

A Calamity Strikes the Grand Tour: 17-22 April 2016

Here are the Riders and their machines:

Lorraine Litster:	BMW K75 (V Plate)
Len Skipper	Triumph 800 Tiger
Nigel McGee:	Triumph T100 Bonneville
Ed Towner:	VStrom
Ron Jacobs:	BMW R100 Dakar
Mike Kelly:	VStrom (1st Day only)
Ian Duvall:	KTM Enduro (1st day only)

The story of the calamity will unfold here rather like an episode of 'Air Crash Investigation': a series of events unfolding leading to a crash, but in this case as we were on motorbikes it did not result in a disaster with many fatalities!

Day 1: Sunday 17th was a dull cold day when we met in Lyneham all full of high spirits, including myself although I was nursing the onset of a bad cold and had been taking aspirin for a couple of days: no worries I thought (1st Error). We rode north via Gundaroo and Gunning to Crookwell where we refuelled. I discovered that this Mobil had a new owner, and I soon realised that he was selling bad fuel and my K75 did not like it, its 30 year old fuel injection appears to require good quality 98 Octane otherwise all manner of nasty noises and poor performance result. It was very chilly by now and there was no alternative except to put on all available layers including waterproofs.

The rain held off however and we decided to ride on to Oberon for lunch. Temperatures hovered at 11C as we crossed the hills to Oberon, we were chilled. The café was a warm lunch break before we descended to Bathurst and the motor racing museum on the Panorama circuit. This is always interesting with different exhibits on display. Several of the riders had never been there. I took some more aspirin.

Off again and over more hills via Sofala, warmer now and good riding, still no rain. We arrived at Rylstone and booked into the Globe Hotel, which seemed to be full of other motorcyclists. We got our bikes into one of the garages but another group were frustrated when a selfish family with filthy trail bikes on a trailer backed it into the other garage. We had a pleasant evening there with an excellent meal, far above the usual pub quality. The rooms are fine and with a nice guests lounge. The toilet/shower facilities are inadequate however. I took more aspirin.

Day 2: The next morning was brighter and warmer; Ian left us for his ride home. I topped the tank at the BP, the others did not (Error 2). We rode the lovely Bylong Valley under threat from coal mining and when we later viewed the devastation wrought by mining near Singleton I felt for them in their fight. Mike left us at the end of the valley heading west for Ulan. The rest of us rode on to the still pretty town of Denman, where several decided they needed petrol: if they had topped up when I did we would have reached Singleton for fuel as planned. This wasted time before we took the back road to Gerry's Plains, an interesting road which is poorly signposted: I last rode it many years ago. However several miles out of town we lost Ed and Len who had fallen behind. Len did not have his GPS tuned to Singleton so the two of them sailed off on a dirt road back into the Bylong valley. (Error 3).

After waiting for them we decided to ride on to Singleton and I left a phone message to that effect. In Singleton we refuelled at another independent petrol station and again I was sold bad fuel: I wonder who owns it? Len and Ed arrived none the worse for their adventure and after a café lunch we rode into the hills again with the K75 complaining bitterly at the rotten juice I had fed him. However we discovered that the Nabiac Motorcycle Museum shut at 1530 and there we had lost so much time that there was no way to reach there before it shut: (Error 4).

Never mind, at Gloucester I got decent 98 Octane and at least the bike was happy: no more independent stations for me. We took a break here then headed down the Buckett's Way towards our destination of Wingham, bypassing Nahiack and turning off at Krumbach, which looked like a pretty village. I had visited Wingham some years ago on a 'reccy' trip. I remember it fondly as a tidy town with a village square in the centre. It seemed strangely down at heel now with its 2nd pub burned down in typical NSW style and was now just a vacant block. We booked into the Australian Hotel whose rooms I cannot recommend, dingy and sparse, however the meal was fine.

The reason for Wingham's decline was evident in the morning: an ugly little shopping mall had been built with an oversized Coles, guaranteed to kill any small town. My cold had turned to Bronchitis the previous day.

Day 3: Calamity Day: I felt better this morning after taking aspirin in the night so I didn't take more in the morning as I had been previously doing: (Error 5). Wingham is a dead end for roads with only dirt to the north and west. Our plan was to ride over the Killabakh range on 20 Km of dirt to join the Oxley Hwy. This was actually beautiful and enjoyable although I dislike dirt riding. We came out at the village of Comboyne where there is a pleasant shed café. We stopped for refreshments: I should have drunk water but had coffee instead: (Error 6). We were dressed for cold weather as we were planning to ride to Walcha which is a cold town. The descent into Wauchope was hot and I began to run a temperature: no worries I thought. We turned west on the famous (infamous) Oxley Hwy. We passed through Long Flat village then began our climb to Mount Seaview, the site of a resort where the Triumph Club had held pleasant events some years ago.

I was feeling quite poorly by this stage and a bit light headed, likely overheated and dehydrated: I ignored the ominous signs: (penultimate error 7). A mile later I entered a tight left hand corner ill prepared and just at that moment a 4WD appeared towing an oversized car trailer partly on my side of the road. Befuddled panic set in and I hauled on the brakes even though my line and speed were fine: (Final Error 8). The K75 is over-braked and it is easy to lock the front wheel which of course it did and in an instant I was skidding down the road, my ride over. Miraculously I was just bruised but the K75 had not fared so well, the faring smashed and a footrest broken off. I vainly attempted to ride it only to find the wheel buckled. I was very distressed. I rode it back to the Mount Seaview resort and left it in a shed there and rode on pillion behind Ron Jacobs.

The trip up the Oxley was a nerve wracking experience for me after the crash. In Walcha we discovered that it would not be possible to reach Grafton, our planned overnight stop, before darkness: so prudence advised us to stay the night in Walcha: (Walcha Motel highly recommended). We ate Chinese in the pub that night. I was very sore and poor in spirits.

I had to replan the trip and make arrangements for the broken K75. We decided to turn for home and descend the Oxley where Brian Weeland, a Triumph Club friend came out from Wauchope to rescue the BMW: good friends are worth a mint. I also arranged for the bike to be trucked to Canberra ('Move your Motor Bike' \$350).

Day 4: Pillion for me now: Ron is most competent even with the two of us on board and I felt confident. With the K75 rescued by Brian it was on to Wauchope. Then we came south to Nahiack to see the Motorcycle Museum we had missed two days before. It was hot and we were all weary but the museum was as fascinating as ever. Our overnight stop was at Forster where I had booked rooms at the Forster Motor Inn, very central and a good price but beware of using 'Booking .com' they charged all three rooms to my card and then insisted I download their 'App' to get the confirmation, which I refused to do as it seemed to let them control my phone! We had a pleasant night and a meal at a nearby Mexican place: I am back on the aspirin.

Day 5: We had breakfast at a beachside café, it was warm and lovely which made us wonder why we live in chilly Canberra? We took the coast road to Bulahdelah for fuel then on to Stroud on a very rickety road. We passed a strange high rise block on the hill: it looked just like a block of flats, but Ed advised it was a single dwelling, a folly built by a rich nut case! We took a break in Dungog, which is surrounded by almost the worst roads I know: Hampton to Rydal however takes that dubious honour. We rode through Singleton, which really is too busy for a pleasant stop;

instead we rode on to Bulga. This is another little town threatened with destruction by the march of the ugly big miners. The café provided fuel and a light meal before we reached the Putty Road, riding heaven.

This is truly a great riding road and in good condition throughout. There is very little traffic and the views are lovely. We passed the long burned down Putty Café; this was indeed an accident and the last time I passed there the owner was valiantly trying to keep his business going from a caravan. He had evidently failed as the site was abandoned.

A business called the 'Grey Gums' has taken over about 10KM further south and this seems to go from strength to strength. There were only a couple of bikes there that afternoon, but at weekends it is heaving with sports bike posers and other more serious riders. We stopped for a light snack then rode on to Windsor (Windsor Terrace Motel reasonable value but forget the outrageously priced wi-fi). There was time to look around the town now devoid of antique shops. We had a \$10 deal steak and a beer in the Fitzroy Hotel, amazing value and quite good.

Day 6: Friday 22 April; the last day: Breakfast at a café opposite the Macquarie Arms. This town too is threatened by a road which will badly damage its history. A group has been manning a protest tent for 1000 days but they say they are losing the battle, sad.

A frontal system was passing through Canberra as we ate our breakfast and this was forecast to reach Sydney later. We made plans for a rainy ride home but were happy when we escaped it. We took a back road route to Richmond, Penrith Wallacia, and Thirlemere hence to Hilltop, with the rain still not upon us. We rode off to Mount Gibraltar, above Bowral and here we finally suited up before avoiding the highland town to arrive at Bundanoon. Here we took lunch in a cafe whilst the now narrow rain front passed through; what luck.

After lunch the sun came out and our ride to the lookout at Long-nose Point was pleasant. Fuel again at Marulan proved to be the end of the interesting riding and we completed the ride on the Hume Hwy; we were all too tired to do anything else! I am extremely grateful to Ron Jacobs for his kindness and the others for their patience and good humour.

Lessons Learned: I really should not have set off on this trip feeling unwell, but I did not anticipate how ill I would get and how much it would affect my riding. After all I was leading the ride so really felt that I had to soldier on. I am rarely ill so this sudden onset of bronchitis took me unawares.

I then failed to look after myself with the result that at Wauchope I was dehydrated and running a temperature and overheated to boot. I then failed to take note of the symptoms of my decline with catastrophic results for me.

The BMW K75 has an unforgiving sports type frame which will 'tank slap' given a chance, it is also fearfully over-braked and can lock the wheel if you are not careful. This means that if you find yourself in a panic situation and grab for the brake a spill is almost inevitable, as happened to me.

These days most machines of this size have ABS to prevent the sort of accident caused by panic braking, but such refinements were not available 30 years ago when the K75 was made. My classic bikes would be unlikely to throw you off in these circumstances as the brakes are usually not powerful enough to lock the wheel so easily.

Perhaps I should buy an ABS equipped machine?

Lorraine Litster

25 April 2016 Anzac Day