

8. Rescued by ‘Hell’s ‘Guardian’ Angels’

One of the most remarkable aspects of riding motorcycles, even to this day is the incredible camaraderie that so often is encountered under the most ‘unlikely’ situations that occur so frequently when one is a daily rider. Back in Britain during the sixties, the public was becoming concerned with the increasing outbursts of ‘road-rage’ on public roads and a drive began to help encourage courtesy and recognize gallantry shown by drivers to each other. The movement was known as “Knights of the Road” and driven by Auto clubs such as the RAC and members of the public through radio stations in the main. ‘Pirate Radio’ was in it’s infancy in Britain with Radio Caroline being the very first to challenge the iron hand of control then held by the BBC in radio broadcasting. It was located in a ship anchored offshore and outside of UK Territorial Water limits. It was also one of the strongest backers of the Knight’s of the Road campaign. The story I’m about to relate should surely have qualified for a Knights of the Road award to probably the unlikeliest bunch of reprobates on or even off record.

Riding an HRD Vincent to work one summer morning along a fast moving road just outside a town in Essex, England named Basildon, I encountered the motorcyclist’s worst nightmare, a high speed tire blowout. Fortunately it was a rear tire and not the front, traveling in excess of 90 plus mph. I would not be around to be telling the story. Nevertheless, I was truly fortunate to have survived the experience. Following a sudden and loud explosion that could be heard even above the wind-noise roaring through my crash helmet, I felt the rear end starting to drift out to the right. Leaning my whole body weight to counter-steer and avoiding sudden braking to retain at least some control, I eased off the throttle in hope that the engine braking would slow me down more gradually. For what seemed an eternity, I battled the monster machine’s weight to keep her upright, swerving alternatively in the most horrifying manner from one side of the two lane highway to the other with rush hour cars all around me. Finally, I brought the machine to a broad-siding halt to the side of the road.

Exhausted and visibly shaking, I somehow managed to heave the monster machine off the road and over to a concrete cycle path to the side of it, and with the last of my remaining energy, lifted it up onto its rear stand. Flopping to the grass I reached inside my jacket for my tobacco tin and with trembling fingers, rolled myself a cigarette, lit it, and drew deeply while I counted my blessings for such a lucky escape from violent destruction. All I could taste was burning rubber as the air was filled with this acrid aroma. The rear tire had completely disintegrated, all that was left of it was one bare stranded wire bead and shreds of melted rubber stuck just about everywhere around the back end of the bike. The steel rim of the wheel was scraped up where it had come into direct contact with the road, but miraculously still seemed intact.

In the ten minutes or so that I sat there, not one car stopped to enquire if I was O.K. or offer any help. All at once, I heard the unmistakable thunderous roar of motorcycle engines as they appeared over the top of a nearby hill on the road, about a dozen of them. It was a chapter of marauding local Hell’s Angels motorcycle gang. My hopes for help were dashed the moment I realized who they were. Spotting me, their leader beckoned to the rest of the group to pull over and stop. I was now surrounded by roaring motorcycle engines and a bunch of the most rough and tough looking bikers I had ever witnessed. My first thoughts were that neither I nor my bike would ever be seen again. Cutting their engines, the leader approached me and looking down at the remains of my rear tire exclaimed loudly, “Looks like you came to a pretty close thing you lucky bastard, are you OK?” We all shared another cigarette while I told them what had happened and the leader had a couple of his group check out the bike for any other damage. “Well, he said finally, I guess it’s just the tire and tube gone and the wheel rim should dress up with a little sanding work”.

Barking orders to his motley looking crew, he had them remove the rear wheel from my bike and ordered four of them to stay with the bike to make sure nobody took off with it in a truck. He beckoned me to jump aboard about the worst sidecar I have ever seen, it was a third wheel chassis with a few builders planks cut to length and tied down to the chassis with ropes and a milk crate strapped down as a seat in the middle. Clutching the wheel from my bike with one hand, I hung on for grim death with my other as the powerful twin that it was hitched to sped off up the road in search of a garage. The look on the poor owners face at the first garage we pulled into was worth a million dollars, I’m certain that I wore that exact same

look when the gang first rode up to me. He was unable to help but recommended another garage with directions to find it.

It took several stops before we found someone who carried motorcycle tires in stock, and he reluctantly went about dressing up the rim and re-fitted a new tire and tube. All I had with me was a personal check book and the garage owner protested that it was not his business policy to take personal checks. At this point, the leader of the pack and one of his biggest henchman gently grasped the poor guy by his elbows and frog-marched him to the back of the building 'for a little chat'. When they returned a minute or so later, the owner seemed delighted to take my check, he didn't even want to see my driving license. It had taken a good couple of hours before we returned to the rest of the group and they re-fitted my wheel and made all the chain adjustments. I asked them why they had gone to such extremes to help me, a total stranger, and was highly amused at the answer I got. "You're lucky mate that you had a 'Vinnie', if it'd been a Triumph we'd have left you for dead and taken off with your bike all in bits. Joining their group for a while, we all rode off together until with a wave of goodbye, I made the turn-off to go to work.

I recall at the time trying to get word of this incident to Radio Caroline for nominating a 'Knights of the Road' award, but organizers informed me that because I had no names other than first names I could give them that it did not qualify. All I can conclude with over forty years later is that this particular bunch of 'Hells Angels' were one 'Hell of bunch of Nice Guys!' Upon even further reflection, maybe it was just a simple case of, "The Devil always takes care of His Own."

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