

# Road Ramp 2004

Day 7: Wednesday, 16 June 2004

## FOCK 1: California Desert Drivin'

I awoke to bright sunlight illuminating the leopard-skin-pattern sarong that I use as a curtain between the cockpit and the cabin. It had been cool enough for a sheet during the night, but, though still low in the sky, the desert sun was wasting no time heating up the Mobe. Without really thinking about anything besides existing in comfort, I flicked on two of the fans, cast aside the navy blue sheet, and dropped back into Dozeville. The rising sun was almost like having a snooze alarm.

Just as there are Passengers and Drivers on the road of life, there are Snoozers and Risers on the bed of life. A Riser awakens at the first beckoning of day. Risers step out of bed with alacrity, ready to face the world. Within an hour of first opening their eyes, they (notice I'm not saying "we" here) get up before the sun, and they have gone for a run, walked the cat, taken a shower, eaten a cooked breakfast, read the paper, checked out their favorite websites, and lord knows what else.

Yeeesh.

Snoozers, on the other hand, respond to that first beckoning of day – almost always the loud prodding of some ranting alarm clock – by hitting the snooze button. It is usually a practiced flail rather than some calculated motor skill. My own home circumstance happens to find a pole lamp between bed and alarm clock. With barely a hint of consciousness, the left arm loops around the pole, drops heavily on the battered snooze button, and recoils back to the safety of the mattress.

Nine minutes later, this recurs. And another nine minutes later. And another. Eventually, the utter limit of available time is reached, and getting up can no longer be put off. At that point, the snooze alarm is bypassed, the Alarm Off switch is flicked, and the dreaded commitment is made.

Snoozers have a love-hate relationship with the Snooze button. It nudges us, but doesn't shove. It wakes us up, but let's us know that it's okay to go back to sleep, and we embrace that option joyfully. I've done as many as ten Snooze cycles, each time deciding that I just plain wasn't ready.

That is what has always happened to me, the quintessential Snoozer, whenever I have resolved (foolishly) the night before to Wake Up Early And Go For A Run. Though the intention was noble, it was ill-fated. Resolve dissolves and desire misfires when it means gettin' my sorry behind outa bed any earlier than is absolutely necessary.

Oh, I've made it sometimes; I'm not totally dysfunctional. I've hefted my carcass, creaking and groaning and grunting those strange involuntary "Awwwwfff" noises that old men make. My back has strained sharply as I've leaned down to tie my shoes. My knees have screamed bloody murder as my body weight descends on them the first several hundred strides. My heart and lungs send nasty messages to my brain, griping about the sudden and unwarranted change in workload, all with a This Ain't My Job theme. And my morning "run" has been more of a trudge.

Maybe that's one reason why Snoozers are Snoozers: we just don't move well in the morning. My brain will function just fine – well, after the initial decompression period anyway -- but my body clunks like the Tin Man from The Wizard Of Oz. I need my oilcan (i.e., Biofreeze) to loosen up those rusty joints.

And that's not just when running is involved. Some of my northern cronies used to occasionally make crack o' dawn tee times at the local golf course, and they expected me to join them. After a few double-bogeys and snowmen, my muscles finally would feel awake enough to execute something resembling a golf swing, but the damage had been done.

Who first started golfing at dawn? What a misguided concept: coordination is lacking, so you can't swing well; the grass is still wet, so your ball won't roll as far; the low sun is in your eyes, so you can't see where your ball went anyway; it's before noon, so bibulous activities are somewhat frowned on by the average conscience; and when you're finished you now have the whole afternoon to do ... chores!? Bah!! Bad plan. Bad. Bad.

OK, OK, so that's golf, and we were talkin' running here. To me, much of the same applies though. My empty stomach growls at me. I'm thirsty because I didn't drink enough, or my belly is sloshing because I drank too much. And when I get through with it, and all I want to do is stretch out for a while, and kick back and unwind with a refreshing malt beverage, as I do after my evening jaunts, I instead have to rush my shower, scarf down a quick breakfast and skedaddle to work. Usually still perspiring.

I'm just not a Riser.

So, it was a reflex action when I dropped back onto Moby's bed instead of leaping up to meet the new day.

Eventually, though, the usual nudges from the bladder forced the issue, and I began to slide aside the wonderful draperies of precious slumber.

The usual where-the-hell-am-I-this-time stuff went through my sluggish brain. Moby I recognized, but I had to do a little reconstructing to figure out where I had parked by noble steed.

Oh, yeah: California! Images from the final hours of last night's ride began to fall into place, but they were all smothered in darkness. I had entered The Golden State under cover of deep desert dark, and had seen pretty much nothing but headlights, taillights, and reflective road signs.

And trucks! As I rose and reached for the curtain, I remembered the sight of hundreds of trucks. They lined the road, they packed this lot that I had squeezed into.

And now they were gone. Every last mother-truckin' one of them had packed up and rolled on. How the hell did I not hear them, especially the ones right next to me? I mean, they were like six feet from me. WTF? It was like they had all been abducted by aliens or something. Hey, for all I know, maybe they were.

One thing was certain though: they sure were gone. A few hundred yards away on I-10, a couple of semi's rumbled by on their way to destinations unknown, like their brothers.

Obviously Risers.

Desert Center lived up to its Tiny-Dot Status on the Rand. It was a tiny motel, a puny store, and maybe gas, maybe not. Other than that, it was just a huge flat empty dirt lot, with one tree in it, and one Dodge Ramvan under that tree.

There was no reason to stay, so stay I did not.



I-10 welcomed me back with open lanes. I was in my 8<sup>th</sup> state and still using the same I-state. One thing that could certainly be said about the RR04 route: it was not complicated. At least, not yet. That was due to change real soon.

A breakfast stop was needed. Ice was needed, especially. And I took the time to sit back a bit with my Diet Coke and peanut butter crackers and check out *USA Today*. I sometimes get very out of touch with the real world when I'm ramacking. If I go a long stretch where I'm playing my own tunes instead of the radio, I can miss a whole lots of headlines. I never see any TV newscasts. Any bars I go into usually just have some ballgame on, so, apart from a few out-of-town scores, there's not much info gleaned from them either. So, every few days, I like to grab a paper and see what's what.

For some reason, I have always liked the weather map page of *USA Today*. Maybe it's the bright colored swaths that sweep across the page, showing you where is hot, warm, mild, cool, cold, and freaking freezing. I like checking out the high/low temps all around the country and the world. I like knowing that it was the same temperature in Buffalo and Budapest. Or that Seattle was just few degrees warmer than Stockholm. Or that New Delhi and Singapore are both more than 20° "colder" than Tucson.

So, I absorbed all of that, sipped down my breakfast, contented myself that all was packed and ready, and shifted into D to head for Joshua Tree National Park. I got about 100 yards. I stopped by choice, though, not due to some malfunction, so it was OK.

What stopped me was the General George S. Patton Memorial Museum, which sat off to my right. Somehow, it had escaped my vigilance when I had passed it on the way into the gas station. This was a very weird place for such a museum. It was in the middle of desert country, with the two nearest cities of any appreciable size being San Bernadino (120 miles west), Mexicali, Mexico (120 miles south), Las Vegas (260 miles north), and Phoenix (200 miles east). So, there this tribute sits, in the middle of a 120,000 square mile area that has the population density of Alaska. Just who the hell did they project would be visiting this museum? The handful of misguided tourons who chose the southwest desert for the roadtrip? Well, it just didn't make sense.

Then I read the plaque. What a novel thing to do, eh?

What was actually being commemorated was Camp Young, which Patton founded in that California desert, and which was used to train soldiers for desert combat conditions from 1942 through 1944. In that span, over a million men trained in very harsh conditions to prepare for battle.

Now that made much more sense.

There were several tanks on display, though they were fenced off. I would have had to go through the museum to get into the yard if I wanted to touch them. I wonder if I could have driven one around, or fired a few rounds off into the desert. That would've been worth the price of admission.

One tank was named Sluggo. It was parked way up front, where it was most visible



from the road and was parked on a small mound, giving it a bit more prominence. It had "Sluggo" stenciled on the barrel of its gun. It would have been pretty cool to climb inside a tank and imagine just how cramped and loud and smelly it would have been in there, either in the heat of the desert or the chill of winter. Not a place I would crave in either case. Spring and fall wouldn't have been days at the beach either.



There were other tanks of different sizes and colors. One was hardly bigger than Moby was. As crowded as that van can get with a handful of people in it, it was hard to envision a crew of armed men, with full supplies of fuel and ordinance crammed into that little monster.

But, anyway, a few photos from outside the fence satisfied my curiosity, and maybe made Moby seem just a tad more comfortable as we returned to the road.

Those Southern California Mountains are not friendly looking. To the south, they were dark brown and jagged: no grass, just dirt and rocks. To the north, the same, but a lighter brown. I could think of no reason to ever climb them. Mining crossed my mind as a possible purpose, but dirt and rock didn't like much of a commodity. The again, gold is found in rocks, isn't it?

All these bugs that ended up getting smooched on windshields, why don't they just fly five feet higher? There is no atmospheric condition that limits them to a five-foot ceiling. It's not like the air gets too thin to go higher. Climb up there! Can't they see or hear these big things coming? If they had any brains (and maybe they don't, being insects), they would recognize the peril and fly higher, where the cars would go sailing blissfully by under them, and they would be alive to buzz the tale. But who's gonna tell them that? Those who found out the hard way can't exactly spread the word. Dumb bugs.

If you want a good description of the southeastern California desert, just go back and cut-and-paste the most bleak passages of the New Mexico desert. It was more of the same, which only proves that state lines don't mean shit to Mom Nature.

Joshua Tree National Park became Featured Stop #9 on RR04. It was also the 26<sup>th</sup> National Park that my ramacks have passed through (31<sup>st</sup> if you include National Monuments, which I think would be valid – see chart, next page). It was every bit as hot, dry, and deserty as any other area in this area. Why this particular zone was zoned off was not immediately apparent to me.



I stopped in the Cottonwood Visitor Center, ostensibly to show my card, but really to get my souvenir map. The NPS maps are cool. They always contain a wealth of info about each Park. Most of it I learn weeks later, after I get home, because I never take the time to read the damn map when I'm there; I just grab it, glance at where the roads go, and drive off.

While I stood beside the ranger's counter, briefly perusing my map, a well-to-do couple came in. Their Cadillac had pulled in as I was walking to the front door. The woman did all the talking.

"Hello," she said, "We're not interested in the whole park – we're on our way to L.A. -- we'd just like to know how far we'd have to drive to see the Joshua Tree."

The Ranger lady looked a trifle amused. "Well," she began patiently, "there really is not just one Joshua Tree..."

"Oh, you know," the woman interrupted, with a sort of a laugh, "the one on the U2 CD cover. Hahahaha. Is that close?"

"Well," the Ranger began again, "there is a whole forest of Joshua Trees..."

"We just want to see that one," the woman persisted, "the famous one."

"Well..."

"How long would it take to just go to that and back? We have to get to L.A."

"Well, I'm afraid there is no one famous tree," the Ranger replied cautiously, "I think someone gave you the wrong idea. But instead of just one, you can see hundreds of them, just..."

"Oh, we don't want that then," the woman said shortly, "we have to get to L.A. Thanks anyway." And she whirled fabulously and walked to the door.

The man, who had stood silently behind her the whole time, gave the Ranger an odd little smirk and a slight shrug, then turned and followed dutifully. The woman had paused near the door, maybe to glance at a poster or a book, but most likely to let him catch up and open the door for her.

Just as she was in the doorway, and hopefully before they were out of earshot, I said to the Ranger lady, "Gee, I wonder where they're headed."

The Ranger waited until the door closed, and said, "I thought she said something about San Francisco?"

"Do you get asked about that tree a lot?" I queried.

"Not really," she said.

I decided not to tell her that I had been about to ask her about it myself when L.A. Woman had made her appearance. (I hope that's not who the song is about.)

Just after leaving the VC, a roadside sign admonished me, "Do not feed animals." I wondered what kind of animals actually lived in this harsh environment, and whether peanut butter sandwiches would appeal to them anyway. And, of course, I had to feed the CD player U2's *The Joshua Tree*.

Another sign announced, "THIS ROAD IS SUBJECT TO FLASH FLOOD." I was not concerned though. I just didn't see rain happening today.

#### RAM's National Parks

1. Shenandoah (VA) 83, 86, 87
2. Grand Teton (WY) 83, 85
3. Yellowstone (WY) 83, 85, 87
4. Badlands (SD) 83, 85, 87, 00
5. Zion (UT) 84, 87, 90, 00, 03, 04
6. Grand Canyon (AZ) 84, 87, 90, 03, 04
7. Rocky Mountain (CO) 85
8. Petrified Forest (NM) 87
9. Bryce Canyon (UT) 87, 00
10. Arcadia (ME) 88
11. Mammoth Cave (KY) 88, 92
12. Mount Rainier (WA) 90
13. Crater Lake (OR) 90
14. Lassen Volcanic (CA) 90
15. Lava Beds\* (CA) 90
16. Yosemite (CA) 90, 04
17. Death Valley (CA) 90, 04
18. Great Sand Dunes\* (CO) 90
19. Black Canyon of the Gunnison (CO) 00
20. Arches (UT) 00
21. Canyonlands (UT) 00
22. Natural Bridges\* (UT) 00
23. Capitol Reef (UT) 00
24. Grand Staircase – Escalante\* (UT) 00
25. Olympic (WA) 00
26. Everglades (FL) 02
27. Cedar Breaks\* (UT) 03
28. Carlsbad Caverns (NM) 04
29. White Sands (NM) 04
30. Saguaro (AZ) 04
31. Joshua Tree (CA) 04
32. Kings Canyon (CA) 04
33. Sequoia (CA) 04
34. Canyon de Chelly\* (AZ) 04
35. Biscayne (FL) 04

\* = National Monument