

**BMW Touring Club
of New South Wales**



**Member of the International Council
of BMW Clubs**

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BMW National Motorrad Rally 2018—Wallerawang



BMW

Touring Club of New South Wales

A person wearing a black helmet and riding a black motorcycle on a dirt road. The person is positioned on the right side of the road, moving towards the left. The background is a clear blue sky and a flat, open landscape.



A THOUSAND
MILES OF
MUD, SAND
AND HARD
KNOCKS
COULDN'T
STOP THESE
HARDY
AUSTRALIANS

Conquest of the Gunbarrel Highway

It was a dream about to come true. The dream of crossing a continent—without proper roads, without service stations, without roadside coffee shops. The real thing.

Australia is one of the few civilized countries that still can boast of huge, unexplored areas. And through all that vast unknown stretches the Gunbarrel Highway.

For several years, members of the BMW Motorcycle Club of New South Wales had been fascinated by the idea of conquering the entire stretch—mind you, the word "Highway" is a misnomer—for the first time with motorcycles. The Gunbarrel Highway is an incredibly poorly marked, 1600-kilometer-long route reaching from Mulga Park Homestead in the Northern Territories through endless, untouched, arid and sometimes forsaken wilderness—called Australia's "Dead Heart"—to Carnegie Homestead in Western Australia.

Gunbarrel was planned and built in the late 1950s by Len Beadell, a well-known Australian author, together with a sixman group. Never intended as a public road or highway in the normal sense, it was meant to make the Woomera range as well as the atomic testing grounds in Emu Field and Maralinga a bit more accessible.

We began planning our trip in January 1975. The starting point would be Ayers Rock; this way we would be leaving out the more thickly populated section between Mulga Park Homestead and the meteorological station at Giles.

947 KILOMETERS BETWEEN STATIONS

Between Sydney and Ayers Rock alone there are 2000 kilometers of difficult, partially unpaved road to cover: this was to serve as a first trial for us and our beloved machines. But well before this trial was to begin, we already faced the thorny problem of calculating just what supplies eight human beings and their eight BMWs were going to need along the way. After our official start at Ayers Rock, the miniscule settlements of Docker River, Giles and Warburton were the only places where we would encounter people before reaching Wiluna: we had

been assured that Carnegie Homestead was long since abandoned. We also had to obtain a permit from the office responsible for aboriginal affairs just to enter the Docker River and Warburton settlements. The Office for Education, Science and Consumer Affairs entered the picture too, granting us permission to visit the Giles Meteorological Station.

Since we were all on BMWs, it was no great problem to stock up on the spare parts and materials we envisioned needing. But the extremely limited storage possibilities on our machines spelled difficulties for carrying the necessary food, water and fuel. We would probably be able to replenish our supplies at Docker River, but not at Giles. A telegram to the mission station at Warburton was in order, then, and the answer came back that we could be assured of food and gasoline there.

This was a critical point, because the 947-kilometer leg from Warburton to Wiluna was going to be the longest distance without the chance of new supplies. The Warburton-Wiluna stretch also determined our fuel-capacity needs: we calculated that each machine would have to carry 13 gallons of gasoline. To get this amount aboard, we replaced the standard tanks with German Heinrich units, each holding 6.8 gallons, and then arranged for the necessary additional fuel to be carried in the sidecar of our backup machine—which we christened the Gunbarrel Freighter. On top of all this, each machine would carry four gallons of drinking water in a special extra tank.

Large quantities of light, space-saving and yet nourishing dehydrated food, as well as heavy canned food, required a lot of space, in the sidecar and on the rear of each solo machine. All the extra weight, in turn, required that we fit the machine with stiffer springs and shocks: we were astounded when we weighed one of the BMWs and found that it came to 1010 pounds without rider—fully 130 over the maximum gross weight certified by BMW!

And so, after months of planning, calculation, modification of our trusty machines and a lot of improvisation, we finally got underway on 19 July 1975, leaving Sydney on what we believed to be

eight thoroughly prepared BMWs. But before I get into the real tale, allow me to introduce our "team" and its machinery:

Tony Carroll, 21, sheet-metal technician; BMW R 75/5 with 55,000 kilometers on the clock

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Kevin Devine, 21, brickmason; BMW R 75/5, 110,000 km

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Rob Edgar, 28, machinist; BMW R 75/5, 47,000 km

*

Allen Grosse, 21, student; BMW R 75/5, 11,000 km

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Alan Hawkins, 39, inspector; BMW R 75/5, 15,000 km

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Malcolm McKenna, 25, switchman; BMW R 75/5, 36,000 km

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Garry McLeod, 23, bookkeeper; BMW R 75/5, 24,000 km

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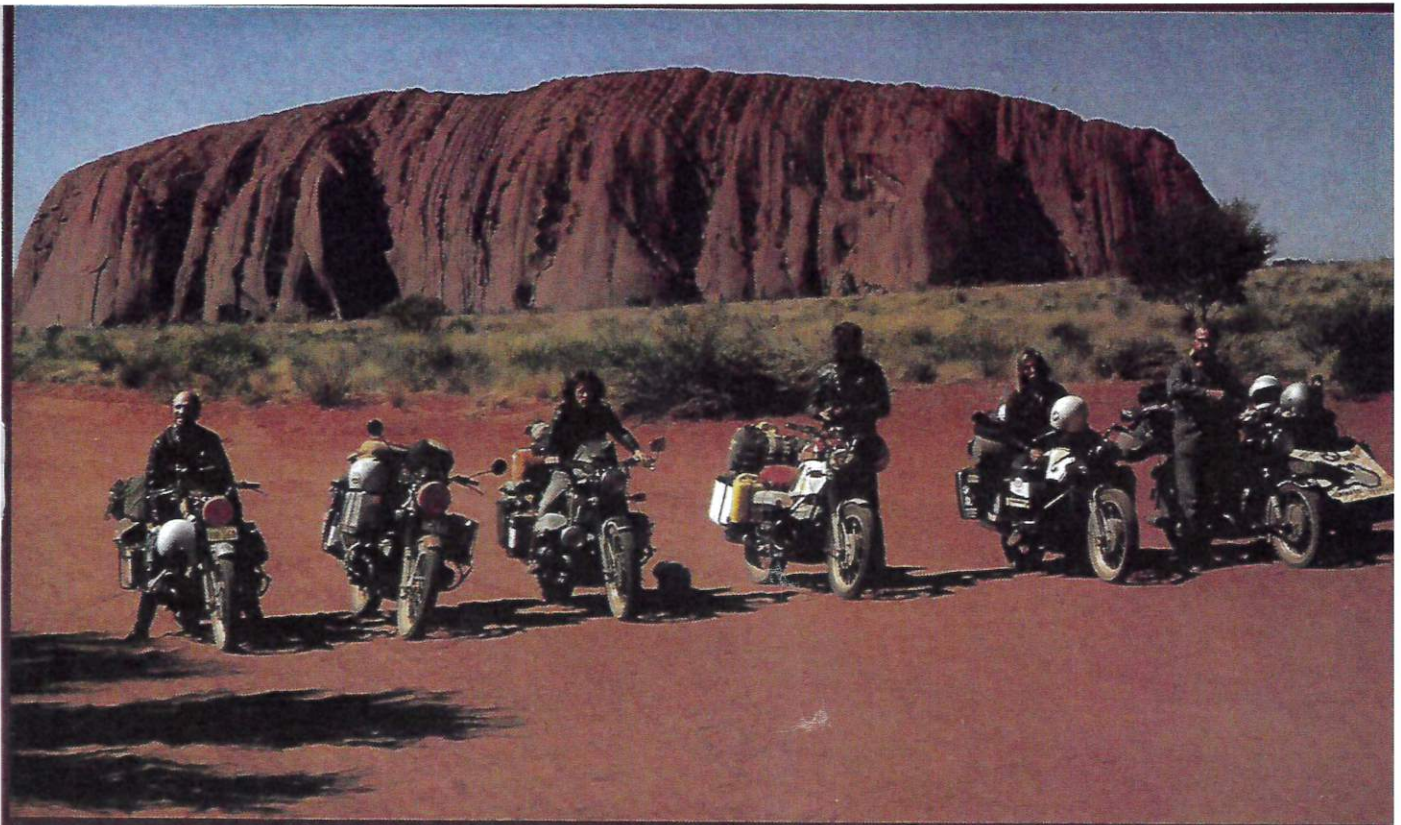
Rob Poplewell, 34, flight coordinator; BMW R 60/2 with sidecar, 125,000 km

BY NO MEANS THE LAST BLOW

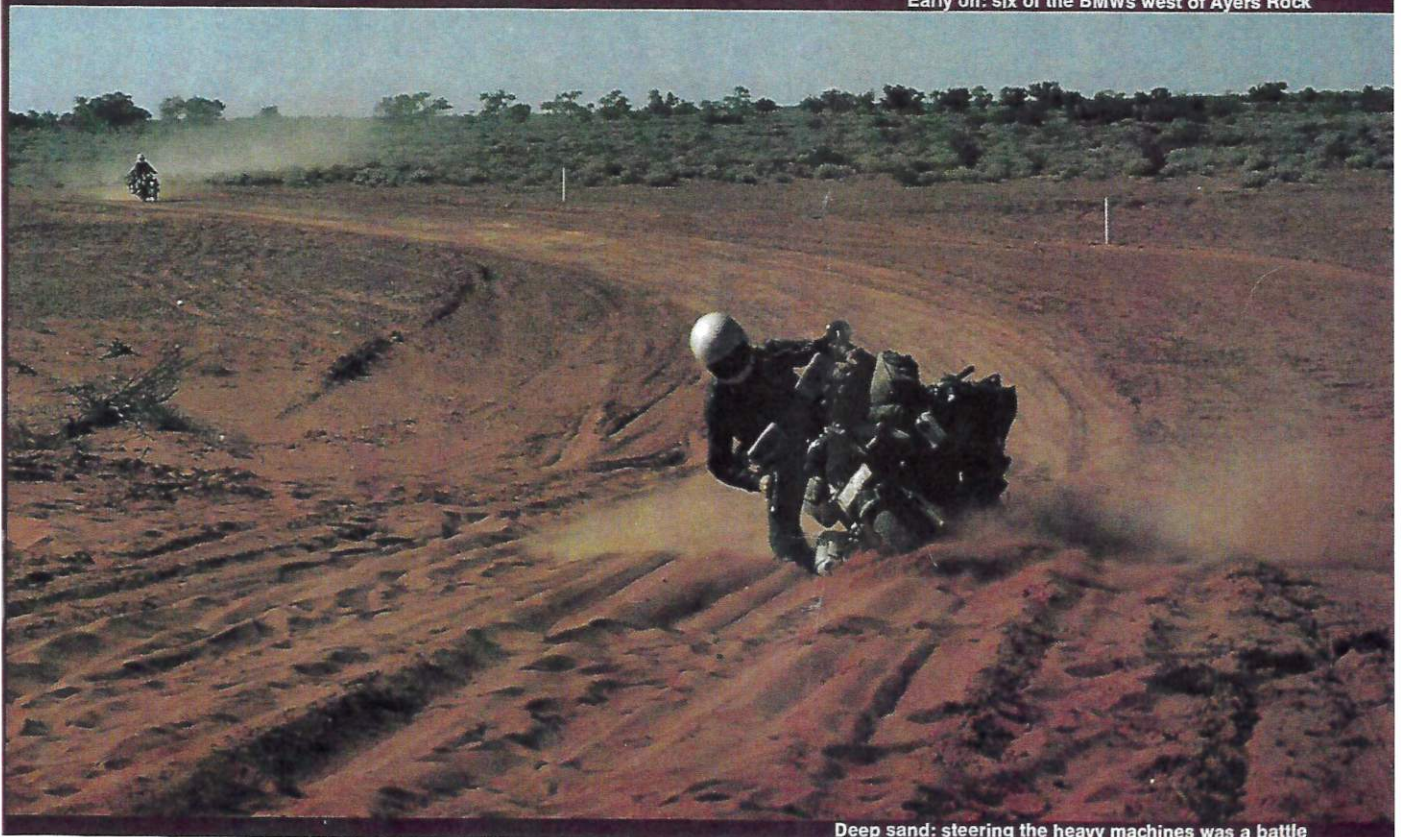
A fleet of R 75/5s, then, most of them a bit more than "well run in"—and we were off, with the heavily laden R 60/2 and its sidecar to help us challenge the hitherto unconquered. We waited until reaching Wilpena Pound in the Flender Mountains (South Australia) to mount special universal steel tires from Metzeler on the rear wheel of each machine. These, we felt, would be necessary for the unpaved section of the distance between Marree and Oodnadatta on the way to Granite Downs Homestead.

It rained buckets—so bad we had to wait a week in Alice Springs before tackling the tedious, sometimes sandy, often muddy 100-kilometer leg from Walla Ranch into dramatic Kings Canyon. At this point one of the group had had enough: it was clear he had neither the endurance nor the desire to press on farther, and he turned back.

Soon afterward, yet another member of our troop would be forced to drop out. Thirty-two kilometers before Wafara Ranch the rubber strap holding Allen Grosse's packs to the back of his



Early on: six of the BMWs west of Ayers Rock

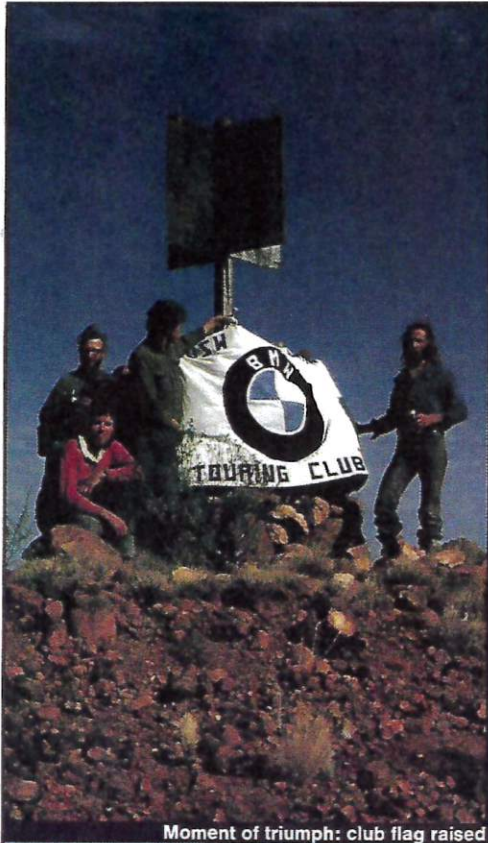


Deep sand: steering the heavy machines was a battle

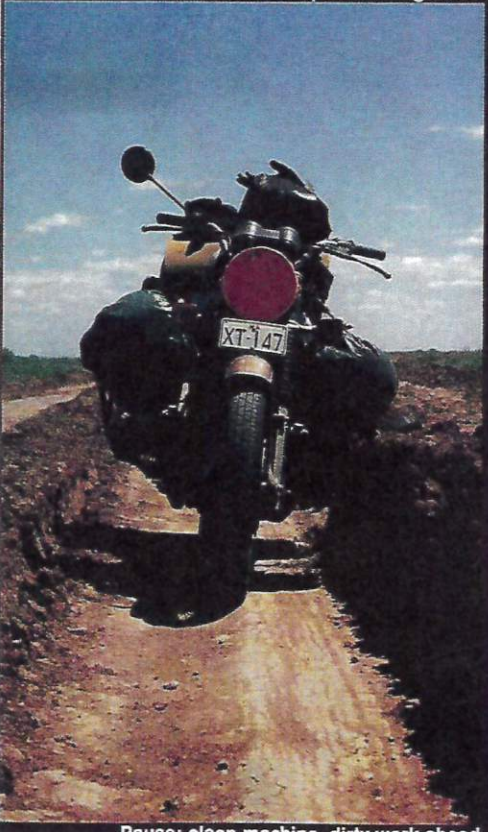
machine came loose and hit him in the eye. He struggled on for six days after that, but finally had to be put into the hospital at Alice

Springs. That was a hard blow for us all. But not the last. Between Curtin Springs and Ayers Rock Kevin Devine lost control as he hit

a patch of deep sand at about 110 kph. He came away from the ensuing battle with a few abrasions and bruises, but his R 75/5 didn't



Moment of triumph: club flag raised



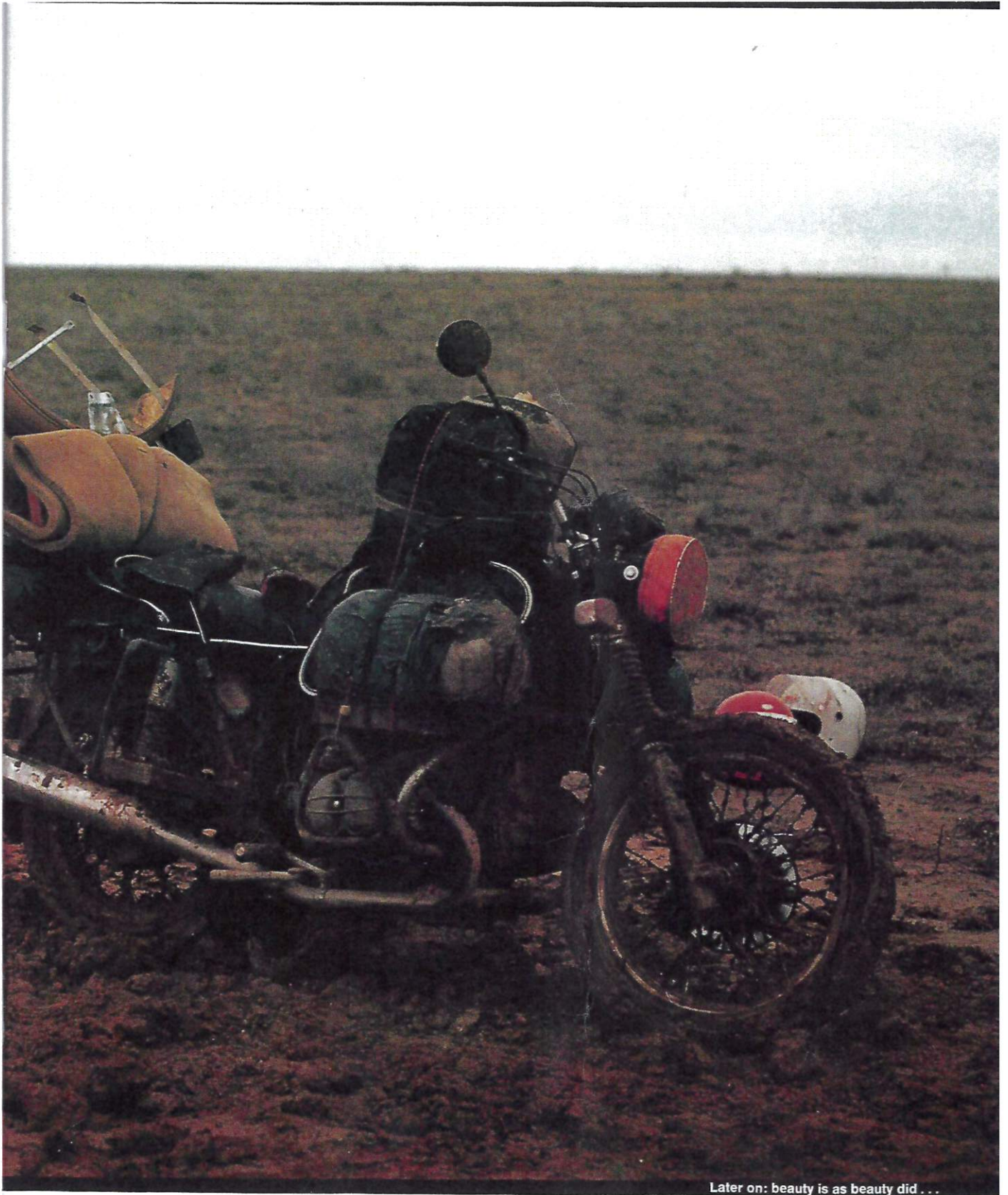
Pause: clean machine, dirty work ahead



fare nearly so well. And we didn't have the parts necessary to repair it properly. So: improvise. And that wouldn't be the last time either!

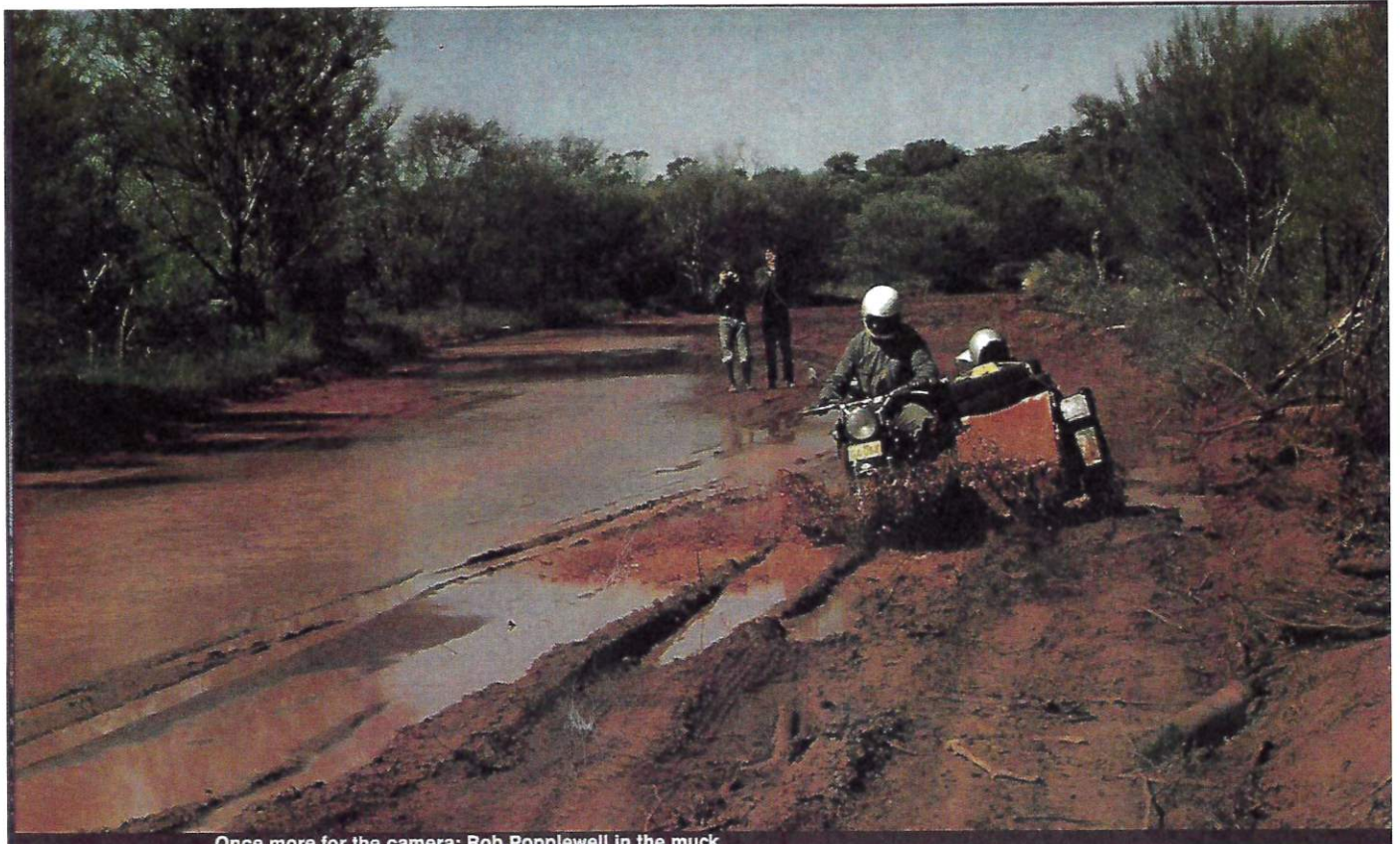
The comforting, or challenging, thought that kept coming back through all this was that we were quite likely experiencing the same

up-and-down of triumphs and low blows that most pioneers throughout history have known. We therefore pressed on, undaunted . . .



Later on: beauty is as beauty did . . .

On Sunday we made it to Docker River, where we were unable to talk the man at the "service station" into selling us gasoline. So, believing we had enough to make it to the next possible fillup place, we went on—only to stop a few kilometers farther on, recheck our calculations and assure ourselves that was wrong. One of us turned around, then, heading back to



Once more for the camera: Rob Popplewell in the muck



School of hard knocks: Malcolm McKenna lost this round

Docker River on Monday, when it was possible to get petrol. Thankfully, at the weather station in Giles we got a different sort of recep-

tion. We were welcomed not only by friendly faces but with fresh fruit and culinary delights. We could shower too—what luxury!

The friendly people at Giles told us that a unit of the Royal Australian Army had been through here a month before, testing heavy

military vehicles. Proof for us that we were truly putting ourselves and our machines to the ultimate test . . .

And yet to come was the most difficult, most seldom used stretch of Gunbarrel Highway. Since its construction 20 years ago absolutely nothing had been done to it—and we knew it from the first kilometer on, where the road was totally washed out. The next 36 kilometers were fairly negotiable, though—until the road turned into little more than a track of deep sand. In the first day after Giles we covered fully 74 kilometers!

This meant that we would have to spring out of bed at sunup the next day and make our way through the Gibson Desert's mighty dunes for a good 10 hours. Our sidecar, which normally had plenty of ground clearance, sank again and again into the sand. Despite its special short gearing we had to help it out, three or four of us, repeatedly.

BALANCING ACT IN THE SAND

But for the five remaining solo machines it was also a constant battle. It was virtually impossible to steer the heavy machinery through the sand without losing balance and landing anything but rightside up several times a day. Fortunately we landed mostly on top of the BMWs instead of vice versa and there were no serious injuries—but often we were so tangled up in the motorcycles that another rider had to get off and come extricate one who had just "landed." The worst day of all was between Giles and Warburton: in 10 hours we put just 47 kilometers behind us.

As the first native huts on the outskirts of Warburton hove into sight, though, all the tribulations of the past five days suddenly seemed worth it. Even the depressing news that we wouldn't get fuel here—even though it was promised—was not enough to destroy our triumph at making it this far.

We were surrounded immediately by a crowd of curious, if shy, natives. And then two missionary nurses drove up in their Land Rover. Wonder of wonders, despite our appearance, they invited us to lunch!

In five days we had covered

355 kilometers—an average of 8.9 km per hour. The stretch had taken its toll too: Alan Hawkins, our chief navigator and oldest member of the group, decided to pull out.

After a refreshing stay in Warburton, off again—and now the road was relatively good, though big potholes, ridges and washouts forced us to keep down our speed. But on the first afternoon it happened; Rob Popplewell was motoring along at about 50 kph when he saw a deep washout right across the road—much too late to do anything about it. The R 60/2 with its sidecar was catapulted into the air; it didn't return to earth in one piece.

So we had to improvise yet another time, exchanging front and rear engine-mount bolts and taking off the forward footrest. For the rest of the journey Rob would have to make do with the footrests intended for the passenger's seat.

A makeshift repair to Kevin's carburetor was to give up the ghost on this leg too. We used wire to perform an even more makeshift fix, which broke again and again. But there was more: 181 kilometers before Carnegie Homestead—which was supposedly deserted—and 502 kilometers from the next place where we hoped to get supplies, the sidecar's front attachment bracket broke once and for all. It would be impossible to take it any farther.

This meant that all supplies now had to be distributed among the solo machines, which was going to make it more difficult for

all of us. But especially for Rob, who would now be on two wheels for the first time since we had begun.

Almost incredibly, we made it to Carnegie without any major problems. And truly incredibly, there was someone there—a native, charged with certain administrative duties.

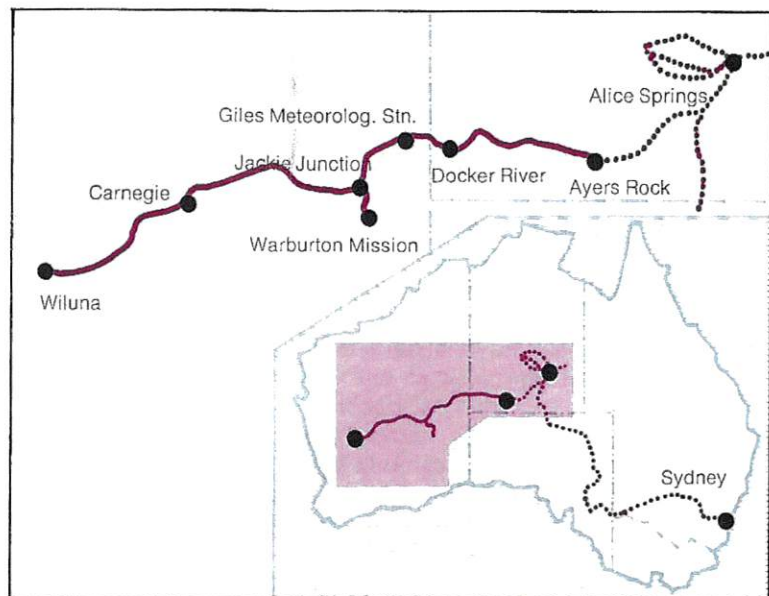
The dusty, 426-kilometer stretch between Carnegie and Wiluna is comparatively smooth and we made good time, although we found the settlement at Wongawol abandoned. On top of that, one of our fuel tanks had developed a leak and was empty. Only Rob Popplewell and I had enough fuel to make it on to Wiluna.

About 145 kilometers before Wiluna we made the decision that I would go on alone to Wiluna; the others would share Rob's remaining fuel and go as far as they could. I got to Wiluna with no problems and filled my tank as well as the extra containers I had with me.

Turning back then, I met my friends only 37 kilometers from Wiluna. Fuel apportioned, we started up and made our entry into the little village of Wiluna on the evening of 29 August in pouring rain . . . a quiet but triumphal end to the most ambitious two-wheel adventure in Australia to date.

For the first time, motorcycles had conquered the Gunbarrel Highway—through hell, high water and one of the most sparsely settled, driest stretches of land on earth.

Garry McLeod



McLeod and teammates were the first to conquer the Gunbarrel on two-wheelers. Dotted line is the approach route, solid red the real thing