

I wrote this article for Classic Driver magazine. Was disappointed to see when the magazine came out that they had incorrectly ascribed the authorship to Rowan McLean. In the subsequent magazine [two months later] they apologized profusely on several pages. However by then the damage was done.

ALL THROUGH THE NIGHT

BRIAN SKUDDER | recalls competing in the 1970 Australian Southern Cross Rally with Neil Johns in a Mark I Triumph 2000. It was a major learning curve.

At the end of the 1960s New Zealand held its first proper motor rallies, starting with the Shell Silver Fern held in the North Island, beginning in Taupo and finishing in Wellington. In the Northland Car Club for years we had had as our core events hillclimbs through the summer and car trials in the winter.

So rallying looked like an exciting combination of these two sports. Four cars entered that Silver Fern event from our club. Neil Johns/Rowan McLean in a Triumph 2000, Bruce Pullman/Brian Skudder in a Mk I Cortina, Noel Millar/Malcolm Pullman in an Isuzu Bellet and Bruce Burling/Max Aitken in a Datsun 1600.

After this rally (won by the late Grady Thomson driving a 350 Monaro), my Whangarei garage became responsible for the mechanical preparation of Neil Johns' car and during the next year it was stripped and rebuilt ready for the second Silver Fern Rally which was held in the South Island.

Four gruelling days of rallying took place and towards the end Johnsey was leading Paul Adams' BMW when he became nauseous on petrol fumes from a leaking fuel pressure gauge and slipped back to finish second to Paul.

The upshot of this result was an invitation from the Australian Sporting Car Club to compete in their Southern Cross Motor Rally. Neil asked me to be his navigator, because having your mechanic on board was probably good insurance. I approached Castrol, who were just introducing GTX motor oil and got some sponsorship, while Johnsey approached British Leyland of NZ who also helped financially and we were off.

Getting off the plane at Sydney we were met by John Arter, Secretary of the Australian Sporting Car Club and I delicately asked him if he knew of a cheap hotel for us to stay at — he immediately replied "You're staying at our house". This spontaneous response is typical of what I have found to be Australian hospitality.

We clambered into John's well used Mini

and drove to his house. The next day John had to go to work and Neil and I grabbed a lift into the city and I spent the following three days day walking from customs offices to shipping offices, organising the off-loading of the car. There was no way I was going to hurry the wharfies, it was Labour weekend, so I went searching for Neil and found him at the Sydney Triumph/Rover dealers where Murray

I WANDERED UP TO SEE ANDREW COWAN TEARING ABSOLUTE STRIPS OFF HIS HAPLESS CO-DRIVER

Thompson had his Rover 2000 in for servicing. Murray was a New Zealander who had also accepted an invitation to compete and his car was in "I've just finished a rally" condition. So I threw on some overalls and stripped the front hubs, cleaned and repacked the bearings and checked out the front brakes.

(Murray Thompson later hosted one of the first NZ produced motoring programmes on TV and was responsible, in a roundabout way, of getting Chris Amon involved with Toyota — Editor)

Eventually we got the car off the boat and we had to take it to a Testing Station for an Australian Warrant of Fitness.

I overheard the testing officers discussing our widened wheels, because in Australia you were not allowed to exceed a certain width, so when the chap pulled out a tape measure I helpfully grabbed one end and then, hiding what I was doing with my body held the end of the tape almost midway across the tyre. So we got a warrant and were ready to go.

The Triumph 2000 was a Mk I version and Neil had brought a TR5 fuel injected motor back from England and Johnny Windelburn had installed it at his Maungaturoto garage in around 1967. This was before Neil and I developed our working relationship. It would have been close to being the first Pi Triumph saloon

in the world, although the factory was probably already experimenting.

The day of the rally dawned and we headed in to central Sydney for the start. Cars and people everywhere and I started to get my first inkling that rallies in Australia were different to ours.

Instead of seeing "hotted up" Cortinas, BMWs etcetera, I noticed cars like Renault 16s with lots of map reading gear like we used to see in the Hepolite Car Trials in New Zealand. Gulp!

Also entered were Andrew Cowan and Brian Culcheth from England along with Edgar Hermann and Jaginderv Singh from Kenya, as well as top Australians like Colin Bond and Evan Green. However, when we were given our rally pack the instructions were very detailed and most navigating was done by working to eight figure map references.

Holy Moly! Now we're off, luckily hooking onto the tail of another competitor fairly quickly which got us out of Sydney to the first special stage.

This was a dirt track race track which Johnsey duly pounded around and then it was back onto the road again.

I was getting the hang of the instructions now and we found our way to the next stage where a lot of cars were lined up waiting the go-ahead.

I wandered up to see Andrew Cowan tearing absolute strips off his hapless co-driver. I slunk away and thought "thank goodness Johnsey's a laid back sort of guy".

Dark was approaching now and we eventually started the stage and were shocked by the road conditions. They were basically clay and metal and were as hard as concrete. With bumpy, unbelievably deep washouts.

The car was taking an unbelievable pounding.

In New Zealand our competitive stages were held on closed roads, so when we had thrashed quite a long way into the stage and we broadsided around a corner to be confronted by a floodlit tennis court with parked cars and spectators on the road we were using, our eyes



The Triumph 2000 Mark I, fitted with a "petrol injected" engine from a TR5 sports car, in Southern Cross trim. A really period shot

bugged out nearly to the windscreen.

Talking to officials after the stage they confirmed they didn't close roads, but they tried to use little used ones! Yeah right.

So we pressed on through the night and a lot of the next day, at one point going across a river on a car ferry.

We started at midday Wednesday and drove continuously until 6 o'clock Friday morning before having a sleep until 3 in the afternoon and then off again for two more nights.

One night we went over the Queensland border, then the instructions took us into a banana plantation and we weaved through narrow tracks with plants higher than the car each side of us.

At another point we had to open a gate into a paddock and follow a creek bank around until out another gate and back on the road.

However, eventually I got us lost.

We were looking for an acute right and I must have had my head down reading because we missed it and the acute right we finally found took us into the middle of a big clearing with about five tracks going off it. The instructions didn't make sense.

We switched off and got out of the car to try and hear the sound of other cars. Oh boy we're in the middle of this humongous forest, it's all ghostly quiet and I can't even pick out which was the road we came in on.

In the end we just grabbed a road and drove for about quarter of an hour until we met a car howling towards us. We U-turned, chased him and we were back in the rally, but we lost a heap of points.

Still we battled on. We heard Murray

Thompson had to give up with mechanical woes and still the Triumph gamely pounded over the bumps while I juggled the table-sized National Survey map.

Later on this night we were doing close to the ton on straight forest track when we saw a string of lights cross the road in front of us. Fortunately it was about 400 yards away, so we had time to slow, while a logging truck and trailer crossed an intersection and carried on into the night, leaving us shaking our heads in wonder.

Where are we? I think this is probably our fourth night and Neil is bugged. He is close to falling to sleep and just driving by instinct and I tell him I'll have to spell him.

Now rally drivers are not good passengers and I had never driven the Triumph in anger before.

I nearly went off the road on one of the first corners because the steering was heavy and the throttle had a tight spot, which you gave an extra nudge and you got it all.

So, with having to drive and map read, with Johnsey sitting next to me with the whites of his eyes showing I don't think he got much rest and we were both glad when he took over again.

We were heading back towards Sydney and there were bewildered competitors all around us because the instructions had confused us all. We all decided to head for the finish line.

It was an adventure.

We finished third in class, although there was a bit of confusion over the results because of stages being cancelled.

And the Triumph 2000, which had now completed two gruelling rallies on end, performed faultlessly, except for a wiring break-

age by the overdrive switch on the gearbox, that I fixed at a rest halt.

I finished with a lot of respect for Neil's driving. He gave it his all, but never once looked like crashing.

Looking back on some old newspaper articles I see that in Australia in that era they didn't close the roads, we were supposed to obey the road rules (which included an overall speed limit of 65 mph), crash helmets were not compulsory and they tried to find rougher roads than the East African Safari.

While our Triumph didn't miss a beat, and we finished on our original set of tyres, the works Minis used six sets of tyres.

A great experience. □

