Men, Mud & Motorcycles

Conquering 200 Miles of Jungle by Motorcycle. Panama to Columbia through the Darien Gap.

By Bob Webb
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Website mission
To inspire a dream and fulfill it.
Without a dream, nothing will happen.

Written and Published by
Captain Bob Webb
220 Ibis Lane
Goose Creek, SC 29445

Motivation-tools.com

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Preface

Ron Merrill and I were machinist and hard hat divers on the Panama Canal. This made it possible for the multiple attempts to conquer the Darien Gap. I love the tropical rain forest, especially in the rainy season. The rain is warm, not cold like in the temperate zone. Working in the rain may be annoying, but is not uncomfortable. There is gold in the rivers of Panama and the Darien was my favorite searching grounds. I was always looking for reasons to spend time on the jungle rivers. On most trips I went by myself, either by dugout canoe or motorcycle. Jungle entry was about an hour drive from my house. I could do on a 3 day weekend what most people would take a year to plan for.

I worked on the locks, where ships were raised and lowered. As machinist, I had a verity of duties that included:

- Operating the towing locomotives that pull the ships through the locks.
- Diving in the lock’s culverts when conditions prevented valves from operating properly.
- Blasting steel plates off the locks wall while hanging in a cage 80-feet from the chamber floor. The cage was on a hook from a steam powered crane.
- Troubling shooting and repairing 5 pressure hydraulic systems in the towing locomotives.
- Write computer programs that help office personnel.

When hired by the Panama Canal Company, I had no experience in the above skills. In third world countries like Panama, formal training for many needed skills is not available. People who can educate themselves are given opportunity. My ability to educate myself was the key to opportunity. I acquired this skill through self-motivated projects, small and big. The Darien Gap is an example.

You can learn more about this concept at my website: motivation-tools.com

Men, Mud and Motorcycles
In 1963, Chepo was the end of the Pan American highway. The Bayano River connected the interior farms to Panama City. Nearby buses supported the river farm industry. Today, roads connect these farms.

Gold panning in the jungles of Panama. This was a day trip, because I have no camping equipment with me.

This is a 30-foot dugout that I use to go up rivers. The blue tank at the stern is an air compressor for diving. The red pump sucks the sand from the bottom and dumps it in the boxes that trap the gold.
If it were not for the Darien Gap between Panama and Columbia, it would be possible to drive a motor vehicle from the northern edge of Alaska to the southern tip of South America. For engineering and political reasons, the 200 miles of jungle and swamp between Panama and Columbia has never been tamed. I decided to be the first to drive a motorcycle through, what is known as The Darien Gap. It took four attempts before Ron Merrill and I succeed.

The Rokon Trail Breaker is the ultimate jungle vehicle. This bike goes anywhere, there is no need to cut a trail. The biggest problem is getting hung-up on a hanging vine and the bike goes on without you.

The two-wheel drive makes the bike a climber. The rear wheel pushes while the front wheel climbs until it flips over, if it is wall. The ground clearance is 15", but it will climb over fallen trees 30" off the ground without taking your feet off the footrest. If the bike fell in a hole, which seemed to be often, in low gear and giving it the gas the bike would jump out. It will drive through water 24" deep. If deeper, it will float laying on its side. Crossing the fast moving Bayano River, we had to build a raft to get our bikes and equipment across in one attempt. See Monday, December 7.

The tire rims double as 4 gallon tanks for holding water or extra fuel. In the Darien Jungle, we found water to be more of a problem than fuel. We used one tank for fuel and the other for water.

The bike has three speeds; First gear was 1 to 3 mph, second was 1 to 10 mph and the third did 15 mph. In the jungle we never got beyond second.
First Attempt

February 10, 1973

George, his wife Karen and I left Balboa in my Volks Wagon pulling a trailer with the Trail Breaker motorcycle on it. We arrived at Cañita at 11:00 AM, the end of the Pan American Highway. By 11:30 all the equipment was loaded, tied down and I was off. With all the weight on the bike, I had trouble keeping it under control at first.

I forged the first stream rather than use the bridge so George could take some pictures. The first few miles was on the new road that was under construction. It was easy going and I was feeling good about the excellent progress. Then I discovered I lost my bag with all my clothes in it. I went back and found it on the road. Then a Guradia National (police officer) wishing me good luck. The tire rims are full of gas, plus two cans on each side. The load was too heavy.
jeep came by and the American driver asked where I was going. I said, “To Santa Fe.” which is 100 miles away.

He said, “You are on the wrong road, this ends at the Bayano River. Follow me.”

I was slow for him and he took off.

There was a section of road with explosives planted and wired in the drilled bedrock. No one was around and I hoped they were not getting ready to blow.

I saw the jeep tracks turn into a side road. As I turned I lost control and fell. A rock poked a hold in one of the gas cans strapped to the side of the bike. Nothing I could do but watch the gas run out.

The load on the bike is so heavy, it took several tries to lift it on its wheels. I toped off the bike gas tank and threw the leaking gas can over a cliff.

After making some wrong turns, I found a logging road that went north. Soon I came to another logging road that went east to Santa Fe. This is dry season and the road is covered with deep soft dust. A truck came by leaving a cloud of dust so thick I had to pull over and wait for it to settle. I and the bike had so much dust, we looked like part of the road. Several logging trucks passed, each caring three huge logs. I came to a broken down Guradia National truck as a logging truck pulled up behind it.

I had to forge several rivers. Each time I felt the bike was going to fall over. With the bike in the river, I would be in trouble. There were always people by the rivers and I would ask if this is the Bayano. The Bayano is the big one and the small rivers looked big to me. When I came to the Bayano River it was wide and deep, I did not have to ask. After walking along the river bank, I saw shallow ledge that extended across the river, the fast running current was about a foot deep. I was tired and rested awhile before attempting to cross.

While crossing, I went slow and easy, stopping once in a while to rest. I felt I was going to lose the bike several times. The current tried its best to take it. A spill here would mean loosing everything in deep water. When I arrived on the other side, the jeep and its driver was there. He introduced himself as Mr. Wilson, an American missionary on the river.

The next obstacle was a freshly bulldozed road that looked like it went straight up the side of a long hill. The bike would make it, but keeping it under control is hard work. Half way up I was so tired I had to block the wheels and rest. Fatigue causes spills and spills is the last thing I need. At the top of the hill traveling was easy through the jungle.

Up to the Bayano River I was following logging roads and cattle trails. On this side of the river the jungle is thick and the air is cooler.

At 5:00 PM I found an Abandoned camp sight near a dried up stream with some standing water in deep holes. In it I found a newspaper dated February 9, 1973. This was February 10. I set up camp, took a bath, and found my air mattress was rotten. It would not hold air and could not be repaired. I had a jungle hammock that I hung between trees.

The night was full of noises. One sound sounded like a large animal in the near by bushes. The sound always came from the same place. The moon was almost full, the night beautiful, and there was nothing I could do about the sound. It was a long time before I went to sleep. When I woke during the night, the jungle was black and quite, no moon. Slept till 8:00 AM.
February 11

I was slow getting around this morning. I re-packed the bike so it would ride easier. By noon I was off. The road had deep ruts from the logging trucks. The bike wheels had to stay in the ruts which made it hard to control. I stopped to drink some water. A man came out of the jungle with a rifle. Soon two more men came out of the jungle with rifles. One was pealing an orange and handed it to me. We talked awhile and I took pictures. One man walked back in the jungle. Soon a jeep, I never did see, came out of the nearby jungle with rifles mounted all over it. They said they were hunting white bore. Apparently I upset their hunting plan.

The trail became more and more impossible. Because of the weight I needed to travel five miles per hour in order to keep the bike balanced. When I hit a bump at that speed, the bike would go out of control and fall over. I could not pick it up without removing some of the load. One time I put a long poll under it and was able to lift the bike loaded.

About 4 PM I came to a well traveled trail that crossed the one I was on. My trail went up a steep hill to a house. A man from the house shouted something and I said Santa Fe. I walked up to him and asked which way, which was up this hill. I asked for some water and he gave me two bags of homemade candy. He invited me to stay for dinner which was plantain, sweet rice, pork, and coffee.

The setting was typical jungle living, thatched roof house, dirt floor, a man and his wife, two girls and a boy. The only house for miles. The two girls were thrashing the rice, pounding it and letting the wind blow the chaff away. Running around on the floor were about twelve pigeons, two mother hens with her chicks, a small pig, and a dog. Climbing on the walls were two parakeets. The rice that was spilled on the floor during thrashing was cleaned up by whoever got there first. Everyone seemed happy.

After dinner I was on my way and soon fell again, hitting a fallen tree. An Indian help me raise the bike and cut a trail around the tree. I went another mile when I fell for the sixth time today. The trail was blocked by another big tree. I realized I could never make it with this load. The jungle is passable and the bike can take it, but I can’t control the bike. It seems my only choice is to go back. I unpacked and made camp for the night.

I lay in the jungle hammock at sundown trying to read a story, by flashlight, out of Readers Digest of a girl who walked for ten days through the jungles of Peru after her plane crashed.
Insects seemed to be her biggest enemy. Insects were coming through the netting so I had to turn off the flashlight. While laying there, I thought about the American Indian’s drag sled. Tomorrow I will build one and give it a try.

**February 12**

During the night I could hear wild boar grunting. None came near my camp that I know of.

After breakfast I built a sled and loaded most of the supplies on it. The bike dragged it for 300 feet when the sled hooked onto something and pulled the bike over. I could not pick the bike up so I untied the sled. Leaving the supplies behind, I drove ahead for a while. Without the supplies, the trail was so rough, I could walk faster than driving.

Coming back I took a short cut down a hill. Then the hill turned into a ten foot cliff and no way to stop. All I could do was lay the bike on its side and slide over it. I went faster than the bike and was pinned under it when we stopped. I hurt my back and tore open another can of gas. I then realized I could never make it alone.

I tried the sled one more time. One hundred feet and over the bike went. I could not go in or out of the jungle with this load. I had less than one day supply of water. To save myself, I dumped five gallons of gas from the rear tire rim. Loaded enough food supplies for three days. I gave the extra supplies to a passing Indian.

With the light load I could travel easy and did not fall the rest of the day. I found a camp sight near a stream where I had drinking water and could take a bath. During the night the jungle hammock broke and had to repair it, if I wanted to sleep off the ground. I camped here several days before going back home.
Life in the Darien Providence of Panama

Above: Cuna woman sewing a mola.
Left: Choco woman grinding corn into flower.

The jungle is being cut down extremely fast. Loggers are in the jungle ahead of the road builders. In the dry season, a bulldozer will cut a road that is good until the first rain. Floating logs down river is another option.

Above: Removing logs from the river.
Right: Loading logs onto a truck.
Second Attempt

After the first attempt I realized the trip is not possible solo. I talked Ron Merrill, a co-worker, into buying a Trail Breaker motorcycle. During the rainy season, when conditions are at the meanest, we took short trips into the jungle. I also used it for gold panning expeditions deep in the jungle. The bike is excellent for following shallow streams.

Nick Unger was a friend who took my car back home.

Sunday, December 6, 1973

At 7 AM, Nick Unger and Ron Merrill arrived to load the bikes on the trailer. At 8:15 we were on our way to Cañita.

The new bridge across the Cañita River at the village of Cañita was finished but closed to all traffic. The temporary bridge beside it was washed out. The road on the other side was good for a few miles so I decided to take a chance that the Volks Wagon would forge the river. On the other side it sank in the mud. We off loaded the bikes, pushed the VW up the hill and reloaded the bikes onto the trailer.

At the end of the Pan American highway we loaded the bikes with supplies and we were on our way. It was less than a mile when we found ourselves in thick heavy mud. We saw tire tracks and wondered if a jeep could get through. Soon a jeep came toward us and we were informed that the trail was impossible. The driver turned around a short distance ahead. While talking the driver gave us ice cold Coke.

For the next few miles the mud was so thick I felt sick, weak and the elements were overpowering. The mud beat me. Ron being in better physical condition, drove on ahead. I saw him driving up the hill when his bike sank in the mud. We pulled it around so as to drive it back down hill and out of the mud. He started down hill and fell over again. The mud suction held the bike down this time.

The mud is caused by cattle that are driven to different locations.
While Ron was stuck near the top of the hill, I went back to my bike that was still stuck near the bottom of the hill. I unload the bike then drove it back down hill to free it from the mud. I lost control and fell into the mud again. There was a stream near by so I drove the bike in the stream to wash the mud off. I reloaded the bike. With first hand experience, I drove to the top of the hill passing Ron.

Ron offloaded his gear, but it took two of us to free the bike from the mud. The mud suction made it almost impossible walk or work with the bike. In time we got Ron’s bike and equipment to the top of the hill.

We still pushed through mud until we came to our first big river that was two feet deep and fast. I was so tired I wanted to quit. We carried our equipment across then drove the bikes across. It was early afternoon so we decided to move on hoping to reach another river by dark.

The road was good with some mud compared to what we just came through. By sundown we arrived at another river that we didn’t know the name of either. Our spirts were much higher and we felt the worst was behind us and we could make it. We pitched our tent, washed our clothes, bikes and took a bath. The moon was full and this was our first day on a long journey.

**Monday, December 7**

By 9 AM we were on our way again forging two rivers at the start. By noon we were at the Bayano River. The river was over four feet deep, fast, and wide. I tried walking across. When the water went above my knees, the current was so strong I could not stand up. We had to float our bikes and equipment across the river in one try. It was not practical to ferry equipment in small lots.

We went up stream and made a raft using our bikes and logs. We lashed everything together with the bikes upright and reloaded the equipment. Ron was to swim across the river with a rope. When on the other side he would tie the line to a tree and I would let the bikes go. The current would carry the raft onto the bank on the other side.

Ron went up stream and started swimming across the river. The current was so fast he was going to be downstream and at the end of the rope before he could get across. Seeing the problem I shoved the
raft into the water so as to drift down river to give him a chance to reach the other side. Ron tied the line and all went well until the line broke. I could touch the bottom and tried to push. There was no way I could get a footing. I found there was some line left so I swam to shore with the end and tied it to a tree root. The raft swung into the bank, right where we wanted them and at the beginning of the trail on the other side. Another 100 feet down river was white water, if we missed we would have lost everything.

While crossing the river, the bikes were mostly under water. I thought we would have a hard time starting them. Ron pushed his bike out of the water and it started on the first kick. I pushed my bike out of the water and it started with no effort also.

Soon we found more deep mud and a steep hill to climb. At the top, traveling was better except for pockets of mud. I seemed to fall in every mud hole and had trouble getting out. My helmet was always in the way and I tossed it.

We arrived at fork in the trail where a Panamanian told us to take the left fork. It was muddy and it seemed to go in the wrong direction so we took the right fork. There was no mud on this trail and we made good time. Near dark we arrived at a small stream and setup camp.

December 8

Traveling was somewhat easy except for steep stream banks. We cut trails through the jungle to where we could cross the stream without going over or climbing a cliff.

The heavily traveled trail ended and branched out into lightly traveled trails, so it seemed. We walked the trails and they faded away in the jungle. Where did the main trail go? We finally found one that could be followed. It led to a freshly bulldozed road. The mud was so soupy we could not walk on it. Following it for a while, the road seemed to go in the wrong direction. We turned back and tried another trail. It was no better. Then we went back where heavily traveled trail ended and setup camp. This day was spent looking for the right trail.

December 9

We decided to go back to where we were told to take the left fork. On the way back we spent two hours checking out another side road. It came to an end for no reason like all the others. Back at the fork we took the left fork as instructed by the native two days earlier.

We were going along good until my bike quit. I took the carburetor apart twice then decided it was the points, this would take a while. I told Ron to drive ahead, find a river and setup camp. Several hours later, Ron drove back on a flat tire. We cut a clearing in the jungle and stayed the night.

Men, Mud and Motorcycles
December 10

With our bikes in working order, we were off again. Later in the day we found ourselves in the stickiest mud we ever experienced. We could only travel a few hundred yards before the rear wheel well would be packed solid with mud. We spent a lot of time digging the mud out. By noon I had a flat tire. We kept going until we came to a river. We took baths, washed our clothes, fixed out bikes, and were on our way only to find the mud was thicker than ever. Ron’s boots were completely disintegrated now, they started to fall apart the first day.

It took two people to push the bike out of the mud. Finally my bike was packed in solid. We could not reach another river today. Without saying a word, Ron took off walking and I set up camp. Just as it was getting too dark to see, Ron came riding back on a horse with another Panamanian. Ron said, “Leave the bikes, take the camping equipment to a river by a farm house just ahead.”

Ron and the Panamanian carried the equipment on the horses. I walked through the blackest jungle through the soupiest mud for the longest time. When I arrived at the river, Ron had the equipment offloaded. We pitched the tent, took a bath and washed our clothes again that day. We were exhausted. At three in the morning a rooster kept crowing which ended our sleep for the night.

December 11

We were low on food and did not travel as far as I did on my first attempt. Ron had no boots and my bike lost a foot rest. The farmers told us Santa Fé was five days walking or fifty miles. On our bikes we are covering three to four miles a day.

This morning I walked back and pulled my bike out of the mud and drove to camp. I gave my boots to Ron so he could walk back and get his bike. We spent the day by the river washing, fixing the bikes and deciding what to do.

While cleaning the bike I found the rear tire was flat. While I was fixing that, Ron noticed that my wheel bearing was wiggling. Looking at it closer, the ball-bearings were gone. We then realized our attempt has come to an end, also, we could not get the bikes out of the jungle.

This evening the farm hands gave us dinner of deer meat and rice. They told us we could leave our bikes in the chicken coop and they would take us by horseback to the Bayano River. They said Indians traveling down river will take you to Chepo where you can take a bus to Panama City. By noon you will be in Panama City. The plan sounded like it was the best choice.

December 12

It took two hours on horseback to reach the Bayano River. Not being a horseback rider I fell off twice while the horse was dodging the mud. They don’t like mud either. The trail ended a short distance from the river and our guide cut a trail to the Bayano River and a clearing for us to wait on the riverbank. Then he left.

We sat for a while watching the river flow by. We had maybe one meal, no machete, no matches, and no camping equipment. We took their word about being in Panama City by noon. It was almost noon and we were still on the riverbank. I said, “Let’s build a raft and drift to Chepo,” remembering my Amazon River days.
The problem was, we had nothing to cut trees with except my sheath knife. I found a soft tree that would snap clean at the base. We lashed several trees together with vines. Launching it, it would hold one man or it would hold our personal effects such as my camera which was put on board. We swam with the raft in the fast moving current.

After about an hour I was losing too much body heat and started shaking. At the same time small fish were pecking at us. We did not know how far up river we were, we assumed Chepo was a short distance. A outboard powered boat coming up river stopped and asked what we were doing in the river miles from nowhere. They shook their heads and continued on. Soon we heard another outboard motor boat coming down river. They also stopped and asked what we were doing in the middle of nowhere. They said they would take us to Chepo for $4 each. We swam to shallow water and climbed aboard.

The dugout canoe must have been 35-feet long and 3-feet wide loaded with passengers, pigs, chickens, rice and who knows what else. In places the river was fast with white water. We passed a Choco Indian village, then a Cuna Indian village, then the Panamanian village of Isla de Patos. We went under the Bayano River Bridge that was under construction. There was one more section to be installed for the two sides of the bridge to meet at the center. After four hours we arrived at the hydroelectric dam under construction. From here all passengers had to walk several miles to the town of Chepo. Ron and I help carry some of the chickens.

Just before dark in Chepo, Ron and I were holding our thumbs out. Soon a jeep gave us a ride to Espavé Naranjal. Two hours later a truck stopped and gave us a ride to Tocumen. From there we took a taxi home.
Bayano River Bridge Construction
Third Attempt

While waiting for the dry season to start, a friend flew me over the farm where the bikes were stored. Ron had written a letter telling them when we would be back. While over the house I dropped it out of the plane. The wind carried it so far, I did not think they would find it, but they did.

Sunday, February 3, 1974

Ron and I were driven to the Bayano River bridge. As we arrived about 7 AM, an outboard powered dugout canoe motored its way up river. We were sure another would come anytime. At 9:30 we saw another coming up river, but they stopped before reaching us. Ron walked down river and asked the boat owner if he would take us up river. He agreed to one hour travel time for $8.

We loaded our supplies that included, food, repair parts, and gasoline into the canoe. In the jungle gasoline is like gold, so when people ask if we have any we say “no.” As expected, the boat owner asked if we had gasoline. The lack of fuel did not seem to bother him as we headed up river. Soon the owner stopped and tied up to a tree. Two boys, 5 and 8 years old were on board, they jumped out and ran into the jungle. Soon they came back with several stalks of plantains. Then we motored up river a ways and stopped at a land clearing construction camp. Someday this area will be the bottom of the Bayano lake and all of the trees are being cut down. With the construction crew, the boat owner traded one stalk of plantain for one gallon of gasoline. The construction crew wanted all of the plantain but the owner would not deal.

At the frequent rapids, we all had to help poll the canoe through them. An hour after we started, we arrived at the main trail crossing. This is where Ron and I floated our bikes across the river two months earlier. This is dry season and the river is low, about one foot compared to four feet in December. We off-loaded our equipment and sat on the river bank.

Bulldozers have been through a short time ago and the trail is now a logging road. We now hoped a truck would take us to the farm, but were informed that the trucks were not entering the jungle yet. The crossing on both sides of the river was like a city compared to two months ago. A large work camp where people were working on bulldozers and other equipment.

About 1:30 PM a machinist who was working on the bulldozers wanted to take his
family up river. He said we could travel with him if we help push through the rapids. This was fine with us. We soon realized this was the machinist first experience on the river, he did not know how to handle the dugout canoe or how to read the river. We were always going aground and he went up the shallow part of the rapids instead of the deep. I wanted off but it was too late.

Ahead we saw an Indian village with a Panama Government helicopter on the ground. When we arrived at the village the helicopter took off. Ron told the machinist we want off here. Ron and I walked through the village looking for the men. Then we waded across a small stream and found the men in a meeting house.

In one corner a man was taking bets or so it seemed. Then we were offered seats in the center of the building facing the chief and his six council members. They were laying in hammocks, passing a bowl back and forth, and drinking something from it. The staff members sat on benches that circled the council members. Through an interpreter, the chief asked a lot of questions; where we came from, where we were going, and what for. The chief pointing to a man said, “He will take you up river for $30,” which was a high price for the jungle.

It was two hours before sundown, Ron said, “We will stay in the village tonight and decide tomorrow.”

The chief snapped back and said, “You will pay $30 now and you will leave now!”

At that moment we realized we were dealing with a hostile group of people. The land they are living on will soon be the bottom of a lake and the government helicopter carried negotiators, we presume. We arrive when tempers were still hot. From this moment on we said “yes sir” to everything.

By sundown we arrived at the trail where we rode the horses last December. We hid our equipment in the jungle. By this time it was dark and we had no flashlight, they are stored with the bikes. For the next two hours we walked through the dark jungle. If the lead person lost the trail, the trailing person would stay put until the trail was found by the lead person. When we arrived at the farm house, we were given supper. The usual, sweet rice and beans.

**Monday, February 4**

We hired one of the farm hands to take horses to the river and bring our supplies back. In the meantime we went to work on our bikes. Replaced the wheel bearings, repaired a flat, and organized the equipment for loading. Apparently we set up camp on a cattle drive trail. While working on the bikes a heard of cattle were being driven toward us. We stood our ground and the cattle went around us. At sundown we went swimming with the farm hands.

**February 5**

By 10 AM we had our bikes loaded and we were off. Soon we found a long muddy trail ahead of us. We were hoping all the mud had dried up by this time. We were planning how to
get through it when we heard a bulldozer coming. In a short
time there was a new road that bypassed the mud. We then went
ahead of the bulldozer and found the trail much easier than in
December. What a difference two months of dry season makes.
Now it was ditches and fallen trees that slow us down.

Our two-wheel drive bikes would go over trees 30-inches
off the ground with no additional help. The front wheel climbs
while the rear wheel pushed. When the bike frame is setting on
the tree, we shift our body weight to the front, the rear wheel
takes traction on the tree and we are over. Done just right, we
don’t have to put our feet on the ground for support. Some of the
higher fallen trees, it takes a second person to help push the
bikes over. We could drive down a low cliff and not crash so
long as we kept the throttle open and kept the speed up as we hit
bottom. The height of the cliff may depend on our nerve.

Ron’s front tire went flat about an hour before sundown. We
kept driving and it was starting to get dark when we came to a
river. A river always gives us a chance to freshen up for the next
day. Ron fixed his flat before turning in.

February 6

In the morning I found my bike had a flat tire also. It turned
out there were two punctures and had to repair the tire twice.
Thorns two to three inches long grow on the ground. They go
through the tires like butter.

The trail seemed a little better. The fallen trees, ditches,
cattle ruts, and tree stumps give us our usual problems. About
noon we arrived on a high and wide riverbank. (Ipetí River) We
could not see how to get down the 30-40 foot cliff or how to get
up the cliff on the other side. An Indian on the other side saw us
and came over with his small dugout canoe. He told us to go up
river to where we could climb down the cliff.

Leaving our bikes on the cliff, the Indian took us across the
river and showed us a trail headed down river that leads to the
village of Ipetí. We walked to the village and asked for help to
get our bikes across the river. We were told to go up river
another mile, there it is possible to cross.

Up river we found a place to cross, but we were still high
above the river. We tied a line to the bikes and rapped the free
end around a tree and lowered the bike with the rider down the
cliff. A rider needed to stay with the bike to free it from tree
roots and other snags. At the bottom we drove across the river
and followed the trail back to Ipetí.
The village is half Cuna Indian where women wear fully dressed brightly colored cloths. The other half is Choco Indian where the women are topless and wear only a skirt. A street down the middle divides the two groups. Customs in one tribe does not seem to influence the other tribe.

We pushed hard all afternoon, hoping to arrive at the next Indian village of Tortí before dark. Somehow Ron and I separated and one of us took the wrong trail. I parked my bike at the fork in the trail and walked back to where we separated. After a while I heard Ron blowing his whistle from where my bike is parked. Just before dark we arrived at the Tortí River where we set up camp.

February 7

When we woke this morning, kids from Tortí were standing around our camp. They watched us cleanup, eat breakfast, and take down the camp. By 10 AM we were on our way only to find ourselves on the Tortí air field. Trails led in all directions from here and we did not know where to go. A man walked with us and put us on the right trail. The first hour was easy going until we had to follow a cattle trail. During the rainy season, the cattle trails turn into soft mud. The cattle’s hoofs sink deep into the mud leaving holes. During the dry season the mud dries and becomes rock hard. Driving over this is like driving over boulders.

At 1 PM we found the newly surveyed trail that someday will be the new Pan American Highway. This trail goes all the way to Santa Fé. The going should be easy, so we thought. In reality, the going was almost impossible and we were completely discouraged. The foot trails we have been following go around obstacles or find as easy way up a hill. This survey trail goes straight no matter what the terrain. I wanted to give up, but in the middle of the jungle, it take just as much work to go back as to move ahead. Also, for lack of water, few people live in this part of the jungle.

We were hoping to find another river before dark, there were none. The last river was the one we camped at last night. Then just before dark we saw a sign that read “Camp” with an arrow pointing to the right. We drove in and found three large abandoned thatched huts by a small stream. We assume they were build by the survey crew. We setup camp in one of them and took a bath. We guess it to take another six days to cover fifty miles before we
reach Santa Fé, which is the half way point. We do less that ten miles a day. People can walk faster than that.

February 8

It turned cold during the night and it seemed we spent the night keeping warm. By 8:30 we were on our way. Soon we found ourselves high on a river’s edge with steep banks on both sides. This is where the new road is going and someday there will be a bridge. Right now the trail continues on the other side and we have to find a way across. We went hiking along the bank until crossing the river was possible. With our machetes, we cut a trail back to the bikes. With our bikes across the river we cut another trail back to the survey trail. We used this procedure for the smaller streams and fallen trees. Hanging vines seemed to grab our handle bars or wrap around our neck. At least we can clam we were the first vehicles on the new highway.

The date on the wooden survey stakes was one year ago. (1973) During the afternoon, the trail widened with cement bench markers dated five years ago. (1969) The driving was easy with no obstacles. All afternoon there were no more streams. By sundown we found a dirty water puddle and set up camp there. We built a camp fire to boil the water for drinking.

February 9

Just a few minutes after we started, we came to a work camp with a caretaker. He had the same dirty water we found. The caretaker said, “Bulldozers are working three miles ahead and it is one hour by jeep to Santa Fé from there. You will be in Santa Fé tonight.”

Going at top speed, Ron’s bike quit running. It turned out to be drive pulley’s shear pin which is easy to replace. We saw two giant bulldozers pushing down trees at five mile per hour. I never saw such big bulldozers or trees move out of the way so fast. We stopped to take pictures. Soon the driver came towards us pushing down trees. A tree landed right beside us and we jumped on our bikes and got out of there.

The rest of the morning we traveled on a smooth hot dusty road. My front tire was going flat. I told Ron, “lets stop and eat while I fix the flat.”

When we started again, the tire went flat again. I decided to drive on it. Soon an American in a pickup truck came by and saw my problem. He said, “I will carry you and your bike to the mobile service center.”

For some reason, the Panama Government decided to build a 30 mile section of the road in the middle of the jungle. At this time, it had no connect to another roads.
While loading the bike into the truck, Ron had gone on ahead. We soon passed Ron talking to some of the workers and waved as we drove by. At the mobile service center, everyone stopped working on the road building equipment and helped repair my tire. Out in the middle of nowhere, anything to break the boredom.

When Ron arrived, we went on to Santa Fé. The manager of the construction camp said we could stay there for $9 a day including meals. That night we had a steak dinner and the American workers wanted to hear about our adventure. We also slept in real beds.

**Sunday, February 10**

We washed clothes and worked on our bikes. This was the work crew’s day off and everyone wanted to help us from the top supervisor to the bottom helper. Everyone offered advice on how to make the repairs. They let us use their machine shop to make some parts. We did everything they suggested so as not to offend anyone. It did not matter if it was their way or ours, just so the job got done.

**February 11**

By 8 AM we were on our way again. Neither of us was in much of a mood to enter the jungle again. In a short time we were at the end of the road and back on jungle trails. We pushed on. There seemed to be many ditches cross or trails to cut around obstacles. Some places the trail was clear and others the tree stumps were so thick, we could not ride our bikes. Ron was fighting an upset stomach all day. By mid-afternoon we came to a 6-foot deep ditch. We ate lunch which gave us time to think about it.

We found there would be a lot of trail cutting to get around the ditch. Also all the streams we crossed were dried up. There seemed to be no more water. The map showed no rivers for the next thirty miles. In the jungle, this is days. We decided to give up on this attempt and setup at the construction crews mobile service center. My bike is in the truck.

The construction crew’s mobile service center. My bike is in the truck.

A construction worker’s pet parrot sits on my shoulder.

Back in the jungle the hazards seem to become more frequent. But, we were become more discouraged.
camp for the night. We were tired and beat with no more push in us.

**February 12**

This morning, Ron’s bike sheared another shaft key. We now had no spare. We pushed our way back out of the jungle. The bike fell on my leg twice. The last time I thought it was broken. After the pain went away, I found it was OK.

By noon we arrived at the construction camp. Everyone asked what happened. I felt very small, because these people were cheering us on two day earlier. Someone said we took the wrong trail, we should have been in the next town in a few hours. Checking the map, I decided that trail would not have helped us.

The manager said they will ship our bikes back to Panama City on their LCM. We took them to the boat and the crew loaded them aboard.

**February 13**

At 8 AM we were at the Santa Fé international airport that had a dirt runway and an newly built open sided thatched roof shelter. There were nine people wanting to fly out. A five passenger plane landed to drop off passengers and would not take anyone because he had people waiting at another airfield. In time planes keep coming and going until all the passengers had their flight out.

**February 15**

In Panama City, Ron and I drove to the LCM landing to pick up the bikes. Ron’s was on shore. We could not find my bike and the crew was gone. Hidden behind a tree, there lay my bike all smashed up. Someone said they think the bike fell under a truck as they were driving off the LCM. Anyhow it looked like it was beyond repair.

I parked it beside my house. Friends came and said, “I see why you came back.”

I said, “A logging truck ran over it.”

It save me from explaining the real reason for coming back and that a truck ran over the bike in Panama City.
Success on Forth Attempt

Saturday, March 22, 1975

We arrived at Chepo about noon. The new Bayano River bridge and few miles of road pass it was now open, but permission is needed. Ron went to the Chepo office and received a letter of permission to cross the bridge.

Checking our bikes on the trailer, I found the gas cap missing on Ron’s bike. The last thing we need is a lost gas cap at the start of a 200 mile jungle adventure. While Ron was getting the paper work done, I drove my bike back down the road hopping to find it. No luck. I asked in the village and there was none.

Our bikes back on the trailer, we were driving the gravel road to the Bayano River bridge when our car became stuck in a ditch going up a hill. A little pushing sent us on our way. At the village of Cañita someone gave us a gas cap which we could wire down.

At the Bayano River bridge we off loaded our bikes. There were so many trucks racing by I felt like we were in New York City. Horns blowing, ground vibrating, and clouds of dust. Logs were coming out of the jungle while culvert pipe was going in.

Ron and I drove our bikes to the end of the gravel road. There logging roads went in all directions. We did not know which one to take and kept ending up at logging camps. A truck driver said to follow him and he showed us the right road.

Now the road was so dry the dust came up to the bikes axles. The thick dust made us feel we were driving on ice, the wheels kept sliding all over the place. Just before dark the road branched again. We found a house in the jungle and they put us on the right road. At dark we came to the farm where we stored our bikes last year. At that time it took us six day to get this far.

The farm was taken over by a Choco Indian Tribe. Their old village was in the valley of the future Bayano Lake. This tribe does not have sides on their houses. They gave us one for the night. As the sun went down, we took a bath with the other Indian men in the nearby river. After the sun went down, the women went to the river to take their bath. I lay in bed watching night life in the Indian village. With no walls there are no secrets. Women stayed in their house attending to family chores like putting up mosquito nets for their children and them selves. In the village plaza, men played...
dominos till 10 PM. Then they struck up the town band that included drums made from five gallon buckets, wood drums, and an accordion. I believe they knew only one tune, it seemed like the same tune over and over. This lasted till midnight. At this time the men went to their thatched house and I could go to sleep.

Sunday, March 23

About 4 AM the radios were blaring all over the village. Women were moving about to start the day. Don’t these people ever sleep? By 5 AM the village was coming to life again, so Ron and I decided to get up also.

At 8 AM we were on the trail we took last year. We found that a bulldozer had opened a crude road all the way to the Santa Fé road project. It was not intended to be traveled, someone wanted to get a bulldozer in or out of the jungle. For us it was better than a jungle trail. By 4 PM we arrived at Tortí. We did in one day what it took us two days last year. We set up camp and took a bath in the river. For lack of sleep the night before, I was so tired I could not eat until I took a nap.

March 24

Just outside of town we heard chain saw buzzing. People were cutting down every tree in sight. The road was impassable and the fallen trees covered such a wide area it seemed impossible to find a way around them. We found a sunken dried stream bed that was deep enough to pass under the fallen trees. Back on the road, the bulldozer followed the survey line except to bypass obstacles. This made traveling easier and faster. I did hit a tree stump that sent me and the bike flying. Mid-afternoon we arrived at Rio Cañazas and the north end of the Santa Fé road project. By sundown we were in Santa Fé.

We again stayed with the constructions workers. They let Ron radio a message, he asked his wife for an air mattress, maps, and other supplies. She was to put them on a plane at Paitilla airport in Panama City.

March 25

Ron spent all day at the Santa Fé airfield waiting for supplies. They did not come. I had another one of my famous flat tires and fixed it. Ron decided to fly back to Panama City for supplies.
March 26

At 5:30 AM, Ron was at the Santa Fé airfield and number seven in line. Before long there were fifty people waiting to fly out. The wait was long and there was no water. On my bike I went to town and brought back water for everyone to drink who seemed to appreciate it. Ron did not get on a plane until 2 PM.

March 27

Ron arrived at 10 AM with a new air mattress, compass, maps, and food. He also brought flat-proofing that I immediately put in my tires. Then we were on our way to the south end of the road. Soon I had a flat tire and fixed it, an hour later I had another flat, when we got to the end of the road the tire was flat again. We stopped at a construction camp where they gave us Cool-aid and ice water. It was sure good.

We had very few tire patches left and at this flat tire rate, we were not going to make it to Yaviza on the Chucunaque River. Distance of fifty miles. The north end of the river was about five miles east of us. We decided to find the river so as to have a choice if things went wrong. We followed a dry stream bed and forced the bike through the jungle. Cutting trails takes too much time. Soon as you can expect, my tire went flat again.

It was near sundown and I felt we were closes to the river. I said to Ron, “Go to the river and set up camp. I will follow when the bike is fixed.”

When I took the inter-tube out, I noticed the patches were coming off. The flat-proofing was eating the patches glue and was not blocking the holes. It was getting dark so I decided to leave the bike and find Ron. Soon as I started, he came walking back. He said, “I did not find the river, but I did find a trail.”

We repaired the tire using all of the patches and then drove to Ron’s bike. We set up camp by a small pool of water that had hundreds of small fish in it. As the dry season evaporates the water, the fish die. I often wonder how they survive from rainy season to rainy season.

March 28

My tire was flat this morning. I walked along the trail for a while hopping to find the Chucunaque River. No luck. A bulldozed had been through here which makes traveling a little easier. I pumped the tire with air, it held, and I took off. Ron finished loading his bike and followed later. He caught up to me at a fallen tree. By noon we reached the Chucunaque River.

At a nearby house, Ron asked about boats going down river. The man said he would use his dugout canoe and poll us down river. Yaviza was fifty miles and we did not think much of his idea. We drove along the river for another mile. There we stopped for lunch, took a swim, and wondered

We tried building a raft to float down river. The wood available was too heavy. The bottom photo we debate what to do.
what to do next. We built a raft which sank when we put the bikes on it. Ron borrowed a small dugout canoe from a nearby house and paddled up river to the man who would consider helping us.

I set up camp and had a fire going. There were four young topless girls in camp watching me when Ron came back. Finally Ron got down to business and said, “Louis will come in the morning and take us down river.”

**March 29**

We woke up at sunrise and saw a large 30-foot dugout canoe going up river. It was Louis. He said, “I will be back later to pick you up.”

At 9 AM, Louis came down river with his wife, eight children, several bags of corn, and household goods. There was still room for our bikes and equipment.

All day Louis paddled and paddled with no letup. At noon he dropped off his wife, cooking utensils, and two of the boys to fix a meal and we kept going. By sundown she and the boys caught up with us in a small canoe. Louis kept paddling till 9 PM when the tide turned against us. Then he tied up to a tree and ate his first meal. Two hours later the tide turned in our favor and Louis was paddling again. At 1 AM we arrived at the jungle town of Yaviza. The town had street lights. Ron and I climbed the steep stairs and set up camp between two houses.

**Sunday, March 30**

We found a restaurant and ate breakfast. Then Louis took us down river where we could unload our bikes and climb up the steep river bank. Then we slowly drove around town with all the kids following and hollering. We asked about trails to Columbia. “There are some,” we were told, “but not well traveled.”

We borrowed a small canoe and paddled up a small river to an American missionary’s house. He had maps and the latest information. He said, “It would be better to travel up the Tuira River, then the Paya River to the village of Paya, then
follow trails from there.”

By the end of the day we realized the missionary’s advice is the only way we are going to make it. We needed new inter-tubes, tire patches, and more money. We found a man who would use his outboard motor to take us up river if we had a boat. One problem, the motor needed a new head gasket and cylinder head. We agreed on a price including fixing his motor.

**March 31**

The airfield was on the other side of the river and Ron took me over in a small canoe. The end of the airstrip ends at a drop-off into the river. When the planes take off, they don’t lift before the end of the airstrip, they fly off the end and then climb. At 11 AM I was able to get on a plane. It first stopped at Santa Fé and La Palma before going to Panama City. That afternoon I bought outboard motor parts, bike repair parts, food, and more money. Money seems to run through our fingers in the jungle. I was able to get everything we needed.

**April 1**

Ron’s wife took me to the airport at 5:30 AM. By noon I was back in Yaviza on the only plane that flew in that day. Ron was waiting for me and took me back across the river. He said, “We will use Louis’s boat to go up river. He was renting it and I agreed to pay the rent plus his fees.”

We repaired the outboard motor and bought 40 gallons of gasoline. We were ready to go.

**April 2**

We loaded up the dugout canoe and headed down the muddy Chucunaque River. The crew, Louis who was responsible for the dugout and Jose who owned the outboard motor.

Dugout canoes, up to 50-feet long, loaded high with plantain were also headed down river. The canoes were so deep in the water it looked like a wave would sink them. Each canoe had an Indian at each end with a poll or paddle to navigate and a third Indian in the middle that kept the canoe bailed out. This was the day banana boats from Panama City anchor at La Palma, at the mouth of the river, to buy farm goods from the Indians.

The clear waters of the Tuira River runs from the Columbia boarder to the muddy Chucunaque River. We headed up the Trira River and passed El Real when the outboard engine quit. I found there was no spark, so took the flywheel off and found the shaft key was sheared. The key was the same size we used on our bikes and we had a replacement. That fixed we were These boats were so heavily loaded with plantain, I wondered how they get to market without sinking.
on our way.

Early in the afternoon we came to our first fast water and all our problems seemed to start here. The rapids were too shallow to motor up and almost too deep and swift to push the heavily loaded canoe. When one of us lost our footing, we would be carried downstream, the rest would keep pushing so as not to lose what progress we made. The sun was hot and we were wet.

We sheared several prop pins which was made from nails. The fuel pump did not work, the fuel tank had to be at the same height of the motor so the gas could siphon. The motor kept coming loose from the motor mount. We had some bolts to fix it. Finally Jose said, “We are not going any further until the motor is fixed right.”

Jose did not know anything about motors which left it up to Ron and I to fix it.

Just before dark we arrived at a small jungle village of Boca de Cupe. We set up camp next to the small cantina where we ate. The police asked us where we were going. We said, “To Columbia.”

The policeman said, “You have to have your passports stamped with an exit permit.”

He took us to his office and stamped out passports with all the official stamps. I found it surprising that someone in the jungle would have all the tools necessary to complete official paperwork.

**April 3**

We camped in the wrong place, the cantina blared rock music all night. Also, Ron’s air mattress would no longer hold air. In the morning we ate

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*Men, Mud and Motorcycles*
breakfast at the cantina. I ordered coffee. Another customer had left, so the waitress took their cup and rinsed it with some coffee and dumped it on the dirt floor and then pored me a cup. In the jungle one does not question anything.

Two Indians asked to go with us. Pushing the canoe through the rapids is hard work, the more help the better. They left us at noon. This afternoon the rapids were getting longer, faster, and shallower. The water had mud in it which meant there was rain up ahead.

Early afternoon we arrived at the Paya River. It was small which looked like the end of the line for our canoe. As it turned out, the river was peacefully flat, clean, and somewhat deep. It was like paradise compared to the Tuira River. We could motor along and watch the large fish below. The trees arched over the narrow river which gave relief from the hot sun. Two hours later we were in fast water again. Jose refused to use his motor or push the canoe, that left five us to do the work. Ron finally told Jose to get-with-it, which he did.

It was dark, a long way from the village of Paya, and Jose refused to sleep in the jungle. Jose no longer worried about the rapids or the motor, he kept pushing the canoe hard. The deep water between the fast water was getting shorter. Two hours after dark, we came to an Indian house. They said we could sleep there tonight.

April 4

We took off early and in one hour we were at the first Choco Indian village. This village seemed lost in time. All the Indians lined the riverbank, topless women, watching us and we watched them. Thatched houses with no sides and no signs of modern tools. Two Indians wanted to go up river with us. By noon we were at the Cuna Indian village of Paya.
With all the villagers standing around, Ron and I put our bikes together. When finished, we drove up the riverbank and into the village. At first the kids ran from us, when they saw there was nothing to fear they ran behind us. As we neared the center of the village, Indian Police came running out of the jungle pointing rifles at us, holding up their had for us to stop. They ran past us and the people behind us scattered. In the center of the village square stood Jose with his hands up. They knocked Jose to the ground and tied him up. What happened?

While Ron and I were putting our bike together, Jose took his outboard motor and rifle into the village. He was going to carry them into Columbia to sell. The village is also a check point and border control for travelers, Jose refused to sign a log book. While Jose was lying on the ground, the police took his rifle and wallet. In the meantime, Louis came into the village to see what was going on. The police told him to put the outboard motor back on the canoe. Ron said to the police, “We owe them money.”

The police said, “Give it all to the boat owner,” which we did.

Jose fought with us from day one on this trip. We did nothing right. I often wondered if this was his first trip into the jungle. It can’t be sense his village is in the middle of the jungle.

The police told us to leave our bikes and go to the police station and sign the log book. As it turned out, the police station was a mile away and when we saw the building, we had to forge a river that was hip deep. Two hours later and back at the village square, Jose was still tied up. Ron asked the police if we could go and they said, “Sure.”

The police did not seem to care about Louis or us.

Just outside the village, an Indian asked if he could travel with us. Ron said, “It is OK with us providing you can keep up. We don’t want to be held back.”

The Indian said, “It is a six hour walk to the next river in Columbia.”

As it turned out, every time we stopped the Indian was waiting for us. At dark we setup camp on the Panama side of the border.

**April 5**

The Indian told us he was afraid of the jungle at night. He dreamed of being attacked by tigers. I thought to myself, “Does he know something that I don’t know?”

After two hours on the trail we arrived at the marker on the Panama Columbia border. The hills were getting steeper and longer, sometimes it took three of us to get a bike up a hill. At places the trail was on the side of a steep hill. One slip, bike and rider would plunge into a deep valley that would be almost impossible to get out of. To

Men, Mud and Motorcycles

On the Panama Columbia boarder. The concrete marker was broken. I am holding up the bronze casting that was laying on the ground. The survey stakes marks where a highway will be someday.
make problems worse, there were many fallen trees and the jungle seemed to be getting thicker. We could barely see the sky and the jungle seemed like perpetual twilight zone.

At noon we came to a small stream. I was so tired and hot I lay in the water until my body temperature was back to normal. The Indian wanted to leave us because we were traveling so slow. We now realized his help was valuable. Ron said, “You help us get to the river and we will pay you.”

He said, “OK.”

As it turned out, trails branched out all over the place on the Columbia side and we would have become lost. The bike had another flat tire when it started to rain. If the dry dirt turns to mud, we will never make it up the hills. The rain turned out to be a small cloud passing by. We arrived at the Cacarica River just before dark. The Colombian family living there was extremely friendly and helpful. We paid the Indian and he headed back into the jungle again.

The first thing we did was take a bath, then setup our tent inside the house because there was no flat ground nearby. That night I was exhausted and my body was sore. I felt like I could not take another day of this jungle.

**Sunday, April 6**

The owner of the house said he would take us down river to the next village. His was a small canoe and not too stable. With the tires off, we set the bike in the canoe and we sat on the bikes. We hit a rock which rolled the canoe, that rolled the bike on its side, and I fell in the water with my legs pinned under the bike that was still in the canoe. As I went under water, I thought the load was going to land on top of me. Those in the canoe stabilized it and lifted the bike off my legs.

By noon we arrived at the village of Puesto De Bijao. The police went through everything we carried. The inspector took some things he wanted and asked for others. I said “no” and
took back the items he had already taken. The inspector was looking for drugs. When we went outside the police station, a man offered to sell us drugs. We shook our heads in disbelief. We made arrangements for another boat to take us to the Atrato River.

**April 7**

The dugout canoe owner said he wanted to leave a 5 AM, he did not show until 6. When he did come, his canoe was loaded with lumber and chickens. We loaded our bikes and equipment. A short distance down river the owner loaded more lumber. We protested, but it did no good. There was three inches of freeboard.

From Cacarica on, the river was one massive log jam. Trees that were washed down river during the rainy season were laying all over the place. We had to weave around, drag the canoe across sunken logs, and squeeze under others. By noon we reached the Atrato Swamp.

In the swamp the river was flat with no fast water or fallen trees. But the river was also extremely narrow, so narrow that two boats could not pass. Because of our heavy load, our boat was the slowest. Other boats would back up behind us waiting for a place to pass. When it was convenient, our boat owner would pull over and let the others by. No one seemed bothered by the delay. One advantage, we were under the jungle canopy that protected us from the sun.

Also the river was shallow in places. At times we had to get out and push across the sand. One time I was pushing at the stern when I fell into quick sand. I held onto the canoe and let the canoe drag me out. It all happened so fast the others did not know I was in trouble. Yet they walked by the same area and did not fall in.

The swamp and its tall trees was fantastic. I took pictures hoping to capture its beauty on film. The scenery was so unbelievable, I expected to see Tarzen swinging through the jungle swamp.

As we neared the Atrato River, the water was deep and the boatman exchanged the polls for paddles. Also the trees were gone and replaced with floating plants as far as we could see. The last few hundred feet, floating plants was packed solid.
We pushed our way through until we reached the open water of the Atrato River. The floating plants closed in behind us. An outsider would never know there were hundreds’ of people living up a river behind those plants.

We still had several hours of paddling to reach a village on an island. The wind was against us and the boat crew was about to give out. Ron and I relived them for a while. The crew spotted two sloth in a tree. They went ashore and speared them.

At 4 PM we arrived at the small river village. They said, “There is a boat to Turbo arriving any time now. There was another leaving at 2 AM, but it was full.”

Ron sat on the riverbank trying to stop a passing boat. No luck.

April 8

At 2 AM the boat owner came to our tent and said he could take us. Everyone seemed to enjoy watching us strike camp and pack. I asked someone to hold the flashlight for me. When I finished I asked, “who has the flashlight?”

No one answered, that was the last time I saw it.

The river was black and I could not see anything, also the river is extremely wide. As the sun came up, we could see the thick swamp grass on both sides. Near the mouth of the river we stopped a factory like structure and picked up two more passengers. Then across the Golfo de Darien to Turbo.

As we took our bikes off the boat in Turbo, a large crowd of people gathered around to see them. We asked how we can get back into Panama. No one seemed to know. Soon a immigration agent told us to have our passport stamped at his office. That we did. We asked him how to get out of Columbia and he offered no advice.
As the day wore on, one man came to us and said, “I will take you to the San Blas Islands for $200 in my dugout canoe.”

Ron said, “We only have $75.”

The boat owner said, “I will take you to Puerto Oboldia for $75 which is the first town across the Panama border.”

Ron said, “OK, when can we go?”

The boat owner said, “3 AM. You can load your bikes in the boat and sleep there tonight. In the morning I will leave.”

Ron and I lifted the tarp and crawled under it.

**April 9**

At 3 AM the boat owner came but his helper did not show. It rained for the first time on this trip. It was the end of the dry season and lots of rain can be expected from now on. Ron and I stayed under the tarp. Sometime after 4 we left. The seas were high in the Golfo de Darien. After three hours I crawled out from under the tarp to look around. That act made me seasick. I ate two bananas which help me feel better. The waves were five feet high, the sky had low heave clouds, and squalls blowing all around us. Then I notice that the helper never showed up.

I sat watching the water, the coast line was rugged, and a house once in a while. At 10 AM, we arrived at the village of Puerto Oboldia. A lot of people helped us off-load the boat. Soon the immigration man came and stopped the off-loading. He questioned our right to be in Panama. We gave him our passports and explained we live in Balboa. He reluctantly stamped the passports and allowed the unloading to continue. We paid the boat owner which left us with $0. The people who helped us unload wanted to be paid too. We told them we are out of money.

We were told a plane fly’s in from Panama City about once a week, but they never know what day that will be. So Ron and I set up camp next to the airstrip. At 1 PM two planes arrive. We asked one of the pilots if we could pay for the fair in Panama City and explained why we were out of money. He said, “OK.”

We got permission to store our bikes in the public library. We filled the back of the plane up with our equipment. One hour later we were flying over the Bayano River Bridge where we started nineteen days earlier.

**Sunday, April 13**

Ron’s friend flew to Puerto Oboldia and was able to put both bikes in his four passenger plane. We felt lucky to get them back.
Five Years Later, 1980

Joan, Karen, Ramcharger, Bob

Bayano bridge and lake. The road ends at Yaviza. Below, my wife Joan.
Camping with the same tent we had with the motorcycles.


We still had flat tire problems. Now people were available with the right equipment. Our daughter, Karen, is in the foreground.

Men, Mud and Motorcycles
At this time, they were still pushing the road through to Yaviza. The mile marker below says “Yaviza 26K.”