered; " You've disgraced us"...

For me the Canol Roads were the highlight of my Alcan. I started out struggling, but by the last few hours on the North Canol, it was like; "Damn...I can DO this!" Once I figured out how to slow and turn my big twin, that wonderful KTM motor and suspension did the rest. I could move the rear around like it was on a rheostat. It never did anything sudden and even though I bent both rims, the bike was never upset that much. That motorcycle made me feel twenty-two again. It was awesome!

### **NWT Camp**

The club set-up a fantastic bivouac for us in the wilderness near a glacier. We had a big-top, several small tents, sleeping bags, dinner, a campfire and a fuel truck...Bob Lisey even passed around his satellite phone for some to check in with home. Life was good.

### **Cliff's Cycles**

I want to thank Frank at Cliff's Cycles (Norfolk, MA) for preparing my 950 Adventure for this event. He knew when I bought it from him last year that my primary objective was to run it in the Alcan 5000. At crunch time he personally went through it to make sure it was in perfect shape for the task. Since the bike had 21000 miles on it, he even replaced a few minor parts as a pre-emptive measure. That was big for me since a mechanical issue might ruin my dream ride. Thanks to Cliff's the KTM was flawless and never gave me a moment's doubt.

I'll post part 2 next month. It will include the "Dash to the Circle" and the "Top-of-the World Highway". While the Canol Roads were 2<sup>nd</sup> - 4<sup>th</sup> gears, these were 3<sup>rd</sup> - 6<sup>th</sup>!

Ride safe.

## **The 2006 Alcan5000 (part II)**

Day 5 dawned at a remote camp on the border of Canada's Northwest Territories. Surrounded by glaciers, we were 130 miles from Ross River at the end of the North Canol Road. Getting there was the most fun I've ever had on a motorcycle. On this day we would ride back to Ross River then head north to Dawson.

After a hurried breakfast, we refueled at the gas truck and headed out of camp in small groups. Retracing the North Canol had us excited. A double track path, the North Canol Road snakes its way through several low mountain ranges and valleys. We even passed through two or three weather systems of rain and fog. Traction was excellent with most of the road run in 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> gear. It was 3½ hours of dirt-road rollercoaster.

Jim Robertson took the point with Ned Marandino and me trailing. Because he had the points lead, Jim left room for error but still set a brisk pace. We steadily worked our way through small groups of riders, slowing only when fog blinded us. I had one fright when rounding a bend to find a water crossing. Both Ned and Jim were able to slow, but I couldn't and barely managed to thread a gap between them, blasting through in a big splash. My WP forks sucked it up like it was nothing. Late morning we refueled at Ross River and headed north on a graded road named Highway 4. We rolled into Dawson about 6pm.

### **Dawson, Yukon Territory**

Dawson is a leftover from the gold rush. Built hard against the banks of the Yukon River, sharp terrain rises on either side of her. Massive piles of tailings from the diggings are everywhere. The town itself is a clapboard affair with wooden sidewalks and dirt streets. Still rough around the edges, Dawson is right out of the movies. Shrieks, whoops and the sound of honkytonks filtered through the night.

The El Dorado Hotel was base camp for our dash to the Arctic Circle. After a driver's meeting, we turned its parking lot onto a full blown paddock. The support trucks unloaded our spares and we went at our equipment like it was a pit stop at the Daytona 200. In no time the place was a hubbub of take-off's, tubes, chains, sprockets, duct tape and zip ties. The next morning we would make a 250 mile blast up the Dempster Highway to the Arctic Circle.

### **The Dash for the Circle**

The Dempster Highway is a groomed dirt road wide enough for two semi-tractors to pass. It connects an arctic outpost on the Beaufort Sea with the rest of the world. We picked it up 30 minutes east of Dawson.

At 50mph the Dempster is as featureless as an interstate. Not so at 90! As dull as the Dempster seems, it's actually rarely straight. It courses its way north over a series of broadly sloping ridgelines climbing to a pass. It then runs along the

tops through a wayside named Eagle Plains. The Arctic Circle is marked another 30 miles beyond Eagle Plains.

Running 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> gears, the Dempster was magical. It was so wide open that after awhile my sense of speed faded. The only governors were the turns and the loose surfaces they were made of. Jim Robertson, a D36 flat tracker from the Pursang era, was a terrific tow for me. We powered up and down the gearbox for hours, and while I was slower in the turns than Ned or Jim, I was able to use my Katoom's power to keep up.

After awhile, we started seeing puddles and patches of mud. Topping a rise at 80, we came upon one 200 yards long! I slowed as best I could and saw Ned's BMW shudder as he hit the far right rut. I picked a center rut and held my breath trying to hold everything steady. I was sure I was going to make a mess all over the Dempster. About that time, Andrew Fekete (Adventurer's Workshop) came powering by my left aboard his tricked out Boxer...up on the pegs and on the gas!

After making the Arctic Circle, we turned around and headed back to Dawson. The ride back was even better...faster too.

### **Top-of-the-World Highway**

The Top-of-the-World Highway climbs northwest out of Dawson from across the Yukon River. It would be our short-cut to Fairbanks, Alaska. The first TSD started from the far bank after a ferry crossing. While straight-forward, this TSD presented timekeeping difficulty because the ferry bunched us with traffic. Passing campers on this road put a premium on a rider's ability to maintain his assigned speeds.

The Top-of-the-World Highway is another maintained dirt road running along the tops of ridgelines. From its crests you could see for 100 miles. If dry, the road is good enough for a loaded Gold Wing. While mostly 3<sup>rd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> gear, it was fast enough to be fun and slow enough to play with the motorcycle a little. Just past the US border crossing we refueled at a strange little place called Chicken. Not quite a town but more than a camp, Chicken is one of those interesting places that gave the rally color.

3 miles past Chicken the road deteriorated. Increasingly laced with switchbacks, it also started to rain while temps plunged to the 30's. Mud slowed things, but it wasn't too slick to make a decent pace. About this time I spotted a pair of headlights in my mirrors coming steadily out of the mist. It was a tricked out Subaru rally car and he had that thing cooking! I pulled over and let him by as he worked the entire road using all he had. It was very cool.

By lunch, we spilled onto the Alcan Highway near Tok. The Alcan is a paved 2-lane and a welcome road after 250 miles of mud. We stopped for a hot meal and collected the field for the next TSD section. Like earlier, it was straight-forward and another opportunity to improve my score. We rolled into Fairbanks about 7pm. Most riders suffered from the cold and driving rain that dominated the day.

Few thumpers were equipped with heated grips or clothing. There was more bad weather to come too.

### **Denali Highway**

So far Alaska was proving a miserable place to ride. It was being blasted by a series of storms that frosted the ridgelines with snow and washed out roads in the valleys between. Ground-hugging fog added to our misery. The 8<sup>th</sup> stage was supposed to take us south to Denali Park, then east across 140 miles of what we expected to be the most beautiful dirt road of the rally; the Denali Highway.

The Denali Highway is a little-used dirt path that runs east/west between the two major artery's running south from Fairbanks. It crosses two mountain ranges and a river. Unfortunately, the road was washed out near its western end, so we had to change our course. We backtracked along the Alcan to Delta Junction and headed south towards Valdez. Halfway down we found the eastern end of the Denali Highway. Meanwhile, it was still driving rain and colder still.

We gathered at a coffee shop at the east entrance to the Denali road. After warming for an hour; a group of us headed up the Denali while the rest went south to Valdez. Two miles up we hit a hail storm! Undaunted, we continued on and climbing as we went. Not five miles later we broke out on top to clear blue skies with spectacular vistas! As we gained confidence, our pace picked up as it always did.

The Denali Road was winding and badly pot-holed. We passed a few 4X4's, making about 20mph trying to avoid the pounding. We ran closer to 60, but the hits were jarring just the same. 85 miles in, we stopped at the river for pictures. Because we had no fuel truck on this leg, we were at the limits of our fuel range and had to turn back. When I think back on my ride through Alaska, the image I hold is the Denali Highway. I hope I get to ride it end-to-end someday.

### **The Last Stage**

The last stage began from a motel parking lot in a town called Glennallen. Like many such establishments, the motel was built from portable buildings left over from the construction of the pipeline. It was a welcome sight as our bad weather continued.

The route was a straight shot west over Hatcher pass and then south into Anchorage. It began with a simple TSD section then continued through the coastal mountains. The further we went, the harder it rained. Road construction combined with the weather to make passage a struggle. Near Palmer we started our last TSD in pouring rain and 40 degree temps. Half way through we had one rider down and others struggling. At the end of the TSD, the field collected just below Hatcher pass. The Rallymaster decided Hatcher was too icy for motorcycles, so we turned around and made a bee-line to the finish at Continental Subaru in Anchorage. Nature wasn't ready to let us go yet, though. 40 miles out of Anchorage we hit a 60mpg crosswind!

We limped into Continental Subaru mid-afternoon. They set up a bannered big-top tent for us to park under and lined us up for pictures and fanfare. Actually,



we were more of a curiosity, but the tent and hot coffee was great just the same. A couple hours later our awards banquet was launched at an appropriate restaurant called the Sourdough Mining Company. After plenty drink, food, speeches and more celebration, our Alcan5000 was finished.

With my improved timekeeping, I managed to climb out of the cellar to finish 4<sup>th</sup> in class and mid-pack overall. Jim and Ned fought it out right down to the last TSD, with Jim getting the nod. Both Jim and Ned were our hero's of the run. Riding with a broken foot from a spill he took a few weeks earlier, Ned soldiered to the end, just missing out on the gold. He was happy too. He finished 2<sup>nd</sup> overall bikes and 4<sup>th</sup> overall rally (including cars). That's pretty good for a 70 year-old with a broken foot! It proves that old-school racers need never fade.

*Note by Jerry Hines: Bob wrote this for Motorcyclist's Post after the Alcan. It's a great story on it's own but has become an unintended final tribute to **Ned Marandino**, who had a fatal accident in California November 25 during a weekend ride with friends. Ned received a standing ovation at the Alcan awards banquet, and made a deep & lasting impression on every participant. Ned was extremely talented, and a unique combination of true gentleman and fierce competitor. He was a model for all, and we'll long remember his strength, grace, and determination. Happy Trails, Ned!*



Photo by Jim Robertson

## Results

### Unlimited Motorcycle

1. Jim Robertson, Aptos, CA – BMW F650GS Dakar
2. Ned Marandino, Watsonville, CA – BMW F650 GS
3. Michael Stram, Gresham, OR – KTM 640 Adventure

### Cycle 1 (under 700cc w/no computers)

1. Jay Ritchie, Starkville, MS – Kaw KLR650
2. Ken Westfall, Port Crane, NY – Kaw KLR650
3. Bob Lisey, Wadsworth, OH – KTM 640 Adventure

### Cycle 2 (over 700cc w/no computers)

1. Dean Scheel, Lake Oswego, OR – Suz DL1000
2. Bryan Townsend, Aroua, OR – Suz DL1000
3. Dave Jordan, Cordova, TN – BMW 1200GSA

Congratulations and thanks to **Subaru** and **Touratech** for being sponsors. Their participation shows they love sport as much as business. The Rainier Auto Sports Club did a masterful job for us. They designed fantastic routes for motorcycles and supported us with plenty of vehicles and equipment to insure everybody made it home every night. Their fuel truck allowed us to ride roads we could never attempt on our own and their supply trucks allowed us to ride light. Time/Speed and Distance rallying seems an excellent new sport for motorcycling. I hope more of them surface in coming seasons.

My KTM 950 Adventure proved nearly perfect for the task. It was comfortable for highway hours, yet agile enough to blast the fire roads like a flyweight. During the trip, the KTM consumed two rear tires and one front, rear brake pads, and half of its chain/sprocket life. After the Canol roads, I noticed both rims were bent, but I do not remember the hits. I ran Continental TKC80 tires, aired up to 32lbs. They worked extremely well on loose surfaces, but not so well on wet and cold tarmac. Still, I rate them highly for the varied conditions we encountered.

Thanks again to Cliff's Cycles for preparing my KTM. The machine was flawless and my adventure a success because of that. Ride safe -Bob Holcomb