

Lost In France

by Geoff Bell



The Tommy Simpson Memorial - Geoff doffs his cap.

Photo Geoff Bell

Tommy Simpson was a contemporary of mine, but while I laboured with my test tubes as a metallurgical chemist, he threw himself into the hurly-burly of professional cycle racing on the Continent. He was good; good enough to be the 1965 World Road Race Champion, whereas I was an unexceptional club cyclist. What we did have in common however, was our teenage hero: Fausto Coppi. Last October I watched a television programme about Tommy which contained harrowing footage of his death on the upper slopes of Mont Ventoux in the 1967 Tour de France. A memorial erected at that place is a mecca for cyclists of all nationalities. I immediately resolved to pay my, long overdue, respects.

By late spring I had got myself into reasonable shape, and had devised a 1,000km route from Calais to the summit of Ventoux. This fulfilled the prime requirements of the Mer - Montagne series of DIY Randonées of the

Fédération Française de Cyclotourisme. Their regulations for these rides stipulate a modest 10km/hr average speed which I reckoned gave ample time for some civilised sleep. The route and schedule were submitted to - and approved by - the FFCT Délégué, Charles Rolland. Hotels and the bike-bus (out to Calais and back from Orange) were booked. I was committed.

‘What back-up do you have?’ asked the New Zealander at the adjoining table in the Calais restaurant on the eve of departure. This is an alien concept to me but we both seemed satisfied when after some thought, I said that I did have travel insurance and the ubiquitous plastic card. He wished me well. On reflection, the back-up that I did have was a self-knowledge (and, to some extent, confidence) born of pushing myself on long walks and bike rides over the last thirty years.

Card stamped and away from the hotel prompt at 10am on Sunday, 14th May; 481 km to my next hotel in Clamecy on Monday evening. I don’t recall much about this first day; the gaudy roadside depiction of the battle of Agincourt, and the simply impressive Mémorial Australien spring to mind. I remember a gentle headwind, temperature not too hot and no big hills. Pretty good really - except that I was aware of working a little too hard to gain a little time on a modest schedule.

I had been, and continued throughout, having a Werther’s Original nearly always in my mouth. This seemed to work on many fronts, but what it did for my few remaining teeth, I daren’t think. By evening at Villers-Bretonneux I was ready for a substantial meal but I struggled with my kebab and chips and had to leave a good half of it. At Compiègne, just before midnight, I was going to sleep but riding steadily and about an hour up on schedule. Another kebab restaurant was just closing but the guys cheerfully stamped my card and enjoyed telling me to beware the wild animals in the forest that my road passed through. Indeed there were warning signs but I found it very atmospheric and peaceful once the initial nervousness had gone.

Meaux at 3am was desperate. Disorientated, roads going in all directions; none of them the D228 that I wanted. I stopped at the railway station where the only sign of life was a drunk listlessly kicking the littering cans around. Eventually the driver of the second car that I flagged down pointed me in the right direction. In hindsight, I should have got the compass out, or brought along a print-out of the street plan from the Autoroute, or both.

About 9am I found a quiet little lean-to against a farm building and had half an hour’s sleep on a pile of woodchip. At Bray-sur-Seine I was about one hour down on schedule but the shops were open. No Müllerrice or basic rice pudding were to be had, but they did have YOP. This and biscuits were

to be my handy food for most of the trip - even though I kept looking for the rice. A café stop in Auxerre provided the next control - about two hours down on schedule. This modest deficit was maintained to Clamecy, where I had reserved a room at the Auberge de la Chapelle. I don't think that Madame was too keen on my appearance, in fact she tried to make out that she had no record of my booking. But one must persist in these circumstance and I was eventually shown to a comfortable little room with shower and my bike stabled in the courtyard. The attached gourmet restaurant was definitely not for me, but two minutes' walk away was a pizza restaurant that was much more my scene. Here, a delicious quatre fromages was not quite finished. A good seven hours sleep, interrupted only by an awareness that I should have put sun-cream on the tops of my feet, and a painful hobble round the room to allay cramp.

Tuesday. I had scheduled a 6am start and a 10pm finish for the 260km to Lyon. No early breakfast was on offer so my alarm went off at 5.30am. While packing, I realised that I had lost my yellow Gore-Tex top. This has been an invaluable piece of kit over the last few years and the last I remembered of it was taking it off after the night section, putting it in a flimsy plastic bag - not the usual thicker one - strapping it to the top of my rack-top bag and then loosening the buckles because I didn't want to damage it. I lost it instead!

Out of the shelter of the courtyard at a slightly delayed 6.15am, the roads were wet and the skies leaden. I felt vulnerable. The rain began slowly at first. Time to despair at my situation, then to notice the bin-bags put out for collection, examine the contents of one and hastily re-tie it, before cowering in a bus shelter on the outskirts of Dornecy. An easing of the rain enabled a quick sprint into the village where the boulangerie was working its early-morning magic on the senses. A side door was open. 'Bonjour', I called. A huge man appeared.

'Voulez-vous aidez moi? J'ai perdu mon jacket pour l'eau. Avez-vous un sac plastique pour construire un gilet?' Now I know that this is severely mangled French, but he understood, and rapidly produced a perfectly-sized heavy-duty bag.

'Avez-vous les (and I did a scissors impression with my fingers).'

'Non, mais', and he eased past me to where his mobile butchers' van (for he was a boucher not a boulanger) was ready for his daily round. He emerged with a still blood-stained carving knife.

'Il n'est pas tous les jours que vous aidez un cycliste Anglais', I said as I shook his hand.

'Non', he replied. He also gave me a spare bag - uncut. My 'gilet' was on more than it was off for the rest of that day and night, including a proper

thunder and lightning storm that seemed to last about two hours. It kept my body warm and dry.

At the café in St-Honore-les-Bains, the locals said that I had no chance of reaching Lyon that night; they were right of course. Not a fun day at all. No success trying to buy a simple waterproof and time just disappeared. I rang the hotel to say that I would be late. 'Pas probleme.' Lyon is big, very big, but by this time - well after midnight - I felt happy on the major roads heading for the city and down to the Saône. This was fine, except that I finished up five bridges up-river from Pont Kitchener - the one leading to my hotel. The night porter soon had my card stamped (3.10am) and I and my bike installed in my room. A quick shower, bed, sleep - and more cramp.

Wednesday. I had scheduled a 6am start and an 8pm finish for the 227km to Vaison-la-Romaine. Just had to give myself a bit more sleep, so awakened by alarm at 7am. The breakfast room was heaving with business types but I had a good breakfast with lots of strong coffee. Away at 8.15am into the morning rush hour. It had been easy in the early hours but this was horrendous. The bridge to take me back over the river was only attained by taking some good advice and becoming a pedestrian. Once over, I was on the route and trying to follow the French descriptions, of 'Le Rhône à vélo'. (The location and purchase by Gerry Goldsmith of this French publication was key to the decision to take the 'easy' line down the Rhône valley from Lyon to Donzère. Where possible, it avoids main roads from source-to-sea.) Soon the majestic Rhône was joined and the route laboriously followed as best I could. First one bank, then the other; an island here, a barrage there; and still too many stretches of main road that could not be avoided. In the heat of the day more time was lost and by Tain l'Hermitage I was a further three hours down.

Sometime that afternoon I rang the hotel Le Burrhus, not to say that I would be late, but to apologise that I would not make it at all. Madame was very understanding - her husband is a cyclist - and hoped that on some future occasion I would be their guest. Minor difficulties finding the main bridge in Valence - I had unknowingly passed under it in the heavy traffic - and then getting back up to it, were soon forgotten a few kilometres further on with the purchase of some delicious ham and mayonnaise sandwiches from a garage. I bought two more packs for the night. Just after dark, and before it got too cold, an hour in the bivy-bag on the outskirts of Le Pouzine revived me somewhat - despite nearby barking dogs. The alarm was most unwelcome.

There was hardly any traffic now, so the main N86 provided a straightforward route south - that was until Viviers where I was lured by a sign (for motorists) across the river, up a big hill and in a big arc back down

to a very quiet Donzère. If I had had the nous to stick to my route, or carefully consult the map, I would have got there a lot sooner and with considerably less effort. Further time was lost trying to find the right road out of Bollène where I had diverted to in search of an easier line. Vaison-la-Romaine was finally reached at 7.15pm.

Thursday. Just 32km to the summit of 'Le Géant de Provence'. I had scheduled an 8am start. After breakfast at the Bar l'Athena I was away on schedule. About an hour to Malaucèn, where I topped up my supplies of YOP for the final ascent. With 1579m of climb in 21km it held no fears - at the planning stage anyway. But first I had to visit the cycle shop and buy another waterproof. My improvised gilets had served me well, but would be no match for the potential weather up there. 'Deux ou trois heures', the proprietor replied when I asked how long to the top. With this cheery news, I set off.

I had a copy of the height/distance profile in my map holder, and the kilometre stones were there to be ticked off. My revised plan, if I remember correctly, was to ride 2km, rest, etc, etc, until I was at the top. I didn't get very far before I realised that even my 22 x 26 'granny' gear needed some power to turn it: power that I did not have. It had all been used up in the last four days. The distances between rests got shorter until by halfway they were down to about 100m. Meanwhile scores of other cyclists of all abilities breezed past me - but they were mostly on stripped-down machines and they certainly hadn't started in Calais. I realised that I could walk faster and this is what I did most of the way to the top - which was reached at 2pm, exactly 100hrs after starting. There is now a thriving shop at the top selling refreshments and souvenirs, and providing their unique tampon for randonneurs.

A thankfully effortless, but chilly, freewheel brought me down to the Tommy Simpson Memorial, the purpose and goal of my journey. As a true pilgrimage it had involved some suffering but I was well satisfied. I had unwittingly sought and found my limits.