

ROMA

THE ROAD

Six years after driving around the world, Garry Sowerby still can't let go of the steering wheel.

There were three of us in the big truck, which was riddled on one side with bullet holes. The driver, Garry Sowerby, makes his living as an "adventure driver," and as we barreled down the Alaska Highway, I thought that if I could learn all there was to know about those bullet holes, I would understand what it means to be an adventure driver. As it was, however, Sowerby was entirely too intent on the race at hand to talk about his occupation.

We were competing in the Alcan 5000, an 11-day automobile race from Seattle to Anchorage and back

Partners and world-record holders Sowerby (right) and Ken Langley.



BY TIM CAHILL

NCING



again. This race was not a contest of the swiftest. Rather, it had been designed as a test of endurance and orienteering skill. We were in the eighth day of competition, it was about four in the afternoon, and the three of us—Sowerby, myself, and navigator Greg Turner—had been running hard for more than 26 hours. We were on the edge of exhaustion, and still ahead of us was one of the race's several "regularities": tricky sections of road on which we were required to travel at precisely 50 miles per hour.

The race route book compiled by the Alcan organizers asked us to take a 500-mile portion of the race—called a transit section—at legal speeds and to check in with officials at the head of a gravel road before 4 p.m. A car could arrive early, as we did, without penalty, but a team arriving late would lose 600 points.

The route book indicated that we were to begin the 20-mile-long regularity right on the border between Canada's Yukon Territory and British Columbia. There were no houses, no gas stations, no signs of human habitation anywhere near the race route. Mountains rose white to the west, and to the east a great grassy plain dotted with patches of snow stretched as far as the eye could see.

Most of the 25 other cars in the race were already at the starting point. The first, driven by a Pro Rally champion racer, was to take off at four o'clock on the dot. The second car would follow precisely one minute later. Our truck was vehicle 21, and we started exactly at 4:21, slowly accelerating to 50 mph.

Minutes later Greg Turner, in the passenger seat, checked the truck's digital odometer, which measures distance to a hundredth of a mile, and then scribbled his calculations in a spiral notebook.

"One second slow!" he shouted to Sowerby, who eased down on the accelerator. We were still going 50 mph, taking what would have been a no-sweat corner for the average car going this speed. But Sowerby's diesel-powered vehicle, which was so big and heavy the other competitors called it the Iron Pig, was decked out for endurance driving: the way it was equipped, you quite literally could drive around the world in it. There were two bunks in the back, with storage lockers for survival gear and spare parts underneath; on the roof were two spare tires. The truck was also carrying a sink, propane stove, electric refrigerator, extra lights, and enough fuel for a thousand-mile run.

Altogether the truck weighed just over 9,000 pounds, about three times as much as a midsize car. The weight made it unwieldy for the tight turns on the gravel logging road we were traveling. For just a minute the two right-hand wheels were running on the shoulder of the road, which was only a rough stretch of spongy grass, and I had a queasy feeling that the

truck was about to go cartwheeling down the steep slope to our right.

Sowerby swung the wheel to the left and tapped the accelerator so that the back end slid slightly to the right, while the front end edged toward the center of the road, away from a long downhill roll to oblivion. The maneuver brought us smartly out of our top-heavy state. Sowerby had saved our lives quite unconsciously, the way a man recovers his balance after stumbling on a bunched-up rug in his living room. He was good.

At the bottom of the hill I saw a car parked in the trees, facing the road. A man in the driver's seat punched a stopwatch as we passed, and he said something to the woman sitting beside him. She made a notation on a large legal pad in her lap.

"We just passed a checkpoint!" I

Sowerby tapped the accelerator so the back end slid slightly to the right. The maneuver brought us out of our top-heavy state. He had saved our lives quite unconsciously, the way a man recovers his balance after stumbling on a rug.

shouted. Turner calculated our time against the distance we had come. "Right on," he said, which meant that we were running at exactly 50 mph. Had we been slow or fast, each second off the mark would have cost us a point.

I checked the route book, which was open on my lap. "Six more miles at 50," I said, "then we're done."

"We've got a hill," Sowerby moaned. The truck was powered by a 6.2-liter diesel engine—built more for fuel economy than speed—and in a four-and-a-half-ton truck, he knew that he couldn't hold it at 50 on a steep uphill. We had the only diesel in the Alcan 5000—which was at times a considerable handicap against the other competitors in the race. The turbo Saab ahead of us would have no trouble with the slope, and the Porsche behind us would take it handily, but we would have to make up time on the downside of the hill before us. If there was a checkpoint at the top, we'd lose points for sure.

Luckily, the last checkpoint of the regularity was on a level stretch four miles away, and Turner calculated that we couldn't have lost more than four points. If that was true, Sowerby and Turner would hold their place in the race. Incredibly, considering the competition (a number of \$40,000 sports cars) and the weight of their truck, these two Canadians from

Moncton, New Brunswick, were in ninth place out of 29 starters.

After the regularity there was another brief transit section that would take us to Watson Lake, where all the teams would spend the night.

"This," Sowerby said as we pulled into town—which consists of several gas stations, a few motels, and some wood-frame houses—"is probably the most pure-fun driving I've done anywhere. The country is incredibly beautiful, the roads are relatively good, and there's almost no traffic." Pure fun, he called it. The truck rode like a tank, and I felt as if I'd just been trampled by a lot of fat people riding elephants. Including regularities and transit sections, we had just driven 1,440 miles in 30 hours on this leg of the Alcan 5000. Sowerby thought it had been a piece of cake. "It's not like Africa or Bulgaria," he said. "Up here you don't have to worry about getting stuck or bribing someone at the border. You don't have to worry about getting dysentery or getting shot." Which, I gathered, were the sort of things one routinely worries about in the adventure-driving business.

We pulled into a parking lot and lined up behind the fancy sports cars. A crowd of curious locals had gathered—20 or 30 people of the sort you might find in a small northwestern town: long-haired loggers, a waitress in her white uniform, and two young Indian boys. They were drawn first to the truck. "What the hell happened here?" a big fellow wearing a cowboy hat wanted to know. He had his index finger stuck in one of the bullet holes that riddled the passenger door.

"Just your basic adventure driving," Garry Sowerby said.

We started at 7 a.m. the next day. The route book said we had two regularities and only 600 miles to run. The organizers had taken pains to route the race along the most scenic roads, so we had turned off the main Alaska Highway and were bucking down the Cassiar Highway, a 500-mile-long former logging road that runs south and west from Watson Lake to Prince Rupert on the Pacific coast. Opened to the public a little more than a decade ago, the road begins in the Yukon Territory, enters British Columbia, and runs along the Iskut River, which flows in a narrow valley between the glaciated peaks of the Skeena Mountains and the Spectrum range.

As we traveled the Cassiar, Sowerby—who is 35 years old, has curly blond hair, sports a close-cropped beard, and is tall and slender at 6 feet 3 inches—was telling me about the adventure-driving business, how he acquired all those bullet holes in the Iron Pig, and how a simple mis-

calculation on the part of murderous desert bandits had saved his life.

In 1977 Sowerby had just left the Canadian air force after four and a half years as a pilot and automotive engineer. He and a friend, Kenny Langley, a lawyer, began working on a project they had conceived in college nearly a decade earlier. The boys liked road trips, and the idea, as originally hatched, was posed as a question: wouldn't it be great to drive around the world? What began as a lark took two years to organize and cost \$300,000, which was raised from various automotive sponsors. In 1980, with Langley navigating, Sowerby drove around the world (26,738 miles) in 74 days, one hour, and 11 minutes for a new world record as noted in the *Guinness Book of World Records*. (The previous record for the fastest trip around the world by land had been 102 days.) But the adventure had left them deeply in debt. And the thought of paying off \$80,000 by working ordinary, nine-to-five jobs was intensely disturbing. The only way to avoid bankruptcy was to launch another project, financed by more generous corporate donations. It was this financial problem that pushed the two into the adventure-driving business. Unfortunately, projects kept falling through. In 1983, desperate, the partners traveled to England and met with Norris McWhirter, the editor of the Guinness book. "We met Norris in this typically British boardroom," Sowerby said, "with mahogany tables, lots of books, and maps on the wall. Norris was wearing a blue pinstriped suit and drinking a mug of stout."

It took only an hour and a half and three mugs of stout apiece to come up with the project: an automobile traverse of Africa, Asia, and Europe, the world's largest land mass. Sowerby and Langley would drive 26,738 miles from the southern tip of Africa to North Cape, Norway, more than 400 miles above the Arctic Circle. "Norris told us, 'The clock starts when you leave and stops when you get there,'" Sowerby said. "Everything in between is your problem."

Sowerby paused in his tale and glanced out at the Canadian panorama to the left of the Iron Pig and the highway. A small, crystal-clear lake, completely bereft of boats or encircling cabins, caught the early-morning sun so that it was metallic green where spruce trees were reflected upon its shimmering surface. Closer to the center of the lake, there was a ring of arctic white where a host of glaciers, high on the summits of the surrounding mountains, glittered in reflection. At the very center of the water was a bull's-eye of cobalt blue that was the precise color of the British Columbia sky above.

"So where did they start shooting at

you?" I asked.

"I'm coming to that," Sowerby said. First, though, he wanted me to know a little about the adventure-driving business: you don't, for instance, just airlift the family sedan over to Africa and start driving. The partners had to secure a proper vehicle and had to convince various corporations to sponsor the project.

"The effort that went into planning the trip was enormous," Sowerby said. "We spent \$50,000 on telephone and telex bills alone. I mean, it took a year or so to set up. Then Kenny and I went on a reconnaissance to meet the sponsors, people from the Canadian government and the host governments, and press people in various countries. Several press conferences in the midst of our record attempt were financial necessities: the sponsors wanted maximum exposure for their prod-

"Two of the soldiers had their machine guns out the window and were just spraying the area. I could see them crouching below the window, not aiming, just firing for effect, and all were yelling at Kenny, 'Faster, faster, faster!'"

ucts. And we wanted to make friends all along the route. Because time is the enemy, you have to make sure you're expected when you arrive. You don't want to have to spend two days waiting at some remote border outpost."

A week before the trip was to start, Sowerby and Langley learned that a road they had planned to take through the Sudan was closed due to an outbreak of civil violence. With a year's work and several hundred thousand dollars hanging in the balance, Sowerby and Langley began working feverishly on an alternate plan. It turned out there was a road through Nairobi, Kenya, and Ethiopia. But in Kenya there had been problems with ambushes and bandits for the last 25 years. The Kenyan officials gave them permission to use the road on the condition that they ride with a military escort.

With a new route mapped out, Sowerby and Langley set out from South Africa in the Iron Pig. "We picked up the military escort about 300 miles south of the Ethiopian border," Sowerby said. "Four guys with machine guns. They told us there hadn't been an attack in six months. We got out on this rough washboard road, and there was no traffic at all. It's all desert out there, just burning rock and scrub.

"Kenny was driving and there were two soldiers sitting beside him, another one in the jump seat, and one in the bunk in the

back," Sowerby continued. "I was dozing in the alleyway between the two front seats. Kenny was playing a tape—Eddy Grant singing 'Killer on the Rampage,' honest to God. We came around this tight turn, and one of the soldiers flipped his gun from lock to automatic. It must have been a famous ambush corner.

"All of a sudden I heard *pop-pop-pop*. Then all hell broke loose. Two of the soldiers had their machine guns out the window, and they were just spraying the area. I could see them crouching below the window, not aiming, just firing for effect. And all of them were yelling at Kenny, 'Faster, faster, faster!'

"There were six bandits out there firing single-shot rifles," Sowerby said. "They had been hiding behind some scrub on the right-hand side of the road. See, Kenya is a former British colony, and they have right-hand drive there. The bandits must have thought they would be firing at the driver, but our truck was equipped for left-hand drive. That single fact may have saved our lives. It certainly saved Kenny's.

"Anyway," Sowerby said, "they shot out one of the back tires, and they hit the front fender and the roof in a couple of places. Kenny had it floored, and we were doing 70 with a flat tire over this bad, rutted road. I said to Kenny, 'We bust an axle and we're out here all night with the bandits. We gotta change the tire.'

"We stopped and the soldiers covered us. Naturally, we couldn't find the jack. It hadn't occurred to us that we'd have to change a tire under attack. The bandits were on foot, probably three miles back, but I was thinking, 'If I were these guys, I would have another five or six men stationed down the road to pick up disabled cars or wounded drivers.'"

Sowerby got the tire changed, but the bandits had hit the tires stacked on the roof, so the Iron Pig jolted over 600 miles of the worst roads in the world with no spares. "It was like waiting for a bad telephone call," he recalled. "One blowout, and a year's work and all that money would be wasted. Luckily, the tires held out for the rest of the trek."

I thought about the worst roads in the world and looked out at the Cassiar Highway. To the right, along the river valley 200 feet below, there were groves of aspen, golden in the cool crisp sunlight of early October. There would be salmon and steelhead in the river, and given time, we would certainly see brown bear feeding on the spawning fish. It was almost 50 degrees out there, and meltwater from the glaciers on the mountains above the river fell in molten silver streams against the sparkling granite cliffs.

"Anyway," Sowerby said, "we got to Ethiopia, and they told us we couldn't drive the road because two weeks earlier 13 trucks had been blown up there. The Ethiopian government wasn't going to let

us take that road—it would have been bad press for them if we were blown up. What they did instead was provide a special train for us and put the truck on a flatcar. There were 26 soldiers with us. We had only 150 miles of track to travel, but that train had been blown up three times in the three previous months.”

The two made it to the tiny country of Djibouti, where getting the truck across the Red Sea was a problem—but Sowerby found a known smuggler who agreed to ferry the truck for \$5,000. “The guy’s boat was a 40-foot wooden dhow, and we had to put the truck on sideways, with the bumpers hanging off either side just below the sail. We had no insurance, of course, because smugglers don’t register their boats, but this guy was the only game in town.”

In Turkey, border guards demanded a \$50 bribe to clear the Iron Pig. “They wouldn’t take the money at the police compound there,” Sowerby said. “The guy had us drive him about two miles to this hovel. I walk in and it’s all dim candlelight, and these thieves are sitting around, cleaning their weapons. The guy said, ‘Things have changed. It now costs you \$100.’ I told the guy it wasn’t fair, and he told me life wasn’t fair. I said, ‘Do you take traveler’s checks?’ He asked, ‘What kind of traveler’s check?’ I told him, and all these guys with scars on their faces and eye patches look up and say, ‘Yes, those are good.’

“I took out five twenties, and I did something that was pretty stupid, but it made me feel good. I signed the first one, and the guy looked at the signature, but I knew he couldn’t see because it was so dark in there—so I signed a false name on the rest.”

Sowerby, in fact, was getting a little sick and tired of being ordered around by guys with guns. “About three that morning,” he said, “I was driving up on the crest of a hill, and I saw two guys with machine guns standing in the middle of the road. Now, if these guys are bandits and you stop, they’re going to shoot you. If they’re soldiers and you don’t stop, they’re going to shoot you. I decided to stop. Turned out these guys wanted a ride. Ordinarily, when a guy with a machine gun asks you to do him a favor you say, ‘Yes sir!’ But at this point I said, ‘Naw, no riders.’ Just slammed the door and left them standing there in the middle of nowhere with their machine guns.”

The rest of the trip went smoothly, and the Iron Pig reached North Cape—it actually followed the first snowplow through—28 days after starting in South Africa. The record still stands, as does Sowerby’s around-the-world record.

We had plenty of time to talk about driving feats, Sowerby and I. The Alcan

race was divided up into legs—600 miles one day, a night of rest, 1,500 miles in 30 hours for the next leg, and so on. There were nice folks along the route, operating the gas station-cafe combinations that the map kept referring to as towns.

There was only one thing Sowerby was worried about. CBC, the Canadian public radio system, wanted a phone interview from the Alcan 5000. It was scheduled to be broadcast live, nationwide, at 9 a.m. Toronto time, which was 5 a.m. our time. That day we were running one of the 30-hour legs and were about half-done. It was four in the morning, and we hadn’t seen anything like a phone booth—not a house, not even a light—for two hours. The next gas station was three hours away.

At 10 minutes to five, we saw a light in the distance. It came from a fishing lodge, and someone seemed to be stirring inside.

Below: Sowerby’s Africa-to-Norway jaunt required round-the-clock planning. Bottom: The Iron Pig, which cost \$85,000 new, cruises the Alaska Highway, stocked with a sink, propane stove, electric refrigerator, extra lights, and enough fuel for a thousand-mile run.



GARRY SOWERBY



RICH COX

DRIVING THE ALASKA HIGHWAY

The Alaska Highway was completed in 1942 as a military road punched through the wilderness for transporting World War II supplies. In those days the rutted gravel road was said to "follow the path of a mad moose." The road still meanders through some of the most striking scenery in the world (four-fifths of the route is in Canada), but it has been substantially improved, and more than 1,200 of its 1,523 miles are now paved.

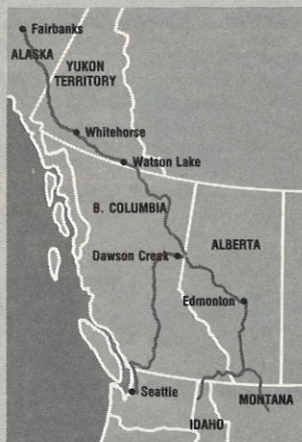
No longer is the drive to Alaska an experience strictly suited for stouthearted adventurers. You can reach the Alaska Highway—which officially begins at Dawson Creek, British Columbia, and ends in Fairbanks—via a half-dozen different routes leading from Great Falls, Montana; Coeur d'Alene, Idaho; or Seattle. Any car in reasonably good shape can make it all the way to Alaska. No special automobile equipment is necessary, although it is a good idea to carry a spare tire.

There are modern motels along the way—and some pretty rustic ones—none of them separated from the next by more than a day's drive. If you want to buy food, gas station-cafe complexes usually have small grocery stores. Because the area is remote, however, gas stations and other rest stops are sometimes separated by as much as 200 miles, so it's a good idea to spend some time planning the trip.

A good reference to consult is *The Milepost*, one of the better guides to the Alaska Highway. The book points out roadside campsites and warns you where to top off your gas tank if the next station's a couple hundred miles away. For a copy, send \$13.95 plus \$1 for postage and handling to Alaska Northwest Publishing Company, 130 Second Ave. S., Edmonds, Wash. 98020.

The Alaska Highway offers a dozen or more side trips or loops, which are fully described in *The Milepost*. The one with the best scenery may well be the Cassiar Highway, which follows a narrow river valley between glaciated mountains. If you plan on driving some of the unpaved loops, it's a good idea to install a skid-plate on your car and to find some way to protect your headlights from gravel thrown by logging trucks. The chances are pretty good that a flying piece of gravel will crack your windshield. Figure that into your expenses and it won't make you so mad when it happens.

—Tim Cahill



There was a phone in the office, and Sowerby sat in a chair and chatted with the CBC, while a couple of sled dogs sniffed his feet. Outside, through the back window, we could see a grizzly bear rooting through the garbage.

Sowerby, who due to his driving feats and flair for self-promotion is kind of a national hero in Canada, was explaining the concept of the Alcan 5000. Navigator Turner, he said, was a hometown buddy and a well-known sports-car-rally enthusiast in Moncton. It was Turner's precise calculations during the regularities that was keeping the Iron Pig in the race, Sowerby said, neglecting to mention that his skill as a driver had something to do with it.

"So you've been up for almost 24 hours," the interviewer said, "and you are sitting 10 yards away from a hungry grizzly bear."

"That's right," Sowerby said.

"What," the interviewer wanted to know, "do you do this sort of thing for?"

"Well," Sowerby said, "do you know what you'll be doing two weeks from today? I don't."

What Sowerby meant was that for all he knew, in two weeks he might be competing in a race from Paris to Dakar or from Hong Kong to Peking. Or he could be wearing a pinstriped suit and be negotiating with a potential sponsor for his next record attempt. The interviewer didn't seem to get it. He treated Sowerby like a genial nutcase, and Sowerby bantered easily with the guy for 15 minutes.

Several days later, driving a paved road on Vancouver Island and only five miles from the finish line, Sowerby was still talking about why he enjoys the adventure-driving business. He likes coming up with a viable concept, he likes the effort that goes into obtaining sponsors for his projects, and he likes planning the trips. He enjoys meeting new friends around the world. And he gets a gambler's adrenalin rush out of the drive itself.

"Do you know how many moving parts there are on a car?" he said. "I mean, if you blow a voltage regulator in the middle of the desert, it's all over: all that money, all those years of organizing, all wasted." Sowerby especially likes meeting the physical challenge of endurance driving as well as overcoming unexpected problems along the way.

"And," I said, "you make a pretty good living at it."

"Yeah," he said, "My main sponsor for this race makes the diesel fuel pump I'm using. After the race, if I do well, I'll go to the factory and give a presentation to the workers. The company thinks it's good for morale: they think that a good finish will prove that a diesel engine, running

their fuel pump, can compete against gasoline engines in a test of endurance and precision driving."

Doing well, by the fuel-pump maker's definition, would be to finish somewhere in the upper one-third of the competition. Up ahead, 500 yards off, was the motel that the route book said marked the end of the race. We crossed the finish line in eighth place, which meant that the Iron Pig had placed in the upper third. Sowerby's sponsors would be satisfied.

"My presentation to them will be just a little story," he told me. "I like to think that's what I do: I'm in the storytelling business. What I'm selling, basically, is good news. I'm not out there to interfere in politics or to bump off someone's business. I mean, I figure I'm going to be a great grandfather. Think of the stories I'll have to tell."

"Ordinarily, when a guy with a machine gun asks you to do him a favor you say, 'Yes sir!' But at this point I said, 'Naw, no riders.' Just slammed the door and left them standing there in the middle of nowhere with their machine guns."

We pulled into the motel parking lot, locked up the Iron Pig, and headed inside.

"You know," Sowerby said, "when we equipped the truck for Africa, we put a big sign on the back: WARNING, LEFT-HAND DRIVE. I think I'll paint that out and put my corporate slogan there."

"And what's that?" I asked.

He put on a serious face. "My corporate slogan is, You can't beat fun for a good time."

"Which," I pointed out, "is another reason why you do this sort of thing."

"That's the reason, all right," Garry Sowerby said.

The organizers of the Alcan 5000 are not really looking for more competitors. For one thing, motels along the route cannot accommodate a couple of hundred people coming through on a one-night basis. And the organizers also want to keep out dangerous or inept drivers.

For those who would still like to compete in a future Alcan 5000, the race director suggests that the prospective driver compete in local rallies put on by the Sports Car Club of America. Alcan organizers may accept drivers with a few years of rally experience, but only if they have earned reputations as skillful and safe drivers. For more information, write or call Alcan 5000, M. Fears and Company, 2907½ Hewitt, Everett, Wash. 98201, 206-252-3488, or Sports Car Club of America, 6750 Emporia, Englewood, Colo. 80112, 303-790-1044.

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