

Day Twelve - Blenheim to Hanmer Springs - 202 Km

Life on the road doesn't always go to plan, in fact on the longer endurance rallies it's just about as safe a bet as there is that something is going to head south a bit quicker like at some point. For some the car is the source of agony, gremlins appearing in even the best prepared machines. Just ask the Morton's about 912 woes, or speak to Stephen Owens about misfiring Jaguar's. Yep, if there's even a hint of some unreliability in a car, the rally will find it, no matter how deep it is buried.

Human error also factors, in the way of wrong slots and mis-calculations that are just par for the course in regularity rallying, how much they impact your overall time is dependent on how quickly the eagle-eyed crews spot the mistake. Jeff Urbina and Chris Pike, in their fabulous Gulf coloured Ford Escort, will answer all your queries about that particular conundrum. They're back with us now, but early on day ten they were spotted exiting Regularity One at a fair pace.

Then there are the comings and goings of rural life that can stop us all dead in our tracks, slow and wide logging trucks, farmers in the road and cattle crossing the route. I'm sure that Stephen Hardwick and Martin Hunt could tell you all about just how many sheep there are in New Zealand, as they counted most of them just the other morning.

The environment too can play its own gigantic curve balls, as despite all of the work that goes into route planning, the endless days staring at maps, reconnaissance trips and scout cars sometimes roads get closed and re-routes are necessary. Just such an event occurred the day before the NZ Classic was due to make landfall on the South Island, when the Awarere Valley Road that would have transported us through the Molesworth Station was closed due to the overwhelming risk of wildfires. Cue the emergency dispatch over the Cook Strait of Clerk of the Course Mark Appleton and trusty sidekick Chris Mills, to find a new route that would allow the rally to continue to this evening's destination of Hanmer Springs, but also live up to the high standards set by the roads travelled so far.

Whilst we were all still enjoying the beautiful ferry crossing over from Wellington, the chaps were hard at work pulling together brand-new route instructions to go with the newly selected roads. As it was, they put together a bit of a smasher and today's regularities transported us along another fine selection of dirt roads, that twisted and turned through the South Islands altogether grander scenery. Golden farmland, fertile vineyards and majestic mountains were our backdrop today, as well as a stunning coast road that skirted the golden beaches that met the azure blue of the South Pacific. If this is what can be strung together with the old 8-gauge wire at the last minute, I cannot wait to see what the rest of the route around this island has to offer.

The rally ran in age order today, so it was left to the two Bentleys to head into the new route first, blustering their way through the two regularities for the day and leaving great clouds of dust for those that followed. The running order meant that first and second in the standings, our two Porsche pugilists, would be on the road almost together. The Targa of Filip Engelen and Anne Gillis arrived into Blenheim yesterday in first place, just a matter of seconds ahead of Sherif Hwaidak and Yevhen Harashchenko, their 911 Carrera often seen going a little bit sideways out on route. By close of play today Filip and Ann had extended their lead by a meagre two seconds, leaving it all very much still to play for.

In fact, throughout the field the re-route seemed to be dealt with by the competitors with wonderful aplomb, with many not dropping more than ten seconds. With a 345 km run north west to Nelson tomorrow though, with three regularities and a test, it will likely be a more taxing day in the saddle. Many rivers still to cross...

Syd Stelvio.