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Well, I finally returned home from the Hoka Hey Challenge. It has taken a full week to recover and rest up before even attempting to write about ‘the journey.’

Since returning, several friends have asked me to describe the Hoka Hey Challenge Ride. And I would love to...but to be honest, I do not know how. It will be easy to describe the places traveled through and the beautiful and diverse scenery witnessed. But to describe the emotional impact will be almost impossible. Typical questions that are posed to me include: “Did you enjoy it?” Me: “No.” “Did you have a good time?” Me: “Absolutely!”

The event was sponsored by the Big Jim Red Cloud (6’ 3” or 6’ 4” in height and just as broad shouldered) and his wife, Beth Durham, of the Lakota Indian Tribe located in Western South Dakota. The goal of the ride was to bring attention to the water shortage issues facing their reservation and the people living on that reservation.

The night before the ‘event,’ Big Jim revealed that one of the purposes of bringing us together was to take us on this journey through famous battlegrounds of the U.S. In that manner, we would be able to pick up the spirits of dead warriors and bring them back to the reservation in South Dakota to help fight the battle for water rights for the Lakota Indian people.

I am a religious man, so do not believe in such things. However, I have always found it enriching to throw myself into the cultures of other peoples and learn from those experiences. While I may not have believed in the ability to transfer spirits of warriors, I knew it would be fun to experience and learn as much as possible from the Lakota Indian Tribe sponsoring the event. During the evening ‘pre-briefing,’ a brother and nephew of Big Jim even sang a song of hope in their traditional tribal language, which was fascinating to listen to and be a part of. In a way, it was even strangely moving!

Later, Big Jim explained that he and his father ‘cooked up’ this idea a couple of years ago. They had been working daily on the Hoka Hey Challenge and, just two months before the beginning of the ride, Big Jim’s father passed away. Both emotionally and proudly, Jim described the day they found his father, sitting in his favorite chair, dead.....and wearing his Hoka Hey T-Shirt!

At that point, the room in which we were all meeting felt somewhat lonely and strangely quiet. Feeling the anxiety, Big Jim then cracked a joke and the room began to immediately come alive again! (I don’t remember the joke....sorry.) Excitement was beginning to fill the air as Jim began to describe our upcoming journey. The ride was scheduled to take us through 62 mountain ranges, 25 national forests, eight deserts, 33 Indian reservations and two countries.....8,300 miles in total.

\$500,000 in gold/cash was at stake for the winner of the event. The ride was limited to air-cooled, V-Twin Harley Davidson motorcycles containing no modifications (although at the last minute, a few V-Twin Indian motorcycles were allowed). The goal was to ride from Key West, FL to Homer, AK the fastest. In order to win the money, a specified

route had to be followed. There would be seven checkpoints where the competitors/riders would have the mileage on their 'bikes' checked. At each checkpoint, a new set of driving instructions/routes would be obtained. Disqualifying factors included veering off the specified route, sleeping in hotels (it was necessary to sleep outside next to the bike each and every night), drug and/or alcohol usage while on the road, speeding tickets, reckless driving, etc.

In addition, no GPS units were allowed. Riders were also not allowed to use electronic devices such as cell phone or computer mapping programs, call family members for directions, etc. Alternative fuel cells or gas cans were not allowable either. The gas was of particular concern to me. My bike has a five-gallon gas tank that gets between 130 and 150 miles per tank ... depending on the conditions. Newer bikes with six-gallon tanks and six-speed transmissions often get between 200 to 250 miles to the tank. But, like those who formed this great country of ours, I consider myself somewhat industrious. I figured I would stop by Home Depot and pick up some plastic tubing. And if I ever got in an area of scarce fuel, I could always ask a nearby farmer or a passing motorist for fuel. As such, I just needed to remember to keep some cash in my pocket.

The Challenge was designed to test the navigational skills, ingenuity and determination of the individual riders. As Big Jim Red Cloud stated, it wasn't going to be easy. They were not going to simply give away \$500,000!

How was all of this to be enforced? Well, at each checkpoint, the motorcycle mileage would be checked. Other than that, it would be based upon integrity. This was to be a challenge comprised of 'road warriors' who ride with honor and integrity. We were to be a part of something special and needed to trust one another. Win the Challenge or not, the commitment to honesty and integrity was to bring, in the end, something special to each and every rider involved.

This all sounded pretty straightforward. I thought all I had to do was drive 1,000 miles per day at 65 miles per hour. 1,000 miles in a day at that speed would take 17 hours, thereby still leaving me with six or seven hours of sleep per night. Then, if I learned that someone was ahead of me I could ride a few more hours and sleep a bit less. Again, this sounded easy. (So I thought.)

The Challenge began just before sun-up on Father's Day, June 20, 2010. We all began lining up in a small hotel parking lot around 4:00 a.m., jockeying for positions near the front of the pack. Even at 4:00 a.m., I found myself near the rear of the pack. 750 riders had registered for this event. So, being near the end of the pack made me nervous about the time it would take to get on the road and actually begin making some time. But, it also gave me time to begin socializing with other riders. It was fascinating to learn that not only did riders come from almost every state in the U.S., but also from New Zealand, England, Australia and even Scotland! Scottish John, as he was called, even began the rally that morning wearing his country's traditional kilt!

Around 4:30 a.m., the organizers of the event began to hand out the first set of driving instructions. In looking over the instructions, it immediately became apparent that this

was not going to be a 'cake walk.' The instructions were driving directions. No coordinates. No highways or freeways. No distance markers. The following is an example of the directions: (actual set!)

Turn Left onto FL-19 State Road 19.

Turn Right onto W. Burleigh Blvd./U.S.-441 S./Fl-19/FL-500 S.

Turn Left onto CR-452/Lake Eustis Dr.

Turn Right onto CR-452 N/Lake Eustis Dr. Continue to follow CR-452 N.

CR-452/Lakeshore Dr. becomes E Citrus Ave.

Turn Left onto FL-19 N/S Grove St/State Road 19. Continue to follow FL-19 N/State Road 19.

Turn Left onto CR-452.

Turn Slight Right onto CR-19A.

Turn Right onto Jennifer LN/CR-44.

Stay Straight to go onto CR-44A/County Road 44A.

Turn Left onto FL44/State Road 44.

Turn Left onto Spring Garden Ave/Fl-15A N.

Turn Right onto W. International Speedway Blvd./CR-92 E. Continue to follow Q International Speedway Blvd.

Turn Left onto N. Williamson Blvd/CR-4009 N.

Turn Right onto LPGA Blvd/CR-4019 E./11th St.

Turn Left onto N. Nova Rd/Fl-5A N.

Turn Right onto W. Granada Blvd./Fl40 E. Continue to follow FL-40 E.

Turn Left onto N. Beach St/CR-4011. Continue to follow CR-4011.

Turn Slight Left onto Pine Tree Dr/CR-2820.

And it went on. At each of the seven checkpoints, we were given a new set of similar driving instructions. YIKES!

As can be seen, it was not going to be easy to navigate. Many upcoming turns needed to be embedded into our minds so that we could keep a look out for those turns. In addition, a turn could be six blocks ahead or 100 miles ahead, so it was important to remain extremely alert at all times. A missed turn would take a rider way out of their way. (This happened to me, as well as most riders, on several occasions.)

Adding to the confusion, the directions referred to CR and SR roads, both containing the same road number! For instance, CR 452 or SR 452. Not having driven the Southern routes for quite a few years, I completely forgot that CR stood for County Road and SR stood for State Road. As such, on more than one occasion, I took the wrong road.

In looking over the directions, I began to think ... so much for 65 miles per hour! The directions consisted of all two-lane roads and switchbacks. But, there was no time to worry about such things. The race was about to begin and, again, a tremendous amount of excitement filled the air.

The first day of the ride took us from Key West to Miami, then west over the Everglades, north to just above Orlando and finally over to Ormond Beach (just above Daytona Beach), where we reached our first check point at mile 616. (Unless of course, the rider became lost ... then even more miles were accumulated!)

About four or five hours into the ride, we encountered a traffic jam. As we sat there in the baking sun and waited for a little over a half hour, we could see the remnants of a wrecked motorcycle up ahead in the ditch. A fire truck, an ambulance and a half dozen police cars squeezed past us and moved ahead to the area of the wreckage. As we later learned, the rider was part of our group and had to be air-lifted to a nearby hospital due to severe compound fractures. This was a stark reminder to all of us who were waiting to remain alert and to pay close attention to the road ahead!

It was about 9:00 p.m. when I finally pulled into the Bruce Rossmeyer's Harley Davidson dealership in Ormond Beach, FL. I was already exhausted! But, this was the first day of the ride and there was still \$500,000 to be won, so after checking in and picking up my next set of directions, it was time to ride again.

The next leg of the journey took us through Georgia, Alabama and finally to the Southern Thunder Harley Davidson dealership in Southaven, MS, some 905 miles away. This was our second checkpoint.

I don't want to bore anyone with details of the journey, so I think it best to simply detail the routes, then speak briefly of the highlights of the trip.

The third leg of the journey was a long one. We traveled 2,754 miles through Mississippi, Kansas, Oklahoma (including its Panhandle), New Mexico, Arizona (twice) from the north to the south, then north again, up and through Utah, and then finally into Wyoming. Our destination was the Flaming Gorge Harley Davidson dealership in Rock Springs, WY.

The fourth leg of the trip entailed another 1,352 miles through Wyoming, South Dakota and Montana, ending at the Montana Harley Davidson dealership in Missoula, MT. There was a surprise checkpoint on the Sioux/Lakota Indian Reservation near Wounded Knee where we were treated to traditional Lakota Indian Buffalo Stew at Big Jim's grandfather's house. Big Jim's grandfather is the chief of the tribe, so this was quite an honor!

The fifth leg finally got us across the U.S. border and into Canada. We traveled another 2,340 miles across Alberta, British Columbia, the Yukon and finally into Fairbanks, AK, arriving at the Harley-Davidson Farthest North Outpost dealership. WHEW!

The last leg finally led us south another 576 miles to Homer, AK to a place called 'the Spit' ... a long stretch of road surrounded by water, resembling the keys of Florida.

The people of Homer were fantastic! It seemed that everyone in town welcomed us with open arms and bright smiles. Some even called us 'heroes.' While that may be an exaggerated term, it certainly made those of us who finished the ride feel pretty special.

Out of 756 riders who began the race, only 231 finished. The ride was indeed, in every sense of the word, a challenge! 20 or 30 people wrecked their bikes and could not continue. A dozen or so of the riders on the wrecked bikes actually had to go to the hospitals along the route. Another 20 or 30 riders could not make it across the Canadian border (due to their past); over 100 that I know of simply quit in the middle of the Challenge and two died along the way. (One fell asleep while riding, the other lost control of his bike in loose dirt). All of this added to a genuine sense of accomplishment at the finish line.

Highlights of the ride:

1. All of the small towns we rode through from Key West, FL to Homer, AK, and all of the people we met in those towns. It was a fantastic look at America and the people who make up this great land of ours!
2. Two 'good old boys' I met on a long, out of the way, deserted two-lane country road, in the middle of Mississippi. I stopped to ask them for directions and began to have a great time laughing and joking with them. They even volunteered to send riders behind me down a nearby road that would lead them to four feet of mud that they would have to navigate. I declined, but I liked their enthusiasm. If time was not of short supply, I would have stayed and partied with them for the evening. They were fun! As it was, I enjoyed their company for about 45 minutes, just 'shooting the breeze' before continuing the journey.
3. Riding the route 'Avenue of the Gods' in Utah at midnight. I could not see anything. There was no moon. The road was unpaved and mostly gravel. The road was also so narrow that it seemed that perhaps only one vehicle could navigate it at one time and in only one direction. It wound up and down through the hills. And, although I could not see anything, I knew that if I veered too close to the edge of the road, there would be nothing for a long way down! It was therefore exciting, scary and exhilarating all at the same time.

4. Setting up my tent in the middle of a storm in the middle of Wyoming. It was about 8:00 p.m. and the wind was blowing so hard I could not keep the tent in one place. Plus, the rain was coming down as if someone had placed a water hose directly above me. In order to set up the tent, it was necessary to move to a Wal-Mart parking lot and use bungee cords to tie the tent to a light pole. In the morning, I woke to rain, but knew I had to press on. Crawling out of the tent, I ended up in a huge bank of mud! Apparently, I had set the tent up in a low lying area and all of the dirt rolled down to the edge of my tent. The tent provided a nice relief barrier, thereby creating a nice island of mud that completely surrounded the tent. After breaking down, rolling up and packing my tent, I looked as if I had wrestled a pig in the mud! Thank goodness it was still raining. After an hour or so on the road, I was clean again.
5. There are great memories of all the places I threw my sleeping bag on the ground and did not even put up a tent ... along deserted roads, in empty parking lots, next to a train track without knowing it due to the darkness, only to be awakened at 4:00 a.m. to the sound of a train whistle and pounding wheels about 20 feet above my head. Great memories of other places stayed include a casino parking lot, along river banks, in places so dark that I could not even make out what was in the area around me, etc. All great memories!
6. Great memories of all of the travels through the middle of the night when I did not see or hear another bike and wondered if I was still on course.
7. Leaving a rest stop in Nebraska about 10 miles from the South Dakota border. I apparently made a trucker mad when I pulled out onto the road in front of him. I guess I was so tired that I completely misjudged his range. As such, he apparently became pretty angry and actually tried to kill me. I heard no air brakes, nor did he sound his air horns. I suddenly saw his truck bearing down on me at a very rapid speed. Going through the gears as quickly as possible, I reached 75 miles an hour ... in what seemed like a nano-second. Still, the trucker came so close to me that I could see the emblem of his truck almost touching the back of my bike and I could feel the heat from his radiator on my back. My initial emotion was anger. I thought about following him and kicking the heck out of him at his next stop. Intellectually though, I knew better. So, I simply swallowed my pride and 'out-ran' him. I needed to find the chief's house in South Dakota before it got too late in the day.
8. Crossing the border from Montana into Canada at 11:00 p.m. Being the only motorized vehicle at the border crossing at that hour was both a relief for finally making it that far and lonely.
9. All of the wildlife along the roads of Canada and Alaska.....both black and brown bear, moose, caribou, big horned sheep, buffalo, etc. Beautiful!
10. Coming over a hill at 65 miles an hour and seeing 'a deer in the headlights' (although it was the middle of the day). It seemed like an eternity as I hit my brakes, fish tailed, regained control of the bike and tried to swerve out of the deer's way, while the deer scrambled to gain its footing on the pavement, and tried to decide which direction to run, experimenting with different directions. Finally, I whizzed past the deer at perhaps 50 miles an hour, barely missing his rear end. Any closer and I would have wiped the deer's butt for him. I am certain I needed someone to wipe mine at that point, but did not have time to stop and

check! Throughout the entire trip, the adventure consisted of meeting new people and encountering new experiences. It included riding in rain storms, hail storms, dust storms, riding in the middle of snow-capped mountains and, at one point, riding among the snow caps while being rained on! Brrrrrr!

There were moments of loneliness when no other bikes could be seen on the road and doubts about my navigational skills set in ... then pulling into a gas station or restaurant and seeing someone I recognized from the ride. There were moments of sheer wonderment at the diverse beauty of the surrounding land. And there were a ton of laughs at the stories other riders shared of their own experiences during brief encounters at rest stops, gas stations, etc.

Every rider, whether he or she finished or not, encountered his/her own unique and exciting adventures and experiences, thereby creating a feeling of some sort of 'brotherhood' among all riders.

In Homer, AK, the townsfolk had been waiting for us since we left Key West. When I arrived, even before I could go to a hotel and get cleaned up or unpack my bike, several locals took me to a saloon and began to fill me up with beer. And everyone in the saloon wanted to shake my hand and say 'hi.' This was the same experience for all of the riders who finished.

On the 4th of July, Homer held its annual parade. We were invited to ride our bikes in the parade. Of course, I took part in the event. It was a real ego boost! After the parade, the town held a 4th of July celebration at a large campground just outside of town. There was plenty of food, bands, beer and tons of people as, it seemed, the entire town came out for the celebration. At one point, all festivities stopped and Big Jim Red Cloud got up on stage, telephoned in his grandfather over a microphone and the Chief of the Lakota Tribe prayed for all of the 'road warriors' in his native Lakota language. The feeling at that moment was indescribable. Afterward, all Hoka Hey riders were invited to sit in front of the stage area, while the locals snapped a ton of pictures of us. It felt like paparazzi and I felt like a star!

Shortly after the photo shoot, the band stopped once again and all Veterans were invited to the stage. Once again, I felt pretty special standing there with other proud veterans of various eras, having our photos taken repeatedly by the locals.

All in all, it was a great experience! And for those of us who challenged ourselves and pushed through to the end, there was, again, a special feeling of brotherhood that cannot be adequately described. The only way to even offer a hint of the feeling is to recount an experience I had flying back to Los Angeles. After boarding the airplane in Anchorage, AK, while I was placing my luggage in the overhead compartment, I recognized a fellow Hoka Hey rider walking toward me. Without thinking, I held out my hand and said, "Hoka Hey." His response was, "Hoka Hey, brother." He then quietly moved to somewhere near the rear of the airplane. In his words, I could feel a real sense of pride. And the momentary 'Hoka Hey' greeting that we exchanged was enough. It was as if my own brother had greeted me. Nothing else needed to be said!

Hoka Hey everyone!

~ Jordan Backhaus, Los Angeles, CA