

## MURRAY STEALS A BIKE

Takahue Saddle Road was an early shortcut and stock route over the western portion of the Reatea Forest that connected the Takahue Valley and Broadwood areas. Being formed roads on either end, the road wound its way up into the forested bush clad hills and gave way to rough bush track. Where once it was negotiable all the way through by 4x4 it had become overgrown on the southern side, reducing it to foot and horse traffic, motorbike and quad.

It had been another fine early autumn morning, a typical poachers day. I could smell it in the air, kukupa falling and dying somewhere, the thought irked me, kept me driven.

I got the call from Murray around one o'clock. Word was that there were guys up on the Takahue Saddle and they were probably up to no good. I joined Murray as soon as I could, downing tools from my mundane task at home and burned rubber to Kaitaia. Picking up Murray at his home off Larmers Road, we hightailed it for Takahue. Murray knew the area well, having spent all his youth growing up in that community, so had no trouble getting access onto the farm track that was the old Takahue Saddle Road. In reality it was still a surveyed paper road utilised by farming and the odd hippy community. Rumour has it that the conservator's daughter was up here somewhere, living rough as a happy hippy. Each to their own.

We began the slow climb winding our way up the rough track through scrubby farmland in my landrover, coming almost into collision with a 4x4 hilux coming the other way as it snaked past us, edging out into the paddock to get around us. A gruff "Hey" was all the occupants said as they drove past us. I had no opportunity to stop them or even slow down, just concentrating on missing the collision. Looking in the mirror, I saw they had no intention of stopping. I had recognised the driver. A well known local farmer, rough, ex North-Auckland rugby player in his hay day. Murray knew the passenger who I had not had time to see. He was also a local farmer in the district.

Murray commented, "Well, if that was who was poaching I am glad we missed them, that could have been rough."

We decided to keep on going anyway, check out if there was any poaching sign up on the saddle. The track became almost impassable as we neared the summit so we pulled off and legged it the rest of the way. Besides, if anyone was still up there we didn't want them hearing us coming.

Fifteen minutes later we had made it to the summit saddle, and bingo! Here it was, sitting propped on its stand - a Yamaha Ag bike. Sitting quietly in the afternoon sun in the small grass clearing. Forest ridges leading off to the east and west, and the saddle track leading downhill into the bush to the south. We didn't need to exchange a word, just looked at each other and grinned. I was already looking for a spot to hunker down out of sight to wait.

Murray, being the country boy he is, quietly pulled the plug leads off both spark plugs, just enough to look like they were still connected but far enough off not to carry a spark. Enough to give us that few moments break should someone try and do a quick runner on it.

I hunkered down behind some flax on the western side of the bike, Murray around to the south a little, and waited. It took a long hour. The odd mossy buzzing, fantails flipping around merrily, beaks snapping at the odd midge, keeping me company hoping I was going to stir him up some more insects. My ears picked up the sound of voices coming from my left on the east ridge.

Voices? That meant there were at least two. I looked over to where Murray was. A finger wriggled in the scrub. He had heard them too. Five minutes later, two figures emerged out of the scrub. My heart was pounding now. I recognised one immediately. Henry! Son of the farmer driving the ute we had passed coming up the hill. Henry was a rugby league player, and a good one. The other guy, just as big, I had not seen before. They walked casually enough. Henry was carrying a shotgun as was his mate. The mate also had a small pack on his back. Even from here I could see it was quite full of something. Most likely kukupa.

They both stopped as they got to the clearing near the bike. Henry scanning the area, looking for sign of anyone being about. A little cautious. We are used to that Henry, we know those tricks.

I watched quietly wondering what was going to unfold here. How were we going to run this? Play it by ear as usual?

Henry straddled the bike, putting his shotgun on the ground, preparing to start up. His mate carrying the pack stood off to one side, put his firearm down and started lighting up a smoke. Henry stood on the kick start. Nothing. It was time to move.

I stepped out from my flax patch, slightly behind Henry's view but in full view of his Mate.

"Hi guys. Wildlife Rangers."

Murray was stepping out from his possie. I could see both men rising up, startled looks on both faces, the moment frozen in time. You could cut the air with a knife! Then all hell broke loose!

Henry's mate threw his smoke toward me, turned and legged it straight back where he had come from, pack swinging on his back, shotgun left on the ground. In the same instant I saw Murray launch off after him, like a dog chasing a rabbit. A rather large one! Henry sat still on the bike, looking at me. I said nothing, just walked up and picked up his shotgun then stepped over and picked up the other. Not a word exchanged, just a look, like two cats figuring each other out. Him being the much bigger cat.

Down below in the bush, just off to our left, we could both hear the unfolding commotion. The smashing and crashing of vegetation being demolished by two bodies moving at speed.

"Stop man! Rangers! Give it up!" Murray's voice echoed up from below. More crashing and bashing of vege. Swearing by a voice I knew was not Murray's.

That did it. Henry broke our little deadlock, swung his leg off the bike and legged it into the scrub, hi-tailing it after Murray and his mate. Christ, now I was holding the two shotguns. I didn't know if they were loaded or not. No time to check. I thrust them both into some scrub, hopefully out of sight and followed Henry down through the crushed scrub toward the commotion.

I arrived just in time to capture a glance of Murray lying on his back, head downhill among crushed vege. Henry's large mate sitting astride him while Murray was locked in a tug of war with him over the shoulder strap of the pack still on the man's back. In that same moment in time Henry ran down at them both, slowing only to claw the pack off his mate's back and out of Murray's grasp, and carried on headlong downhill into the thick bush with the pack and birds. Before I could get to them his mate jumped off Murray and legged it off after Henry, both of them quickly disappearing out of sight downhill through the thick coprosma and pittosporum.

Murray lay on his back swearing.

"You okay mate?"

"Yeah the fuck! He was too big, I tried to undo his belt so he couldn't run but he was too strong for me."

“Never mind mate we have their shotguns and we know who they are.”

“Yeah, that was Michael. He plays league with Henry.”

I helped Murray up and we made our way panting back up the bank onto the saddle clearing. Murray was all hyper. Panting and wound up tight like a spring. I dragged the shotguns out of the scrub. Both loaded. I took the cartridges out and pocketed them.

“What now you reckon?” I asked of Murray.

“I’m seizing their fuckin bike! That’s what I am going to do!”

“Mate I don’t think we can do that, they weren’t using it to take birds.”

“I don’t give a fuck ! I am taking it. They can fucking walk back!”

I could see Murray was in no mood to argue, and I knew we would only have so long before the two big league boys came back a looking for their bike and guns. Murray was already hooking the leads back up on the bike. Swung on board and gave it a kick start into life.

“Hurry up hop on.” As he wheeled it around, ready to go.

I swung myself on the back as best as I could, juggling both shotguns across my chest somehow and hanging on as Murray gunned the bike, almost depositing me on my arse on the ground. We were off, heading downhill over the rough track. I still don’t know how I managed to stay on the back of that bike. Murray was in no mood to slow down so I clung on as best I could. We made it down to my landrover without my falling off or losing the shotguns. I still don’t know how.

I threw the shotguns in the back of my wagon, as Murray yelled at me to follow him to the Kaitaia Police Station. And so we did. Murray motoring ahead on his purloined farm bike, no helmet, all the way to Kaitaia. Me wondering how the hell this one was going to play out.

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We spent some time at the Police station, outlining our lawful authority and making statements. The sergeant in charge agreed to store the bike for us, and to contact the league boys through their fathers. See what they had to say.

The Sergeant contacted us next day saying that the guys would admit they were shooting pigeons, but wanted their bike back. In the end I agreed that the bike could go back if they brought in a bird each and made a statement. And so it worked out. They got the farm bike back. We got two very dead kukupa, two shotguns, and their statements admitting to killing them.

It hadn’t been such a bad day after all. Murray’s stealing a bike paid off.