

A COLD DAY'S RIDE

Maurice Woods blows the gaff on the good old days



Dateline: the coldest day. 6am, Feb/1947. Due to the prevalent freezing snow and ice, the railways have ceased to supply coal to the power stations — call out the army!

Gawd it was cold! The "Matchbox" slithered with bowel stirring effect over the deep corrugations of ice, carpeting the Shap Fell road. My trailing feet were not conducive to the image of my being a fast, fearless, fireproof HQ despatch rider. Mind you, the long green snake of army lorries hastily assembled from every MT section in the north of England weren't doing much better. The "noises off" sounded like a shunt-up of empty dustbins. From far below, I could hear shouted opinions regarding parentage and lewd conjecture on what some driver had been doing the previous evening to cause his blindness.

What a shambles! Why was I responsible for the progressive togetherness of this Fred Karno's circus? This wasn't my scene, I should have been poncing around nice, quiet, little army camps, telling everyone that Mafeking had been relieved. Or, more currently, that big Mabel (an enormous moonfaced ATS cook) wasn't in the club but still open to offers — hot dinners guaranteed! I reckoned anyone who survived Mabel could endure her cooking.

My train of thought was interrupted by a crunching of gears and a belch of exhaust smoke, from a big awkward Austin on my nearside. Any second now I was likely to get a close-up of the red rose "div" sign on its tail board — here it comes! Judging from the leisurely manner the swinging back end is brought back on course, "Scouse" Mullen is the driver. Scouse possessed the disconcerting habit of chucking burning dog ends out of the cab window — I gently roll back the throttle and shimmy further up the convoy! I must watch for banks of snow that narrow the road, there's one ahead. Time for me to move in between the trucks. The bike reacts to this manoeuvre like a blunt ice skate! Suddenly, there's no feeling in the steering, for one heart stopping moment all rapport with the model is lost! I can sense the front wheel wanting to turn under as the back end slides towards the rear wheels of the lorry. Turn off the gas and wait till the "shakes" pass off before trying again.

When dawn and Kendal hove into view my corpse-like condition flickered with interest. Of course, I should be standing in the town centre waving my arms like a policeman! Come to think of it, this was a job for the Military Police! Where were all these heroes now? Rolling out of their pits no doubt, and wriggling into a second pair of knocked-off long johns before farting by numbers around coke stoves all over Britain. So there I was, standing on this grotty little bridge like Napoleon with

piles glowering at the cavalry as it crossed the frozen river Kent. By my reckoning, the last truck had gone over some 20 seconds ago. On walking to the bike, my nose, which was superbly trained to detect food — nasal olfactory sustenance hallucination (NOSH for short!) — started twitching at the mouth watering aroma of fried eggs and bacon. Having sallied forth on an empty stomach — the

they were going. If anyone told me I must have forgotten. Not to worry, the trail was easy to follow, I simply looked for tell-tale signs like, white-faced groups of civilians shaking their fists in my direction or, the occasional car reversing off the pavement. I recall one old dear holding the end of a dog lead which was still attached to a wet mark on the road — not allowing the rear end of the truck

"I saw one old dear holding the end of a dog lead still attached to a wet mark on the road"

best that the cookhouse could offer at that unearthly hour was mildewed cornflakes interspersed with warm mouse droppings — my nose quickly homed in on a nearby wooden hut that looked suspiciously like a YMCA. No sooner had I started to reconnoitre this gastronomic oasis when a Bedford three-tonner hove into view. Quickly resuming my position of directional authority, I noticed with some personal apprehension, that this vehicular abortion was approaching at a fair rate of knots! A couple of young Armoured Corps lads were in the cab, both wearing worried change-of-underwear expressions. At the last second my outstretched arm finally had effect. Without any reduction of speed, the steering was yanked over hard left!

The ensuing action was lively to say the least. It being physically impossible to get the lock off in time, the nearside front wheel exploded against the low wall of the bridge whereupon the lorry bounced ten feet into the air. Simultaneously, a goodly length of bridge wall fell into the river. This antiquated rubble interested me not, my gaze was transfixed on the cab screen which was slowly changing colour with a red drape. Coming from a long line of military ancestors, all of whom fainted at the sight of blood, it behove me to seek immediate assistance, but no one seemed interested in my condition!

Having lost all appetite anyway, I kicked the Matchbox into life and recommenced the nightmarish slithering in the general direction of the convoy. I could have kicked myself for not using a 500cc, sv Beezer, a right old barge of a bike, heavy with a low c of g, and not half so eager to move sideways as the Matchbox. What stopped me? The wretched thing was fitted with an air filter. This was a large box affair positioned on the petrol tank, any sudden unplanned cessation of forward movement was apt to leave one protesting in a high pitched tone of voice!

Incredibly, with the sole exception of an officer in the leading truck, no one else knew where

in front out of sight took priority over minor obstacles!

Although it was still freezing hard, conditions on the major roads permitted intermittent bursts of acceleration, which instantly turned me blue with cold! Just outside Lancaster I eased up behind the last truck, the narrow salted path of road surface forbade I should do anything else but stay in that position until we stopped to eat in Preston. Riding through the frosty air sharpened my appetite to a razor edge — pity! I'm not sure what it was Fulwood Barracks offered us to eat, but I can remember seriously considering stewing my riding boots!

Lined up on the square ready for the off again, the trucks looked an impressive sight. Taking the lead, I couldn't resist a touch of the John Waynes. Raising my arm in the approved manner, "Wag-gons ro-Hole!" A Major stood hands on hips glaring at this performance, which no doubt, confirmed his suspicions that we were a shower of cowboys!

Now it was devil take the hindmost all the way to Lichfield! Once in the Midlands, the going got decidedly hairy, my speed tapered off to second gear burbling. Impotently, I watched the rear light of the last truck disappear into the mist, now I was finding it hard to distinguish road from dyke. After another hour of eye straining misery, without the lights of a town or village in sight there was mutual pleasure when I happened on one of our trucks that had given up the ghost. Fortunately, both the stranded squad-dies were old sweats who had taken the sensible precaution of bringing along haversack rations. Would I partake of a bully beef sandwich? They watched in awe-struck fascination as wad after wad disappeared into my rumbling stomach. Would I mind telling someone of their plight? Belching an affirmative I rode off like a giant refreshed. My arrival at Wittington Barracks, just outside Lichfield, was the non-event of the year. Ignoring the sarky comments, "Did you come by train?" "I could 'ave pedalled 'ere faster!" I flopped down on a very damp mattress

silently cursing the army, the weather, and the fact that I was too exhausted to unlace my boots!

It was still dark when some raving lunatic started blowing a bugle! Ignoring the stirrings and urgent impeachments for me to assume the perpendicular, I let the room empty itself. I was bruised all over, the bike was bent; enough was enough! My second awakening was to the sound of marching feet. Bleary eyed I looked out to see clumps of little brown men stamping up and down a parade ground, 2-3-4! Not surprising really, after all, this was the training depot of the North and South Staffordshire Regiments.

An RSM was turning a bright hue of purple gazing at the Matchbox, which was left high and dry almost in the centre of the square, leaning on its prop stand. I half expected him to bellow at it to stand to attention! Being already dressed, I hurried out and waited until the robots were performing at the far end of the square. Swiftly, I marched (?) across to collect the bike — I never made it! "That dirty 'orrible man, stand where you are!" The screaming disembodied voice manifested itself into a Drill Sergeant, he peered into my unwashed face. "I don't believe it, oo are yer laddie?" The lack of identity on my battle dress had him puzzled. I had a stock answer for this question that never failed to nonplus my inquisitor, "I'm with the 4th of Foot!" He looked disbelievingly at my sagging riding breeches, "Oh no you're not! You're Mellors the bleedin' gamekeeper, (this "nutter" was well read!) now get your ass off my square and take this load of junk with you!" I started the bike with a rich rev and flicked the "mag" lever to fully retarded, the resultant backfire made the Sergeant nearly non-plus his pants!

Making one's self scarce in a strange town in freezing cold weather isn't easy. Lichfield had a small cosy museum, I signed the visitors' book and tried to look like one of the exhibits, until hunger drove me out. A "bob" was going to buy me a cuppa in the salubrious Tudor restaurant until the owner whispered in my ear, "Would you like the full lunch — don't worry about paying?"

After three days of sightseeing, I returned one evening to find a crowd gathered round two very haggard, unshaven soldiers. Both of whom looked vaguely familiar. I caught the gist of their repeated explanation, "... and this bow legged little git jumps in the cab, scoffs every crumb of our grub, and buggers off on his motorbike without telling anyone where we were. We'll find 'im. . . ."

Outside I could hear the bugler sounding retreat. Very quietly, I pushed the bike out of earshot before starting it. By the time I'd reached my unit a thaw had set in — I was past caring!