

Deflowering The Virgins (or, Tepui Tents hits the Rubicon)

Yes, I realize that my title might seem a little odd for a 4WD club newsletter. Maybe even offensive to some. But, you see, it had to be called that. That was the imaginary title for a magazine article that I came up with, and pitched to Chris, shortly into what become a fairly epic adventure. And as luck or fate would have it, I'm the one writing the story. So, obviously that had to be the title. If you're offended or confused, please just read on, and hopefully it'll be explained, or you'll be caught up enough to forget your ire.

As most of us know, when Chris Collard calls and invites you on a trip, you should be prepared for anything. Adventure just seems to find him. Even as of this writing, he and Suzy are facing a Cat 4 hurricane while "on a fancy vacation" (Chris' words) in Mexico. I'm hoping its working out ok.

And so it was, just about a month ago, for me, when he called and said "since you're retired, what're you doing Oct 1-3? I'm taking the Tepui tent guys through the Rubicon, and need someone to drive my truck once in a while so I can 'shoot' the trip". I was available those days, and I thought to myself, "wow, that's kind of an honor to be asked to drive the JPEater". But I was also trepidatious, because I haven't driven in a rock crawling environment in a number of years, and the last thing I wanted to be was "the guy who wrecked Chris' truck". So I told Chris that I needed a little time to check with Des to be sure there wasn't something I was supposed to be doing those days that I didn't remember, and that I would call him back in about a half hour when she got home.

Des, of course, thought it sounded like great fun, told me I wasn't busy, and that I should go. I still had a level of anxiety for a number of reasons, but ultimately, agreed with her and called Chris back and told him "Yep, I'll go, I'm off those days" (to which he and Des responded in unison "Off from what?!). Good point, I guess...

We talked about logistics for a bit, put together a meet up schedule, hung up, and then I spent the next three days worrying if I was gonna be up to the task. Traveling with someone else is not something I usually do, so I realized I needed to put together enough gear to get me by, but, not so much that I overwhelmed Chris and his truck's storage capacity. I borrowed a single person backpacking tent from my son Wade, bought a new Thermarest air mattress to replace my 40 year old one that leaked, grabbed my 0* mummy bag, threw a handful of clothes (including a rain parka, and waterproof hunting pants, just in case...Hah!) and bottle of Bulleit Bourbon into my "waterproof" duffle bag, and grabbed my "purse" (a small backpack I carry around daily that contains lots of miscellaneous items, including, fortuitously, several types of fire starters).

Monday morning came, and I awoke at about 0400 with my usual PTSD anxiety, brought on by 20 years of early morning rising to go to work, drank a cup of coffee, and headed to Chris' house. There we loaded my gear on top of his truck bed, but under his newly mounted (and donated) Tepui rooftop tent, and headed to Georgetown to meet the Tepui crew for breakfast at the Corner Kitchen. We rolled into town about 0700, parked in the middle of the street in true Jamboree fashion, and headed inside for some chow.

A few minutes later, the Tepui folks came in, and introduced themselves. There was Evan, the owner and founder of Tepui Tents, with his 2-3 year old son, and a passenger, Morgan, driving a 2005 4Runner with about 2" of Icon lift, and CBI bumpers; John, Sales and Marketing director for Tepui and his passenger Brittany, driving a mid-90's 4Runner with a few inches of lift and bigger tires; Beth, Marketing for Tepui, and her passenger Alex, driving a 2014 four door Tacoma with a 3" Icon lift, and CBI's also; and Todd, owner of Four Points Adventures, which Tepui had hired to organize the trip and provide meals, with his passenger (and head chef) Barron, driving a '93 Landcruiser, well outfitted for overlanding.



After breakfast, we headed outside for some photos and an informal vehicle inspection, and the crew was excited and highly optimistic for the adventure to come. We hit the road up the divide toward Loon Lake, made a quick stop at Uncle Tom's Cabin (because you really cant make a Rubicon run without doing that!), but they were closed. So instead of having a traditional beer, we took some photos, and moved on.



We arrived at the Loon Lake trailhead at about 1100 hours, behind schedule already, but in line with what became a theme of our trip. On the way up the hill, Chris and I talked a bit about the plan for getting our crew through the trail. Discussions at breakfast revealed that NONE of the folks had any experience with rock crawling, and our vehicle inspections showed well built rigs for overlanding (the Tepui rigs had rear locking diffs in 2 out of 3, and Todd's Landcruiser was locked front and rear), but suspension travel and tire size were definitely on the small side for what was to come. And there was an awful lot of sheetmetal that we were tasked with protecting... And so, Chris informed me that there might be a lot less of me driving his truck, and a lot more of both us "working" the trail to make it passable for the relatively mild rigs in our party. This was met with outward agreement from me, and inward relief to me, in that, the chances of me being that "guy" I mentioned earlier, relative to Chris' truck, were greatly diminished.

We also discovered during breakfast, that Todd and Barron were also photographers, and they were tasked with that duty from Tepui to document this trip. So Chris and I were really there just as hired guides/guns, to use our experience in rock crawling to get them through. That suited me fine. I learned early on in my Fordyce trips that I preferred helping other folks get through the trail. Spotting, throwing rocks, pulling straps and winch cables, and general guiding to help make others successful really set well with me. And letting Des or Wade drive a rig that I built gave me much greater pleasure than doing it myself. And so, when we hit the Gatekeeper section right away, I was happily thrust right back into that role. And so also, began my "walk" through the 'Con.



Most of the rest of the first day was uneventful. With occasional spotting needs by me or Chris, and new experiences for all our drivers. What they lacked in experience, they more than made up for in enthusiasm, "gameness", and most importantly, a willingness to learn and listen. The whole crew had a "spirit" that really made it fun to guide them, and just to hang out with them. That spirit would serve them well as our trip progressed over the next few days.



The combination of the mild rigs and the inexperienced drivers made for slow headway along the trail. Our schedule was supposed to be Spider Lake in the mid-afternoon on Monday, Rubicon Springs mid-afternoon Tuesday, and the Miller Lake staging area and done by Wednesday afternoon. Not an unreasonable expectation considering our rock rigs make the drive all the way to the Springs in a day, in traffic. When mid-afternoon Monday found us somewhere between the slabs and Ellis Creek, Chris and I realized that our timeline was going to be altered a bit. Little did we know...



We finally did arrive at the Spider Lake campground (graciously shared by the landowners up there, and with permission from RTF member John Arenz) that Monday night at about 20:00 hours (8 PM). It was dark, but a nice clear night. We were tired, but still enthusiastic. Chris and I were about to crack a couple of Pacificos, when Todd came over holding two camp cups, and says "would you guys like a Manhattan?" Chris and I looked at each other with surprised smiles, and I replied "why yes, yes we would!". Shortly after that, Barron came over carrying a large plate of some kind of Japanese peppers that had been sautéed, asking if we'd like some. We gladly accepted, both commenting that this was nothing like other "rock runs" we'd been on. Minutes later, Barron arrived again with a plate of dinner food that was also delicious, including Caprese salad. A first for me in the 'sticks... Both Chris and I tend to exist on beef jerky and coffee, and then beer at the end of the trip, so this high falootin' grub was a treat.



We had a nice night around the fire, talking some, drinking Tequila and bourbon, and generally decompressing from a long day. During that time, Chris announced that because of our slower pace on the trail, we would need to be rolling at 0800 sharp the next morning so that we could get to the Springs at a decent hour. That didn't work out exactly, and for the 2 of us who are used to having Uncle Willy just jump in his truck and drive away, with the assumption that he'll be followed, we were a little frustrated. But by 0830-0845, we were back on the trail.

We stopped for a few minutes to show the crew the Little Sluice,

which we had bypassed in the dusk the night before, and then began the downhill portion just past that, on the way towards Arnold's Rock. Noon time found us approaching Arnold's, way behind schedule, and not making up any time. Evan's 4Runner had a hard time getting through the rocky section, and finally ended up high centered. He had been the drag vehicle, so no one was behind him to pull him back out, and the rest of the rigs had already gone forward through the hard left turn. We spent some time trying to stack some rocks, then broke out a High Lift jack, and finally Chris had to drive back from the lead, get behind it, and winched him off his perch. It all took some time. But one funny little "intermission" of this work was when I had just stood up from jacking the rig up. I was pretty filthy, tired, and ready to keep working toward getting it unstuck, when Barron appeared to my left holding something in a paper towel, and says "would you like a wrap?". I'm sure the surprised/dumbfounded look I gave him is still embedded in his mind, but I said "sure...thanks", took it from him and immediately handed it to Evan inside the vehicle to hold while I went back to work. Looking back, it was a much appreciated gesture, but my 30 years of firefighting had taught me to live by the John Wayne quote from True Grit that says "dinnertime will come and go without notice on this trip!". When I'm in work mode, I tend to be self denying quite a bit, and so eating and drinking are usually ignored.



Eventually, we got Evan out of that jam. I did get my wrap back from Evan, and did actually eat it, and it was actually quite good. Thanks Barron....!

Mid-afternoon that day found us near Buck Island Lake....way, way, way behind schedule. It was no one's fault really, just a combination of new drivers, mild vehicles, lots of spotting and rough trails condition. At least the weather was nice.... :). After making it through another difficult section requiring lots of rock stacking, specific spotting, and time, Chris and Todd decided to call it a day, and scout a campsite down on the lake. They found a nice one with access to it just a short distance up the trail from the vehicles, and so led us all to it about 17:00 hours (5 PM). Apparently, just as Chris was driving down the road to the camp, his truck sputtered a little, so he switched fuel tanks, and thought no more about it.



It was a nice camp, with a large fire pit, and the Tepui folks all surrounded it with their rigs, while Chris and I chose a spot a very short distance away. I got my tent set up in the daylight this time, decided the skies looked fine for the night, so I didn't put an extra tarp over it, we cracked a Pacifico, and walked over to the fire. We had a fun night of conversation around the fire, some nice food from Todd & Barron, and got to know our new friends better. But somewhere in there, Chris did take the opportunity to explain that in our 'wheeling world, 0800 means 0800, and that means rolling out of camp. And also, that when there are rocks to be thrown, everyone needed to get involved if we were gonna make any kind of time getting out there. All of our crew responded understandingly, and reacted to both edicts very well the next morning, and throughout the rest of the trip.

Sunrise brought partly clouded skies, coffee, a nice quick breakfast, and Chris blasting the Royal Scots Dragoon Guards version of Amazing Grace from his truck stereo. My associations with that song tend to revolve around funerals (firefighters, police officers, and my father in law, specifically), so to hear it played while looking out into the empty granite wilderness as the sun slowly broke to the east, gave me a completely different, and wonderful appreciation for the song. It was really a cool few minutes.

In true Uncle Willy fashion, at 0745, Chris started his truck, and drove partly up the road out to the trail and parked it, giving a not so subtle reminder that 0800 means 0800, rolling. This time the Tepui crew was on it, and by 0815, we were spotting them through more obstacles on our way to the Big Sluice. Sometime around 10:00 I think, I was spotting folks toward the back of the line, while Chris worked the front end on another obstacle, when someone passed the word that Chris' truck wouldn't start when he tried to move it up the trail. Uh oh....



I walked up the line to where he was parked, and sure enough I could hear him cranking the engine, and sure enough it wasn't firing up. Not good.... After a bit more trying, we decided we should get Todd's vehicle around him, and tow him a short distance up the trail to a wide spot where we could dig into what the problem might be. We did that, then made a quick determination that the engine wasn't getting fuel, discussed possible reasons, including speculating whether his fuel pump might be bad. Checking his tool boxes that usually contain everything to fix his rig anywhere, he determined that, no, he didn't have a spare fuel pump. But he does now.....

I then threw out the question of "could the fuel tank be empty?" Which is when Chris relayed the story about the sputtering, and his switching tanks. He then wondered if maybe his transfer switch hadn't functioned, and after 2 straight days of slowly 'wheeling, maybe he was empty. While he threw the transfer switch, I listened for it's distinct click that indicated it was functioning. It did, but still no start after extended cranking. We then made a decision to pressurize his fuel system from the tank end to see if fuel could make it through. We broke out a brand new air compressor from one of the Tepui rigs, hooked it up to the battery of that same rig, put the air line in his tank filler neck (which services both tanks), wrapped a rag and some Gorilla tape around it, it switched it on. After a couple of mins, fuel appeared in his fuel filter, and finally, at his carburetor. He cranked the motor and it fired up. Problem solved, right? Sure.....

Oh, did I mention the rain yet? About half way through the repair process, it started to rain lightly, so we broke out our rain jackets, and went back to work. When the rain picked up a little, Chris suggested we could stop working



for a bit and “wait for it to pass”. I said I was fine, so we kept on. We didn't know it then, but if we'd waited for it “to pass”, we'd of been waiting for a couple of days...

So with Chris' truck apparently running fine, we continued on, and so did the rain. When we finally reached the Big Sluice, it was about 14:00. The upper section is not bad at all, where the county had filled it with rock, and we fairly easily made it down to the big tree and rocks in the middle, where with lots, and lots of rock stacking we managed to get all the rigs through that traditionally very tight turn. Even the 130" wheel base Tacoma got through it with no sheet metal damage. It's bumpers, as with all the other rigs, were not as fortunate. Throughout the last

couple of days, those heavy duty pieces had paid in dividends, but they also paid the price in scratched powder coating. Trail trophies in my book. Luckily, ALL the rigs had good rock sliders, so they had a place where they could artificially pivot, when their turning radius wasn't good enough.

Right after the tree, the thunder started, and then the always accompanying heavier rain, and then the hail. And then it got interesting. When the rain started, Chris and I had thrown on just our rain parkas to protect us til it “passed”, and then once we got going, we were too busy to think about more rain gear. Which both of us did have. Luckily, I'd worn good nylon long johns from day one, so I had an extra layer on my legs, and I had several layers of shirts on under my parka, and my trusty camping “cowboy” hat (that I've owned for 37 years) on my head, and good Gore-Tex boots on my feet, so it took a little while for the rain to penetrate to my skin . A little while....

Chris was not quite as layered up, wearing just a t-shirt under his usual khaki button down shirt, with those under his rain jacket, and a pair of blue jeans. And of course, his ever present Aussie style brimmed hat, and unfortunately, some not so waterproof boots. The rain took less than a little while to soak him to the bone.

As we worked the rigs down through the lower sections of the Sluice, the water flow running down the trail and under our feet increased to the size of a small stream. Chris commented to me that “he'd never heard of it flash flooding here”, but he really had no idea if it might, or could. Well that WOULD be interesting, wouldn't it. I, in turn, asked him if he'd ever got to run the Panamint City trail before they closed it. That “trail” had been a road once, and when it was, I actually went up and down it with my Dad as a kid. Sometime in the 80's, a flash flood came down the canyon where the road ran, and washed most of it away, leaving a series of small waterfalls that had to be traversed using winches to get vehicles up and down. I was highly reminded of





that as I looked up the trail at our rigs trying to make their way down what had become “a series of small waterfalls”.

Eventually, we made it to the bottom, and after a couple more short, tough spots, I was actually able to climb into Chris’ truck for longer than just a couple minutes, for the first time in about 2 days. Hence my comment, about my “walk through the ‘Con”.

As we came into Rubicon Springs, Chris looked over at me, shivering, and said “we’re stopping here tonight, and building a fire right away”. I looked back at him, and through my hypothermic yawns, agreed with him completely. We notified the group of our plans, and they all were in agreement, and none had a hardship that couldn’t be dealt with by being a day behind schedule. Or as it turns out, closer to two days....

Rubicon Springs was a ghost town. As had been most of the trail actually. We hadn’t seen or heard anyone out there since about halfway through day one. I wonder what they all knew that we didn’t?

We chose a camp spot with a good fire pit, that also had a large pile of split firewood next to it. Chris broke out one of his always carried Duraflame logs, and his ax, and went to splitting some of the firewood into kindling sized pieces, and I dug into my “purse”, and pulled out my container of “hurricane matches” that my uncle had given me for Christmas . Hurricane matches are essentially very small flares, and light and burn as such. They light in the rain, burn in the wind, and they made quick work of getting the Duraflame started . With the addition of Chris’ kindling, it wasn’t too long before we had a decent fire going.

Meanwhile, the rest of our party had set up their tents, and then a tarp off of one of the rigs so that folks could sit out of the rain. Chris and I meanwhile didn’t move from about a foot away from the fire except to add more wood. As the fire intensity increased, the cool phenomena of a “heat bubble’ formed where the the rain (which had lightened some by then) didn’t penetrate the heat coming off the fire, and so at least we didn’t get more wet. Eventually, our jeans and jackets began to steam as they truly began to get dry.

As the potential medical crisis of hypothermia began to subside, we all talked about the fact that we were expected out that night, and hoped that the various people that were expecting us would figure out our situation. [I found out later that that is exactly what was going on between Des, at home in Grass Valley, where they were getting 1.25” of thunderstorm rain, when the expectation had been 0.5”, and Wade who was at work in South Lake Tahoe, texting her that the mountains were getting hammered}. Barron mentioned that Todd had a GPS unit, that, in conjunction with a phone app, could send text messages through the satellites. Todd broke the unit out, and eventually, everyone that felt a need, was able to make contact with their respective people. In my opinion, a unit like that is invaluable, and while not as easy as satellite phone, is something that more people can afford. I expect to get one soon, and would recommend to anyone who gets “out there” to at least look into one.

As the evening went on, and the rain lightened more, and we dried out more, there was a realization that because we were supposed to be done with the trail tonight, food hadn’t been brought for a 3rd night. But there were some leftovers rations from the previous meals, and Barron put them together into delicious, but small portions. I realized that my good humor was returning when he handed me my portion in a small cup, and I commented about how I felt like a member of the Donner Party being given a ration, but I was worried because I was one of the bigger folks in the party, and didn’t know if I should sleep that night for fear of being clubbed in the head, and my body put up for winter stores. I got a few muted laughs....

By about 23:30 (11:30 PM), the rain had stopped completely, I was about 90% dry (as was Chris), I’d drank more than my share of bourbon and tequila shots, and Chris’ offer to share his Tepui tent was much less appealing. So I set up my little tent under the shelter of a large cedar tree, with my extra tarp under the tent for added protection against water and heat loss, and hit the rack. About 0230, the rain started again. Lightly. I ignored it, and hoped for the best. When I woke up again at about 0600, the foot of my sleeping bag was damp on the outside, but overall, I was good. I got up, started coffee on Chris’ stove, and went about trying to restart our once roaring campfire. [Side note here: From a survival standpoint, letting that fire go out overnight was a grave mistake. We should’ve assigned some

folks to watches to be sure it stayed lit, and going well, but I realize our situation was not quite so dire as to be concerned with our survival].

I made the decision that, yes, we were getting out of there that day, and so I sacrificed some of my whiskey to get the fire going. It worked marginally well, and in a short time was smoldering, and looking like it would get going. So, I walked back toward Chris' truck for coffee, and just happened to glance into a wooden cupboard that was near our camp, and I saw a large Jose Cuervo tequila bottle, with a small amount of liquid in the bottom of it. I thought to myself "Cuervo is way shittier than my good whiskey, so I'm gonna use that instead!". I untwisted the lid, and stuck my nose to the top. It smelled like liquid heaven..... Kerosene!

Minutes later, the fire was roaring once again, and with the sounds of its crackling came the sounds of people beginning to stir. Funny how a fire will motivate people to get up. As folks arrived around the fire, there was an obvious lack of energy and motivation, unlike the previous two mornings. Clearly, our taxing day had taken its toll. But as the saying goes "there's no rest for the weary", and as such, we needed to get moving because we had Cadillac Hill (in the rain) ahead of us.

Since I was mostly dry, and most of the clothes in my duffle bag were not, I opted to just go with what I'd worn the day before, and slept in, and was still wearing, but I did dig out my lightweight, waterproof bib overalls. They were mostly dry, so I pulled them over my jeans, put on my now dry rain parka, and my not dry in 2 days old hat on, and after another small portion meal, was ready to face whatever this day was to bring. Or so I thought...

We headed out of the springs, and made our way toward the traditional beginning of the climb out toward Tahoe, the huge granite rock/slab/boulder. Chris took his usual route up it. Straight up the face, turn right at the top, traverse a ridiculous side hill, and transition to the dirt trail again. No sweat for the JPEater, but I suggested that it might be bit much for our still somewhat neophyte crew, and their somewhat top heavy rigs. We scouted the side of the face, and figured we could fairly easily bring them up that way, with just a small, tippy transition to the dirt. Everyone came up it fine, but when Chris got back to his truck (that he'd pulled up the trail a ways to make room for the other rigs), it wouldn't start again. First time since the morning before.....

Same, same as the morning before. No fuel.... There was another flat spot just uphill from his truck, but no way to get a rig around him, so we set up a tow strap around a big pine with a snatch block, and winched him from the vehicle behind him. We pulled him up to as close to the snatch block as we could, reset on another tree, and winched some more. This time, he was high enough to be rolled backwards into the flat spot. We knew the base of the problem, but not the details, and so, had no immediate cure. We ended up putting about 4 gallons of fuel in his tank from one of the other rigs jerry cans, primed his carb with fuel, and then it was running again. I figured maybe on the sidehill back on the slab, that fuel from the tank he was running on (drivers side) had poured in to the passenger side tank, and he ran out of fuel in the drivers tank. We were suspect of the passenger side tank lines, and their ability to allow fuel to the motor, and suspect of his transfer valve, so we figured since it was running again with fuel in the drivers side, that we'd be good til we got out to the pavement. It was not to be....



A couple hundred yards farther up the trail, right where Cadillac Hill turns hard right and heads up hill "like a homesick angel" (my dad's favorite saying when describing some hill climbs from his Colorado 'wheeling days), Chris' truck was dead in the water again. This time, I walked up to him and suggested that we probably needed to be thinking in rescue mode; meaning we needed to get our folks out, and if we had to deal with his truck later, so be it. He agreed immediately. I then suggested we get on the Ham radio, and see if we could get someone to call an STH club member to put together a rescue mission for Chris' truck. He agreed there as well, and suggested Erik Heikila as that



member. He's been Chris' friend since high school, is the current club Prez, and also being recently retired, has some free time on his hands.

One of the great things done on the Rubicon in the last 10 years, is the establishment of a Ham radio repeater that can reach virtually the whole trail. 7 or 8 years ago, a bunch of STH'ers took a Ham licensing class because it was decided to use them on Sierra Trek as the primary comms means. The class was taught by Barbara Olsen-Arenz, wife of the earlier mentioned John Arenz. After the class was over, John arranged a group buy of handheld radios (where I bought 3), and then programmed a set of frequencies into those purchased radios, with one of those being the Rubi repeater.

I got on the radio, barely even remembering my call letters, and called out to anyone who might be listening, that we had a group of vehicles on Cadillac Hill, with the lead vehicle being disabled, and was anyone available to make a call to get us some help. I think it was my second attempt to hail someone, that a voice came back stating his call letters, and telling me his name was "Art". By his description, he lives within a few miles of my house, is member of the Grass Valley 4-Wheelers, and he was a guardian angel. I gave him Erik's number, and the message that Chris needed help. We asked that he bring about 15 gallons of fuel and a brand new fuel pump (though we were still skeptical that the was the problem). A short time later, he reported back that Erik had gotten the message, and would be en route late in the afternoon/evening toward the Tahoe side of the trail, hoping to be in the area around 19:00 (7 PM).

Meanwhile, as we were putting together a plan to move the able vehicles up the trail (with Todd's Landcruiser as the new lead), all of a sudden we heard a couple of vehicles come up behind our drag rig. Chris walked down to see them while I was on the radio, and returned with a 3 gallon gas can they gave him. He poured it in his tank as a hopeful fix, and lo and behold, he was running again. It made no sense, but we went with it, and he started up the hill.

It took a bit of work, and time, to get our vehicles up that hill climb in wet conditions, but we managed to get them past the worst off the spots, with only the last pitch left before relatively smooth sailing up to Observation Point. And then Chris' truck died again... This time, we decided for sure that it would be left where it sat (a small turnout, not blocking the trail), and we would get the rest of our rigs up the hill, and out to the pavement. Both of us would work with them til they got to Observation Point, then I would ride in one of the rigs, while Chris returned to his truck to await my return by way of our expected rescuer, Erik. It was the plan, we went with it, and I started hiking up the last pitch to help where I could, and be ready to bring back back help.

Somewhere back on the climbs up the worst spots, a couple of strange faces appeared; meaning some people I didn't know. They explained that they were the rigs behinds ours, they were from Vancouver Island, British Columbia, Canada, and that they'd just driven down there in the last couple of days in their VERY recently completed pair of Suzuki Samurais. There was a moment there when the first of the 2 Canadians walked past me on one of the obstacles, introduced himself (though I'm afraid I can't remember his name at all), and commented "bit of a rough patch, eh?". It was perfect. Perfect to diffuse the moderate tenseness of the situation, and perfect to define Canadian pragmatism. And I told him as much. He laughingly said "hmmmm, guess I never though about that". Perfect again...





When Chris' truck died the final time, the two Canadian guys were there, and they agreed with our initial assessment that the problem was not the fuel pump. They, as us, were of the opinion that Toyota fuel pumps are ultimately reliable, and that it was most likely a fuel line issue of some kind. We discussed "pumping air", "losing prime", and a periodic "full line blockage" in the 34 year old hard lines in his HiLux truck. As result of those conversations, I told Chris that I thought he needed to run a line directly from his tank to the fuel pump to eliminate ANY possible fuel line issues. I suggested using using his 50 foot air line by cutting off the fittings, and running it outside the vehicle. But with time and daylight running out, we opted to go with our plan to get the other vehicles out, and deal with the truck after that. But the Canadians had other plans....

By the time I'd hiked up to the final pitch on Cadillac, I looked down to see Chris and "the Canadians" going through the boxes of this truck. It looked like he was showing them some hose pieces, had his hood opened, and they were talking for a while. And then, the rest of our vehicles were headed up the hill; with Chris on foot, and the Canadians busily "fussing" with his truck.



Chris and the rigs arrived where I was almost simultaneously, and we got them through the final "hard spot" with not much difficulty. We then had a driver's meeting to discuss the plan of getting the Tepui folks out, and then dealing with Chris' truck. All were agreeable, and just as we all were ready to head up, "the Canadians" arrived on foot saying "it should be good to go"; meaning Chris' truck.

Turns out, the "discussions" I had witnessed were relative to my discussion of running an independent line from the tank to the fuel pump. They rigged their 3 gallon gas can on Chris' front bumper (after siphoning gas from his truck tank to the small can), then ran lines from the the can to his fuel pump. The

short distance of the lines seemed to be the "secret", and it was running and driving fine. Chris walked down to his truck, got in, and drove up to where the rest of the rigs were with no issues.

We re-evaluated our plan, deciding to again put Chris in the lead, and headed toward Observation Point. With one stop to re-siphon more fuel into the "can", it was generally uneventful getting up to the "point", where we again met up with "the Canadians", who had passed us when the opportunity presented itself.

As those of you who have run the Rubicon Trail know, there's always a "sense of relief" when you get up to Observation Point. To say that this was no different would be the understatement of the year. Just an hour or two earlier, we were considering abandoning one of the most iconic vehicles in four wheeling, and now here we were with that vehicle, albeit injured, still driving it, thanks to a couple of crazy Canadians that we now shared a beer with. It was great! We'd sent the rest of crew on ahead, knowing that remaining trail was fairly benign, and that their driving skills were significantly better than just 3 days earlier.



After a few minutes visiting with our new Northern friends, and loaning them some wire to tie up a dragging exhaust pipe, we continued on, knowing that darkness was not far away, and we still had some miles to cover before we hit pavement. We caught up to the rest of our party at a water hole (that probably hadn't been a water hole just two days prior), worked the rigs through it, then got to what I think is called "the Potato Patch" (sort of a gatekeeper for the east side) in the dark. We worked our way through that, and then our crew took advantage of their IFS front ends, and

their fancy Icon suspensions, and they were off to the races headed toward the pavement. We gave them the one direction they needed (“turn right when you hit the dirt road”), and Chris and I didn't see them again until we got down to the staging area ourselves.

Meanwhile, the straight axle rigs (Chris' truck and the two Sammy's) drove out a bit slower, turned “right when we hit the dirt road”, and expected we'd eventually run into Erik since there were no other turns until we got to the bottom. Shortly, after the turn, the fuel in the “can” ran out again, so we went about the siphon procedure to refill, and get back on the road. Just as we were finishing, we heard a vehicle coming from behind us. It was Erik, and he'd brought Suzy Collard with him. It was great to see those friendly faces in the dark. But wait? What were they doing behind us!?

Turns out, while driving the Miller Lake/Barker Pass Rd, they'd missed the Trail turnoff, and continued driving north for a while. Realizing their mistake, they'd turned around, and were again looking for the turnoff, when they heard/saw our vehicles ahead of them, and decided to investigate. Thank god they did. If they'd made that turn and headed down the trail, they'd of found nothing but emptiness, and hardship. It was fortuitous, to say the least.

After some “niceties”, we all headed down to the staging area, where we found the Tepui folks airing their tires back up, having some snacks, having some beers, and in expectedly great spirits (and I'm sure all with a major sense of relief), despite some trail wounds to their rigs. We'd made it!! We were about 30 hours behind schedule, but it wasn't raining anymore, and they only had a short drive to Evan's cabin in Truckee where they all were going to spend the night. When they were ready to leave, there were lots of hugs and handshakes, promises of getting together again, thanks on their parts for our help, apologies on our part for mechanical delays, and just a real feeling of old friends saying “so long”. Our adventure had taken strangers, and made them friends that years from now will still be able reminisce about “the trip”.

But the fun wasn't over for Chris and I yet. At that moment, his truck had a 3 gallon fuel capacity by way of a borrowed “can” that the loaners wanted back; and unbeknownst to me, he had agreed to weld a broken rear caliper on one of the Samurais. So we had some work to do, and it was now around 22:30 (10:30 PM). Still believing that the fuel pump wasn't the issue, we went with my earlier plan to “bypass” all existing fuel lines in the truck (as “the Canadians” had with their quick fix), and I set about working on that, doing as I stated earlier, taking his 50 foot airline and turning it into a fuel line going directly from the tank to the fuel pump. Meanwhile, Chris broke out his welding equipment, pulled the battery from his truck, and another from one of the Suzuki's to power the welder. The Sammy's owner had already jacked the rig up, pulled the wheel, and had it ready to be fixed. After some troubleshooting with the welder, the job went fairly quickly, and the Sammy owner buttoned up his rig to get ready to go. Chris returned the battery to his truck, and we primed the carb with fuel, and started it. It ran fine. So, figuring we were good, he shut it off while we packaged up everything. Having said goodbye to “the Canadians”, it was only Chris and I and Erik and Suzy left in the parking lot. We got everything ready for road travel, jumped in the truck, and when Chris went to start it, it wouldn't.... WTF!???

Now through everything we'd gone through in the last couple of days, Chris had remained cool, and I think I had too. Even when we'd be looking forward on the trail at the next major obstacle, both of us this thinking to our selves (but not saying to each other) “how the f—k are we going to get these guys through this?!” , we'd both still turn around and say to our folks, “ok, lets go, no prob”. But this final straw was enough that we both responded with a resounding, loud “FUCK!!”. And then we were good...

We got out, popped the hood, and contemplated our next move. Staring into the engine compartment in silence for some time, Chris finally spoke. Quietly, and calmly, he said “I'm gonna change the fuel pump”. I replied in an equal tone “good idea”. And there it was, our first suspicion two days ago, was now our last suspicion, and our last hope.

We retrieved the “new in the box” pump that Erik had brought with him from the back of Chris' truck where he'd put to have “as a spare”, spent the half hour it took to replace it, returned the truck fuel system back to its origin configuration, and started the truck. Smooth as silk. In fact, it was running better that it did the day we left. Not surprising I suppose... To quote Suzy, “that fuel pump, that damn fuel pump”.

So there we were, at 0130 in the morning, with the truck finally fixed. It was a great feeling, but we still had to get home. It was probably in the 30's, the heater in his truck doesn't really work, the doors have no windows, and we were exhausted. Mentally and physically. But again, “no rest for the weary”, so we headed north on Hwy 89 toward

Tahoe City, following Erik and Suzy in Erik's truck, huddling against the wind and and cold under a plastic tarp in the cab. We pulled into the 24 hour Shell station, fueled both trucks, bought some coffee and some 24 hour old doughnuts, and hit the road again. I-80 had only big trucks on it at that time of day (night?), and they all were traveling faster than that old HiLux. We were freezing, and yet in a way, exhilarated! We talk once in a while, but mostly were lost in our own thoughts. We arrived back at Chris and Suzy's house about 0330 (Suzy was riding with Erik back to his place to retrieve her car). I quickly unloaded my gear, checked that Chris didn't need anything from me, and prepared to go home. We shook hands, then "bro-hugged", knowing that we shared something unique, and I left.

I arrived home at 0400, stood in a hot shower til the warm water ran out, trying to get my core temp back up to something near normal, and climbed into bed about 0430. It had been only 120 hours (almost exactly) since I'd left home, and yet I was different now. Then sleep finally found me.... for just about 4 hours. I was awake again a little after 0800 when the sun hit our room enough to overwhelm the exhaustion, I got up to see Des for a few minutes before she headed off to work, and yet all I could say was "well, that was something". It certainly was....

Epilogue:

This trip was planned by Tepui because they like adventures. The Rubicon Trail is always an adventure, but when things go sideways, an adventure can become an ordeal if those involved are not prepared. "Prepared" has multiple meanings, obviously. In our case, it meant "mechanically prepared" by having vehicles, that while maybe not ideal for the Rubicon, were certainly well built enough, mechanically sound, and well outfitted for protection and recovery. It also meant "physically prepared". We worked HARD to get these vehicles through the trail. We moved hundreds, if not thousands of pounds of rocks over the course of the 4 days in order to build a trail for the vehicles to traverse the worst sections. ALL of us. I'm so thankful that this past year has been my return to daily hard exercise! But most importantly, it meant "mentally prepared". And everyone is different in this category. The Tepui folks had such positive attitudes, and "adventurous" spirits, and the willingness to accept whatever came next with at least no outward appearance of trepidation at all. Just all really great folks. Chris, of course, has been through much worse than this many times, so he was cool the whole time, until his truck gave him a final frustration that was quickly vented. For myself, I think my 30 years of firefighting has been invaluable as "mental preparation" in all aspects of my life, and this trip was just another example.

This story was purposely written as just a narrative of the trip as I saw it, and I tried not to make it about anyone in particular on purpose. There were some good individual moments, that bear repeating by someone someday, but I wanted to convey just the group effort involved. Our trip turned us from strangers to teammates, and ultimately I'm sure, long term friends. Like all great adventures should.....