

KERMIE goes (most of the way) to Monte Carlo

“ Next time” were the first words that Liz had uttered for over an hour, as we drove south in our hire car to catch up with the rally in Monte Carlo.

With terminal engine trouble (I think a broken crank can safely be described as terminal) Kermie had been abandoned at a roadside garage near Sistrun the night before and with it, our plans to complete the 1992 Monte Carlo Challenge. In truth we were devastated !

The rally had taken up much of our lives since we had decided to enter some ten months previously and with a class win in sight we had found our retirement hard to come to terms with.

Only a week before we had set out from Cheltenham to drive to Berlin for the start. Via the Harwich to Hook ferry and a long drive through Holland and Germany we had arrived at the German city on the evening of the January 30th.

Scrutineering was completed on the Saturday without drama and with a few last minute bits and pieces of shopping to complete we presented ourselves at the Brandenburg Gate bright and early on Sunday morning for our 9.08 start. It was hard to believe that after all these months and all the hard work and at times total panic that we were actually off. It was a cold grey morning and after walking through the gate from ' East to West' we made our way through the suburbs and on towards our first time control and lunch halt at Condit Castle. (Yes that's Colditz Castle).

Arriving at the town square below the famous castle we were totally overwhelmed by the size and enthusiasm of the reception and we took some time to get through the crowds and find a parking space.. We were entertained to lunch in what was the theatre of the castle and escaped (sorry!) at 4.30 to get to Limburgh for 9.30.

If the welcome at Colditz was enthusiastic it was nothing to what greeted us at this beautiful German town. The Monte Carlo rallies of the forties used the town as a time control and there was a tremendous interest in the rally.

Each car was talked into the square by a commentator and at the control we were welcomed with a glass of champagne...! There was more to come. The local motor club entertained the entire entourage to dinner and took it in turn to guard the cars throughout the night. Even the Burgermeister made a speech. When I wanted to find petrol one of our hosts insisted on showing me to the nearest filling station + escorting me back....amazing.

Leaving the next morning each crew was given a souvenir print of the town square and an enormous bag of fruit. We shall not forget Limburgh.

We now had 475 kms to do to Reims. We had fog, rain, ice and snow. Snow! That wasn't on the menu until we got to the Alps. However going through the Eifel mountains Kermie seemed to cope with the conditions very well and I was interested to see how quickly we caught up the bigger engine cars on the slippery road surface. My confidence began to build. I was impatient to get into the real mountains. The trip to Reims passed without drama and we found the Novatel on the south of the city without difficulty. We now had a 24 hour stop over and met up with other crews who had started from Edinburgh and Oslo. Crews from other starting points complained of a pretty boring couple of days. We had no such complaint.

After the concourse, held in the city centre and a further check by the scrutineers we eventually left at 9.30 pm for the start of the long section that would take us to Aix Les Baines on Lake Bourget. I had not enjoyed our stay in Reims. Suffering mainly from nerves as to what lay ahead, I worked on the car most of the day, doing a lot of jobs over and over again. Liz worked on the maps. I managed to smash a spot light lens and in truth we were both glad to get away and into the night.

We had 190 kms to first petrol which was straight-forward (the police escort through the village of St Michel was good for a laugh) and as we were not due out until 1.40 a.m. I even managed a little sleep. A few cars were being driven with a little too much enthusiasm and two had 'gone off'. More seriously Tony Pay in his TR had been hit by a drunken Frenchman and they had a very luck escape. The car was a total write off.

The Col du Dunon was to be the first real test. It was reported that heavy snow covered the top and that the descent would be very tricky. In the event the conditions were not so bad and we dropped 48seconds on the test plus 1min on the following road section due to being held up by a slower car. One more 24min road section and a welcome breakfast on the Col du Bonhomme. Hard luck stories were being reported all around and although disappointed that we had dropped time we were a lot better off than some!

After a further test over the Ballon D'Alsace and dropping a further minute on the road we made the time control at Aix just before 7pm. Not having seen a bed for 36 hours we were pretty tired. Kermie had gone very well, the only trouble being a small brake problem and we had started to lose a little gearbox oil. Liz went for a bath and to do some more homework on the route and I spent an hour servicing the car before falling into bed.

Was it really 6.30?!

From Aix the running was to be in position order and in truth we were a little surprised to discover we were now laying 31st. So the previous day had not been so bad.

Suddenly our rally changed pace. We were 2nd in class behind the Lancia Appia Zagato of Richard Thorne. As we left the time control Richard's navigator said "we are the ones to beat".

It must have been nerves as we wrong slotted on the motorway out of Aix en route for the test over Col du Granier. Fortunately when we reached the control there was a queue of six cars and we managed to claim our allowance. By the skin of our teeth we were within our time allowance - time to calm down. By now Kermie was up with some of "the names" and we were coming across place names that I had read about for years. The heavy rain of the previous few days had passed and the driving was just wonderful. We dropped eight seconds on the first test and by the lunch halt at St Jean we were just seconds behind the Lancia. Paul Easter (name-dropper) warned us that the afternoon would take us over roads that had some of the sheerest drops in Europe.....the tension mounted.

We dropped just one second over the Col du Rousset and were now 26th + leading our class with the Lancia behind us and the Lotus Elite of Mike Greassey just behind them. The Lancia was the subject of much admiration as at each time control up would go the bonnet (or was it the boot) and the crew would start to work on the engine.

Sistrion and the supper halt was just 100kms away. We would start the night section over the Turini as class leaders and overall 20th or thereabouts. The roads continued to be very dramatic although there was little snow. For the first time I began to think how thrilled we would be to ring the children from Monte Carlo and tell them to make room for some silverware . Having come 3000kms from Cheltenham I actually began to think that despite my misgivings with the engine that we would be soon be looking out at the Mediterranean.

40 kms from Sistrion, there was a violent knocking from the top of the engine followed immediately by an even more violent vibration from the bottom.....I am no engineer but you didn't need to be to realize that our Monte Carlo Challenge was over.....

NEXT TIME.....!