

Geoff Trewin

HOKA HEY (Definition: It's a nice day to die – urbandictionary.com)

The name “Hoka Hey Motorcycle Challenge” had originally inspired me with the thought of 1,000 like-minded Harley riders (warriors) in an endurance race from Key West, Florida to Homer, Alaska; a distance of over 9,000 miles. What I didn't understand was how close the definition of “Hoka Hey” would become to being true.

But before I try to tell you about the toughest event I have ever competed in, I need to explain the “challenge” of how the event started for us.

It all started months before the June 20th start date. We had planned to ship our bikes very early so they would be ready and waiting at Bartels Harley-Davidson in Los Angeles, as our plan was to have six to seven days to ride the 4,500 km to Key West and then three to four days to prepare for the start.

I should explain who “we” are; there were only three Australians that took up the challenge. Me (Geoff Trewin), my great mate and business partner, Marc Story and a customer (and now riding buddy), Lyn Lees (aka Hard Riding Harley Girl). Marc had his bike in Denver and planned to have two weeks cruising his way to the ANIMAL BAR (another story) in Temple, Texas where Lyn and I would meet him after riding from L.A.

Back to our personal “challenge”... Lyn and I arrived on Friday, June 11th at 7.30 a.m. at the Los Angeles International Airport, grabbed a cab and headed straight to Bartels Harley-Davidson. They were not open but, as the first of the service staff started to arrive, it became obvious our bikes were not there! I had the import agent's contact details and made a call. The ship had arrived in L.A. on June 9th (the bikes had been left in Singapore for 2 weeks!) and they were still unloading the containers. He informed me no freight is moved from the dock until all the containers are off the ship, so we checked into a nearby hotel. Further calls revealed that the containers were then moved to a freight warehouse for distribution and that no one worked on the weekends. To add to the drama, Bartels did not open their service department on Mondays. Lyn hit the Hoka Hey blog to see if any of the competitors had a contact. While drowning our sorrows in an Irish Pub, Kevin Jones from L.A. Harley-Davidson called to let us know they would do whatever they could to help. Kevin had also entered the Hoka Hey. As there was little we could do until Monday, we informed the agent of the new delivery address and decided to visit Kevin at L.A. Harley-Davidson. The cab fare was about \$70 so we decided to rent a car. Kevin was not working on Saturday but his manager took us to the rental car agent. Then off we go in our rented Mini with Google Maps in hand. But wait, there's more! Lyn had lost all her credit cards!! Breathe, just breathe, was my request as we raced back to the dealership. Luckily, Lyn had dropped them in the manager's car so they were waiting for us. As we drove back to Marina Del Ray there was a lot of discussion on the benefits of “one man, one wallet” versus “one woman, multiple bags, thousands of pockets and loads of shit.” Sunday turned into a forced day of rest. **Three days lost.**

Monday, we checked out and, with Google Maps in hand, we drove back to L.A. Harley-Davidson. We were waiting in the car park and as I looked at our fully packed Mini, I started to wonder how all that gear was going to fit on two bikes. Luckily, my thoughts were interrupted by, “You must be the Aussies?” We met Kevin, who is a great guy, and spent time talking and looking around the dealership. We were introduced to his father and other staff. It was nearly lunch time and Kevin invited us to a meal with his girlfriend. We went to a local Mexican restaurant; I didn’t want to be rude and let them know I don’t eat Mexican so I thought I would bear it, but made sure Lyn swore not to tell my wife or I would be eating it forever!

After lunch we got gut-wrenching news. Customs had assigned our container for “DETAILED INSPECTION” and we would not see it before Thursday!

The process is simple enough; customs may have a concern or randomly select freight for detailed inspection, which means the container is taken to a different holding warehouse, unpacked and laid neatly out so the customs agent can inspect it. This, of course, adds thousands of dollars to the freight cost. Or that’s what your agent will tell you!

Lyn hit the Hoka Hey Blog again looking for someone who had a contact in customs. We were a bit taken aback by the many offers for help; mates, cousins, business associates, even the Hoka Hey competitors were calling anyone they knew. **Four days lost.** Checked into another hotel.

After a morning of frantic phone calls and rushing from warehouse to warehouse trying to speak to with someone face to face, Annie, the Hoka Hey west coast coordinator rang with a contact name, Danny Green, that she had received from her contact in Alaska. It was about 4:30 p.m. when I finally spoke to Danny, a top bloke, and for a customs guy, he had a sense of humour. He said it was the plutonium in the saddle bags that caught his eye. Danny told us the paperwork was a mess and that if we would come to their office in Long Beach first thing in the morning he could sort it out for us. **5 days lost.** Checked into another hotel.

We got up early to miss the L.A. traffic and we were constantly blessing Kevin for the loan of ‘Sherrill’ (the Navman) as she directed us effortlessly with her calm voice even when we were a bit slow to turn. The harshest word expressed was “re-calculating.” We parked the Mini close to the customs building and went walking looking for a Starbucks. Long Beach is a very well-groomed beachside suburb of L.A. In the early morning there were just the odd few homeless on park benches. Lyn spotted a lady walking her dog and walked over to get directions, totally ignoring my golden rule learned the hard way from past experiences, “never ask an American for directions.” After five minutes of detailed directions Lyn returned looking very pleased with herself. We opted for the Starbucks 100 feet away across the park! 10 feet on I was approached by a homeless guy saying something about Starbucks while he scuffled along with his hands on the wheels and legs and feet propelling his wheelchair. I didn’t really understand him so I kept walking. In rolls the wheel chair guy giving me a mouth full at Starbucks?

At the customs office we spent about three hours sorting out the paperwork and got our release paper. What a relief! As we walked out, we overheard a guy tell a story about a homeless wheelchair guy abusing him downstairs!

Off to the warehouse we raced, only to find the bikes were still at the Customs holding warehouse waiting for the fees to be paid. After more frantic calls, it turned out there was a dispute as to whether the freight charges for the ship has been paid and the container could not be released until the issue was resolved. We made even more frantic calls, dismayed by the number of people and different companies that were involved. We then headed off to another warehouse (thank God for Sherrill) that was just more blank buildings covered in security cameras. Finally, we spoke to a helpful lady who also informed us the container had not been inspected and was listed for Thursday. With her help, the inspection was moved up so that we could pick the bikes up from the distribution warehouse on Thursday morning. We lost too much time to ride to Key West, so Marc suggested we hire a U-Haul Van and drive in shifts so that we could arrive by Saturday night. Sherrill took us to downtown L.A. to pick up the van. Lyn had hit the blog again to see if anyone knew of a cheaper alternative, as our budget was getting stretched. Again we were overwhelmed by the support and encouragement we received from the competitors in the Hoka Hey. Did they know we were all going to be competing for \$500,000? One guy, "Whiskey" told us to call him from the hire place and he would put \$500 on his credit card! **6 days lost.** Checked into another hotel.

Day 7 ... this had to be it! We U-hauled over to the warehouse calmly guided by Sherrill. As I knew we were early, we parked in the car park and waited and waited and waited. I finally went in to talk with the supervisor and learned the container was not there! After more frantic calls, some abusive (Lyn had lost it by now), the container arrived at 1 p.m. Now for the bad news... there were 2,000 boxes that needed to be unloaded, by hand, and palletized before we could even see the bikes. The guys stayed on the job after hours to get our bikes and they rolled out at 7 p.m. This was about two hours after our cut-off time; we were too far gone and it seemed our challenge was just to get to the start line – but we felt we owed it to all the people rooting for us.

What followed was 36 hours of driving across the U.S. with very little sleep. Marc was closely watching our progress and trying to arrange somewhere to unload the bikes. We conceded to the fact that it was going to be too stressful trying to unload, unpack and put two bikes together very late on a Saturday night. We knew there would be lots of helpers but that would not be fair to them either. We picked Pensacola as the furthest point we could ride from and not lose the advantage of double shift driving. I called the Service Manager at Pensacola Harley-Davidson who was happy to help. We got there as the doors opened and figured we had time to have two tires fitted to Lyn's bike. At 12:30 p.m. we rode off, expecting to be at Key West at about 12:00 a.m., which would give us time to rest, and Lyn time to repack.

As you would expect after the week we had just had, it wasn't a trouble-free ride. The first of two very wild storms hit us as we turned onto the turnpike (looped expressway). Progress was very slow as the road was flooding and visibility was very low, but we

pressed on. The second storm hit as we reached road work and detours on the outskirts of Miami. Finding our way out of the Miami ghetto was not easy but thankfully a young guy in his 500SL convertible Mercedes directed us back to the turn pike. Soaking wet, we arrived in Key West at 5:00 a.m. – just one hour before the start! We fuelled the bikes, parked them in the line, registered, found Marc and had 15 minutes rest...WE MADE IT!!!!!! Now for the start of the longest endurance race ever put together. Luckily we were well rested and prepared – not!

Start the Race

We started the race at 6:15 a.m. and felt very lucky to be there. We were also glad that Marc was rested and prepared, as the race to the first checkpoint turned out to be quite the navigational challenge. After 17 hours on the bike we were very wet, tired and no help to Marc whatsoever! We were just blindly following and fuelling the bikes, grabbing water and snacks where we could. We checked into Bruce Rossmeyer's Harley Davidson just as it was getting dark to pick up our next instructions. I saw a few surprised faces when they saw Lyn and me, considering the debacle we'd gone through just to get our bikes! With Marc in the lead we were doing well, but it had to end; he was still fresh and I knew, as we all did, had his own personal goals. At about 11:00 p.m. we were in a forest with lots of corners; as Marc went out of sight, I backed off and pulled into an abandoned service station. Lyn followed and I told her I needed to rest. We both just laid down on the concrete with our helmets still on and slept for three to four hours. It was a much needed rest after driving for 36 hours, spending, 37 hours on the bikes and only having about an hour's rest. One hell of a first day of the challenge!!

Day 1

When we woke at first light, it was cold and there was heavy dew. We took off in the direction Marc had headed and pulled into the first service station. I now needed to look at the instructions and start navigating. There was no map; just "turn left at x and right at z"! It was clear the statement made in the briefing before the race was no lie. "We will lose most of you within the first two days and the instructions are designed to confuse you and get you lost." At that moment, we were in both places!!! I found that I had to break my golden rule and ask for directions. I started with "Where are we?" and was able to get that basic information. I found if you keep the question simple you got a lot better answer. It didn't take long to get in sync with the instructions.

The biggest confusion was that we weren't aware of the distance between each turn, which did distract us from riding through some of the most spectacular scenery in the U.S. The riding was only interrupted by fuelling, laying down in full gear – including helmet – beside the bikes and catching 40 winks. The general pattern was established. Now for the confusion... we drove from Florida into Georgia and back into Florida, then back into Georgia and then crossed into Alabama! Once we got our minds around the U.S. road systems, it was pretty good; however, we still needed to know if we wanted to go north, south, east or west. Another point of confusion was that one road often had many names. This is an example instruction as it was written, "Turn LEFT onto US-41 W/SW 8TH ST/TAMIAMI TRL/FL-90 W. Continue to follow US-41 W/TAMIAMI TRL E/FL-90W". Not easy to understand, and even harder to read strapped to the Road King's windscreen!

With the luxury of hindsight I now know at this stage in the race I was already fatigued enough not to be making sensible decisions anyhow! We often rode miles in the wrong direction because I confused a right turn with a left turn. On one very confusing mountain section we ended up with four other bikes looking for the next turn. As we found out, you often need go beyond the instructions to pick up the next piece. We rode with two of the guys (ex-policemen) until about midnight; when it looked like we were about to negotiate a high mountain pass we decided to lie down for a few hours. We were finding the abandoned service stations were becoming very comfortable!

Day 2

We seemed to be making good pace, even accounting for the amount of time the guys would stop to confirm directions. About midmorning, I pulled into a service station for fuel and our two mates rode on. The instructions were to, "Merge onto US-278 E/MS-6 E" and then, "Turn LEFT onto MS-315/BLACK JACK RD." As we merged on to US-278 we caught our new mates and rode on. After about an hour I pulled up and said, "This does not feel right as we are travelling east!" After more directions from locals, we headed back to find the left turn. As we were heading back, we saw about 30 bikes heading east. Soon after, all the bikes were travelling at 140 km per hour on an interstate where the traffic generally travels at 150-160 km per hour looking for Black Jack Road. As soon as we spotted Black Jack Road, all the bikes tried to turn or stop at the same time. It's a wonder that the interstate travellers were able to miss the bikes. After that experience, we avoided riding in groups.

After that, we lost the pack and I made another wrong turn so that we arrived at Southern Thunder Harley-Davidson an hour after we should have. The weather was hot; after a quick drink, new sunglasses and one lost camera (Lyn) we headed off on the next leg, which turned out to be a real low point for me. As if riding a motorcycle on the wrong side of the road with no sleep was not enough, there were new navigational challenges. We crossed into Tennessee, Arkansas and got more confused and disoriented than I have ever been in my life. The instructions must have come straight off Google, as some roads didn't even exist. I should have remembered the "go a little bit further." After sitting in a burger joint trying to see if we could recognize any roads so we could pick up the instructions somewhere beyond Jonesboro (we really needed to get out of there, it was DRY – no alcohol!), we retraced our steps to get onto a main road and headed for Flagstaff to pick up new instructions. On the way we stopped at a truck stop and paid \$5.00 for a shower, before riding on another three to four hours and then stopping to sleep beside a service station that was shut for the night.

Day 3

On to Oklahoma. We were making good time, not quite on the right path but heading in the same direction. My standard line became, "We rode every road and took every turn we could find even if it meant looking for six hours!" Crossing into New Mexico as it got dark was an amazing experience. As we topped a ridge with a valley of traffic snaking its way towards us, there was a backdrop of one of the most amazing storms I have ever seen. The lightning turned night into day, but also formed tornado vortexes that had me looking for shelter. Just as the rain hit, we made it to the New Mexico information center

and found several other bikes and lots of trucks seeking shelter. None of us wanted to be on the road if a tornado touched down. The rain and wind were incredible so we laid down for a few hours. About 3:00 a.m. I woke to a strange humming and heard a frightened truckie say, "It's out there somewhere"...

Day 4

Through New Mexico and across Arizona the pattern of riding, fuelling and the odd power nap became the norm. I managed to contact Marc by text and it looked like we would catch up with him, but we never did. I came to realize it was not going to happen. I knew I would be happy just to make sure Lyn and I crossed the finish line and would later understand any attempt to push ourselves any harder would have ended in disaster. As it was, our trigger to nap was waking up on the rumble stripes. As crazy as that sounds, we were simply not capable of making sensible decisions. When I think back now I still struggle with that fact I put myself in that situation. Upon arriving in Flagstaff, we rode straight to the dealership. It was a personal stop, not a checkpoint. In 2003, when Marc and I and our wives, came across this dealership on the 100th anniversary ride, I was so inspired by what they had done with a tin shed that I made the decision to return to Australia and buy a Harley-Davidson dealership.

We were not eating very well so we had a steak at the bar next to the dealership. This gave us an energy boost and we rode on. Riding through Monument Valley was something I had always wanted to do, just like John Wayne. However, I hadn't expected to do it in full moonlight. We were now in Utah and heading for Wyoming. We pulled into a wayside stop somewhere in Utah to sleep in the car park. Boy was it cold!

Day 5

This was to be the best riding of the race. The valley and mountain road through Flaming Gorge was amazing. We arrived at Flaming Gorge Harley-Davidson just after lunch. We were greeted by a lady from Australia whose daughter is the manager. The dealership really went out of the way with food and refreshments. We also caught up with a guy Lyn had been talking to on the Hoka Hey Blog, "Whiskey." This was the who offered us \$500 towards the cost of renting the U-Haul in L.A. Leaving with Whiskey and a few of his mates, we road into the Wyoming plains across endless open grasslands – you could almost feel the buffalo. There seemed to be a lot of bikes looking for the same place, Chief Oliver Red Cloud's home, which was a checkpoint. Riding through Wounded Knee in South Dakota made me think I was in the movies! We then rode back into Wyoming and on into Montana, where we were hit by a huge storm with lots of hail. We sheltered under an interstate overpass until the hail stopped. Needless to say, it was starting to get very cold. We were still with Whiskey and his mates when we stopped for the night.

Day 6

At first light, we were on US-212 and the US-87 headed toward Billings. Now the ride turned out as I expected – long days and long nights on the bikes. The first few days were stressful, confusing and very challenging as we negotiated in and around back streets, so I was happy to be on the open road. Friends of Whiskey's, Bill and "Enigma" (nickname), pulled up as Bill was in a bit of pain. Lyn and I rode on towards Missoula. It was getting

extremely cold and neither of us was handling it very well. Yet another information center provided us with a place to sleep.

Day 7

Arriving at Montana Harley-Davidson before they were open gave us some time to plan our next move. The bikes needed an oil change and Lyn needed a new back tire. Buying some over-pants helped to better prepare us both for the cold. We also learned Marc was in the front of the pack, but had a broken foot. I knew a broken foot wouldn't stop him! The riding became more enjoyable as we rode into Canada and British Columbia. We had eight hours of great riding, followed by eight hours of agony as we tried to stay awake as long as possible. The roads and scenery were fantastic, but it was still very cold. During a fuel stop and dinner in Radim Spring, the locals convinced us not to ride the next section at night as there was nowhere to pull up and wildlife, including bears, were everywhere! The road also had a lot of glaciers and it we knew it would be a fantastic sight in daytime, so we decided to stop at a campground and spent the night in a wet freezing swag!!

Day 8/9/10

I have combined the next three days as, although I remember what happened, the sequence of events is still confused. The locals were right, the Glacier Highway was spectacular. We crossed into Alberta, then onto British Columbia and then onto the famed Alaska Highway into Yukon. It was now really cold. The snow-capped ranges were never out of sight as we cruised through valleys and over mountain ranges. It was extremely hard to take photos as you had to stop, get the camera, get your gloves off, take the photo and get going again - only to find a better view around the corner! From the start it was difficult to make sensible decisions due to the extreme fatigue and at this point we needed to make a large one. The last checkpoint was about a 1,000-mile round trip, but the finish line was only a few hundred miles at one particular fork in the road. In our dazed state, as bike after bike pushed straight through to Homer and the finish line, I could not bring myself to take the short option. I woke on one of the mornings after a few hours sleep at the side of a service station to find Lyn sleeping on a pile of hoses, still in her wet weather gear and helmet but with the added accessory of a towel over her face (Alaskan mosquitoes are huge!). Our riding at this point took place on cold, wet and slippery roads. We also saw more guys on the side of the road asleep, wrapped in whatever they could find to stay warm or dry. One guy didn't even make it out of the service station driveway before pulling over and falling asleep! The Alaska Highway offers a unique challenge for the unsuspecting: Permafrost dips. The road is not broken; however, it takes a sharp dip, compressing your suspension and spine without warning.

There was a long uphill section to the Alaskan border entry point that was thick with loose stone roadwork. We just gripped our bikes and held on as the river of stone washed us from one side of the road to the other. As we arrived at the border checkpoint, we realized that a guy that had tagged along with us was now nowhere to be seen so we guessed he had lost it in the stone wash. The home security guys were great and sent a patrol back to see if he was okay; luckily he had just stopped to rest. We arrived at the Harley-Davidson dealership in Fairbanks to find it closed and four other bikes waiting. We made a call to the organizers who told us we could go into Homer or wait

until the dealership opened. I could not believe (particularly in hindsight) that we were still trying to get to the finish as fast as possible. We knew the winners had crossed the finish line as I phoned Marc who had finished and he gave us directions. When we stopped for fuel in Anchorage, I decided to ring Mary-Jane who was flying into Anchorage on the 30th. Mary-Jane was on the way to the hotel in Anchorage and I still had five hours to ride to reach Homer; another temptation to stop. We arrived in Homer and rode to the end of causeway where we crossed a yellow line painted on the road. There were no fans or staff at the finish line, so we had to be satisfied with the knowledge that we survived the race. On the way to find a hotel, “with a real bed and shower “I noticed a few people waving from a building and a big HOKA HEY sign. PS. If I ever suggest anything like this to anyone, please punch me in the face! The final numbers: 16 bikes destroyed, 2 dead, 2nd place awarded to Marc who had a broken foot, 1st female awarded to Lyn.

~ Geoff Trewin (Rocky Harley Davidson Australia)
Rockhamton, Queensland

Geoff Trewin and Lyn Lees

