

RIDING THE WIND

Florida Afternoon

It's a rare cloudy day in Florida. In fact, the sky is starting to look downright menacing as the Bikesters say their good-byes to the other racers. Everybody is scattering, as usual: Nail to Louisiana for a race, "Jet Car Bill" Hollings back to his farm in Wisconsin. Bo isn't saying much, but he's heading home to Texas to start building his "Ultimate Dragster" so he can "beat Terry, once and for all."

Storm Brewing

The party breaks up early. The radio is warning that a strong offshore storm has suddenly turned this way. They are saying it could move inland, and nobody wants to be caught in it, especially with a truck and trailer out on the open road! As the Bikester truck and trailer pulls out of the race track, with Jim's bus right behind it, the sky is getting very black and the wind is starting to blow.

"It's starting to look pretty bad," says TK.

He's monitoring the weather channels on the citizens band ham radio set up that he's integrated with his computer. It not only gives him complete weather and road information, but also allows him to be tied into the internet while on the road.

"They're putting up heavy storm warnings, possibly hurricane warnings, along the coast," TK continues, "but I think we'll be far enough north to be out of danger by the time it hits."

Running from the Storm

The freeway is jammed with traffic, all heading north (and fast!) to get out of the path of the storm. The lanes going south are empty! The wind is picking up fast, and it's starting to rain.

As they drive, they talk on the CB to several of the other racers who are also out in this with their rigs. They've all decided to head inland a few miles to a large truck stop where, according to the weather channels, it should be safe place to sit out the storm. Jim has already passed them with the bus. They are heading straight through to Chicago for the pre-meeting seminars and get-togethers the Engineering Society puts on.

Inland Truck Stop

As they pull in, they immediately spot Dan Jones and several of the other racer's rigs in the parking lot. Terry and Nitro head right for the restaurant to sit and talk racing with the guys. The one thing that racers like almost as much as racing is talking about racing.

TK decides to stay out in the truck and keep monitoring the weather and emergency channels. "This is interesting stuff."

Celeste stays, too. She has a pile of paper work to wade through, the result of the race. Even with the truck and trailer parked right up against the back of the restaurant they can feel

the increasing fury of the storm.

“I’m sure glad we’re inside,” says Celeste. TK agrees with her. Being from the West Coast, neither one of them have ever seen a storm like this before.

A Call for Help

“Wow, listen to this!” exclaims TK, holding out the headphones to Celeste. “A guy who was surf fishing is caught on the beach in the storm, and he’s calling the Coast Guard for help on a cell phone.”

Celeste listens as he gives his position over and over. She gives the information to TK who has a map out.

“He’s less than thirty miles from here,” says TK, measuring distances on the map. Celeste listens as the Coast Guard tells him to hang on.

In a few minutes he will be in the relatively calm eye of the storm and will have a chance to get further inland away from the beach - where there’s more shelter - before the back side of the storm hits. The man on the beach replies that he thinks his ankle is broken. He doesn’t think he can cover much ground.

“It sounds like the Coast Guard doesn’t have any way to get to him through the storm,” says Celeste, “Even when the storm moves inland far enough that he’s in the eye, there will still be storm all around him, and it’s real bad! They’re now calling it a hurricane!”

TK listens as he works with his maps and calculator. “According to my figuring, we will be right on the outer edge of the storm’s path when he’s in the center. We’ve only got about twelve minutes before that happens. Quick, get Nitro and Terry!”

Celeste, thinking the same thing that TK’s thinking, runs into the restaurant and is back with Nitro and Terry within a minute. TK and Celeste rapidly fill them in on the situation and the four of them quickly put together a plan.

Nitro fires up the truck and moves it so it’s facing directly into the wind. He then quickly goes back to RocketBike and checks it out, replacing the separator disc with a fresh one as Terry puts on his racing suit. Nitro makes sure Terry has his parachute on this time.

Celeste and TK stay on the radio and the maps. Celeste notifies the Coast Guard that they are going to take a shot at it. The Lieutenant she’s talking to thinks she’s crazy.

“Nothing could get through this storm except a large plane,” he says. “And even then it wouldn’t have enough room to land on the beach.”

However, the radio operator has seen RocketBike’s performance at the race and he tells the Lieutenant “They can do it!” The officer reluctantly agrees. He doesn’t like the idea of civilians taking a risk like this, but it looks like they are the marooned man’s only hope.

“This is going to be a very dangerous rescue,” says the Lieutenant. “This is a small, very strong, hurricane. In fact, I would call it more of a cyclone. One with a very small center. There’s only going to be a window of around three minutes, at the most, in the eye of the storm—the only time you could possibly attempt a rescue. And from the sound of it, he won’t be able to hang on through the backside of the storm, which is certain to consist of even stronger winds than the front side of the vortex. This is a rare type of storm that tends to get much stronger as it hits the coast and starts to move inland!”

“Thanks for all the words of encouragement,” thinks TK, listening to the conversation between Celeste and the Lieutenant. TK then says, “I need to talk to your radar operator.” In a few seconds the radar woman comes on and TK quickly outlines their plan for her.

A Plan

“Terry’s going to be flying with very poor visibility in the storm. It’s getting real dark out there, and there’s no kind of guidance equipment at all on the bike,” says TK to the radar operator. “However, if you can track him on radar and relay the information on a closed radio frequency, I can pick it up on the ham radio. It’s integrated with my computer and I can put your radar readout on my screen in real time. Then we can use the tracking information and plot Terry’s course.”

The radar operator responds, “That just might work, we have a definite fix on the man on the beach from his cellular.”

TK looks past Celeste into the cab of the truck at the small compass that’s stuck on top of the dashboard. It’s something Nitro picked up and installed, thinking it might be fun to know which way the truck is pointing on the road; something to help break up the monotony of long hours of driving. TK asks Celeste to grab the compass and have Nitro attach it to the bike where it’s easy for Terry to see.

First Nitro pops in a new separator disk, then he tapes the compass just below the windshield with “silver duct tape” (Nitro calls it – “200 mile an hour tape”), while Celeste tapes down a small flashlight that points at the compass (her idea).

Between the storm and the fact that it’s almost eight p.m., it’s pitch black out there, and Terry has to be able to see the compass!

TK’s voice comes over the intercom, “Gotta’ launch in two minutes to hit this window right.” Now the timing gets very critical.

TK has calculated the bike’s speed, the wind speed, et cetera as thoroughly as possible considering the amount of time they’ve had to put this whole thing together. RocketBike is sitting on the elevator, and Terry climbs aboard as TK starts counting off the seconds.

Meeting the Cyclone

Nitro and Terry have decided to fire up the bike as it’s going up on the elevator, so Terry can blast off as soon as it’s on the roof. If he doesn’t light it up as soon as he’s up there, he and the bike could be blown off the top of the trailer by the wind, which is already blowing at almost eighty miles an hour -- even here on the outside edge of the storm.

“Get ready to raise the elevator,” says TK. He’s focused intently on the computer screen as mass amounts of data flash across it, indicating the position of the storm, its wind speed, and ground speed, information coming in from the Coast Guard computer, radar, and the weather service.

This ham radio set up TK has added to his system is really saving the day when it comes to gathering this kind of info, especially in an emergency, like this storm, when the cellular and normal lines of communication are overloaded and can’t be counted on.

Plus, TK brings up his own data up on the screen as he figures out the timing to launch Terry and set his course. All has to be calculated to the second, so that Terry can be in the eye of the cyclone as it passes across the beach, quickly land to pick up the trapped fisherman, and then take off before the back side of the storm hits.

RocketBike should have enough power to fight its way through the storm in the air, but on the ground, they’re sitting ducks!

“Ten seconds,” says TK.

The Team

Terry reaches out a gloved hand and Nitro and Celeste grasp it for a second in an affirmation of team power and unity. TK, at the computer, holds up his fist to join in. As TK's count down reaches zero, he drops his hand and says, "Now!"

Nitro pushes the button and the elevator starts to rise. At the same moment Terry pushes the button that starts the idle circuit on the rocket. The noise of the rocket engine, even on idle, is deafening inside the trailer. Luckily everyone has on earphones, and Terry has his helmet on, which blots out most of the sound.

The separate computer monitor that TK has set up to display incoming data from RocketBike comes alive. TK immediately begins relaying information to Terry on the radio, letting him know that, "Everything is reading 'go'," and that he can, "hit the full ignition button as soon as he's on the roof."

As the elevator reaches half way up the door to the roof automatically slides open, allowing some of the fury of the storm into the trailer. The noise from the wind is extreme and even obliterates the sound of the idling RocketBike!

Nitro worries for a moment that maybe something is wrong, and the rocket engine has shut off, he has his finger on the button to lower the elevator back down. But then he sees the characteristic white steamy exhaust is still there, and knows it's OK.

Terry is so intent on his mission and the necessity of perfectly timing his launch off the roof that he hardly hears the noise or feels the wind blowing in through the open roof hatch.

As RocketBike and Terry disappear through the hatch onto the roof, Nitro walks over to where TK is in front of the monitor, takes off his earphones, and puts on a headset. During this mission, TK and Nitro will be Terry's eyes. The visibility in the storm is now almost zero.

Ignition

Terry feels the force of the wind as he reaches roof level. RocketBike is starting to slide! They are being blown off the top of the trailer! He has to get a handle on this situation quickly!

"This is a time when TK's Magnebrakes would help a bunch," thinks Terry. Hitting the green "Full Ignition" button and white "Rocket Burst" button at the same time, he instantly blasts off the roof into the storm.

Terry can't see five feet in front of him. 'We're talking poor visibility!' Immediately, Terry's earphones are full of Nitro's very calm voice giving him a compass heading.

Terry looks down at the compass, which is quite visible with Celeste's rigged flashlight illuminating it, and comes around to the proper heading. Terry thinks, "This instrument flying could be scary, especially when you only have one instrument and it's something Nitro found at a cut-rate auto parts store for \$9.95!"

In the trailer, the team is in full operation. TK is in front of one monitor that is now tied directly into the Coast Guard radar system, while he talks to the radar operator on the radio.

Celeste is in contact with the weather service on another radio channel and watching the computer screen in front of her, which is constantly updating information on the storm. She passes the information that is pertinent to TK, who is plotting Terry's course using the data from Celeste and the radar readout from the Coast Guard, who have an exact fix on Terry's position. Nitro in the meantime is relaying the guidance information to Terry and also watches over RocketBike's mechanical functions on the third monitor. "Multi-tasking," thinks TK, "I love it!"

Nitro has worked with Terry for a long time and can relay information to Terry very

quickly with a minimum amount of talk, which is very important, because with the weather variables, the situation changes almost by the second!

Terry can't believe the fury of the storm. As he comes around to the first heading Nitro gives him, he is suddenly flying into a wind of over one hundred miles an hour! He feels the power of the rocket keeping the bike stable and moving forward against the wind, and finds himself feeling much more in control of what's going on. He hears Nitro's very familiar and reassuring voice in his earphones giving him constant information and updates on his heading and speed, etc. and even slipping in a little joke now and then to try to ease the tension and pressure of this mission.

Flyin' Blind

Flying with no instrumentation other than a compass in conditions like this means Terry has to rely totally on the radar and weather information that TK and Celeste are getting and putting together into navigation instructions that Nitro relays to him.

Flying blind is "way scary," but Terry has full confidence in his team. He's already far enough into the circular storm that he is fighting a wind of over a hundred and fifty miles an hour!

Terry has to stay on a heading that is into the wind. If the wind were at his back he would be blown out of control. As it is, he has the rocket at full thrust, which would normally propel him at a little over three hundred and fifty miles an hour, but with this head wind, he's not even going half that.

Scary Stuff

To top it all off, there's all kinds of junk that the storm's picked up flying around up here. Terry radios Nitro, "I think I just saw an ugly old lady on a bicycle with a little dog in a basket fly by."

Nitro answers, "Pick up the guy on the beach first, then you can save Toto!"

Terry is now flying into the fiercest part of the storm, with winds of nearly two hundred miles an hour. It's taking every bit of power RocketBike has to get through it.

Terry pats his pocket to make sure the parts, tools, and small flashlight that Nitro gave him are still there. He won't be able to get back through the storm from the center without them.

A large piece of boat or something flies out of the darkness just missing him by inches! "It could get dangerous up here," thinks Terry.

There is a constant stream of data from Nitro in his earphones as his course and speed are changed every few seconds to compensate for the always changing direction and wind velocity of the storm.

The way things look right now, he's going to have a little less time on the ground in the center because the storm has veered a few more miles to the south. This worries everyone, because not only does he have to pick up the man trapped by the storm, Terry also has to remove the separator disc and install a fresh one in the brief time he will have on the ground.

Nitro, watching the mechanical readouts from RocketBike on his monitor, is already seeing changes in the pressure readings for the H²O-S system that tell him the disc is almost used up.

TK has calculated the separator disc life as completely as he can, considering the small amount of data they have been able to accumulate on how long the discs last. One thing's for

sure, this one's going fast!

But as long as the storm doesn't make a real radical move and totally change it's path, it will get Terry to the center. It has to, because he's way past the Point of No Return.

The Eyes Have It

Terry feels the Bike starting to move easier through the storm and realizes that he's reaching the eye of the cyclone.

"He's just about through into the center," says TK, rapidly deciphering the radar information and data that Celeste is giving him.

Now comes something even trickier. They have to set him down on the exact right spot on the beach as quickly as possible.

Nitro says, "It better be even quicker than possible, because this separator disc has only has a few seconds left, then Terry will have no power!"

"Tell Terry to start dropping in fast right now, it should be quite a bit lighter in center; he should be able to see the beach if he comes in real low," TK tells Nitro. Nitro makes it quite clear to Terry that this is a "one shot deal."

The bike is becoming much easier to control and there's a small amount of visibility. Terry is entering the eye of the storm.

"Ten feet," says TK, and Nitro relays the altitude to Terry. Terry looks down, and sure enough, there's the beach, right where it's supposed to be.

The man Terry is rescuing has a flashlight, and the Coast Guard has told him on his cellular to get out on the beach and turn it on. As Terry touches down he sees the beam of a flashlight up ahead of him. Amazingly, TK has set him down in precisely the right spot at exactly the right time!

Halfway Saved

Terry rolls RocketBike to a stop right beside the marooned man, who doesn't even ask what kind of a weird vehicle Terry flew in on. He's glad to see anybody! He knows it's his only chance.

Terry jumps off RocketBike. He has less than two minutes to replace the separator disc, get this guy on the bike, and get out of here before they are caught back in the storm.

Holding the small flashlight Nitro gave him in his mouth so he can see what he's doing, he unbolts the clamp and opens the separator housing, removing the disc, which is totally used up, and installs the new disc he brought with him.

As he helps the man onto the bike, Terry can feel the wind picking up as the storm continues its relentless drive inland. Terry looks at his watch. He's already been on the ground one minute and forty seconds. He has to launch immediately!

While all this is happening on the beach, TK, Celeste and Nitro are very busy in the trailer, calculating and plotting out Terry's trip back through the storm. The wind has intensified, and Terry is going to be carrying a passenger. This is going to be cutting it very close indeed!

Back the Other Way

As Terry climbs back on the bike, he says to his passenger, "I hope you're not afraid of flying."

“Heck no,” replies the man, “I’ve been flying my own plane for thirty five years.”

“Good,” says Terry. “Then hang on tight, because this thing moves real hard when it takes off!” Terry knows that nobody can be ready for the kind of acceleration that RocketBike has when launching hard, and he’s about to launch hard!

Terry’s passenger is clutching him so hard he can hardly breath as he hits both the green and white button at the same time and they blast off into the violent storm! As soon as they get off the ground Terry realizes that it’s gotten much worse!

In the trailer they are working out a plan. Because the storm has worsened, and RocketBike now has the extra weight of a passenger, there’s no way Terry can make it back through the storm on one separator disc, and there’s no way to stop and put in a fresh one.

The answer to this problem that the team has come up with is for Terry to skyrocket straight up through the storm trying to stay in the ‘eye of the storm’ as much as possible, and gain some major altitude.

The burst of power he will have to use to do this will use most, or perhaps all of the separator disc, but it will put him high up in the top of the cyclone where the winds are more stable and predictable. From that height, TK feels that RocketBike’s lifting body design and exceptional aerodynamics will allow Terry to ride out of the storm on the air currents and glide to a safe landing.

“No sweat,” says TK, “It’ll be another triumph of superior aerodynamic design.” Celeste and Nitro aren’t quite that sure, but it’s the only plan they’ve got.

Skyrocket

Once again, it’s pitch black as RocketBike shoots almost straight up through the storm. Terry immediately notices it’s really hard to stay in the ‘eye’ – which has gotten much smaller, and there’s even more junk flying around, mostly pieces of trees. He even thinks he sees a turtle fly by.

Going straight up at full thrust through all this stuff is really scary! It’s also really exciting! Terry feels his passenger definitely holding on very tight, but he doesn’t seem to be panicking or anything. Terry thinks he catches a glimpse of a large white – or silver colored bird, perhaps an eagle, also fighting the storm. But he loses sight of it as he struggles to find a safe path through this mess.

As they get higher up into the storm, the amount of debris is lessening, which is a good thing. Because there was so much, it was hard to avoid. In fact, a few smaller pieces hit RocketBike. Because of the very high wind speed any object that might hit you could be quite dangerous.

In the trailer Nitro continues to relay course and weather information to Terry while intensely watching the systems readout for RocketBike, closely monitoring the amount of time left on the separator disc.

If it’s used up before Terry can get to the top of the storm, Terry, his passenger, and RocketBike will be at the mercy of the elements! The disc is going fast, and the elements are definitely quite extreme at the moment.

TK calls out, “Eight thousand feet,” and a few seconds later “Eight thousand, five hundred.”

“It looks like he’s going to have to go above twelve thousand feet to get on top of this,” says Celeste, as she deciphers weather information.

“Well, he’s getting there fast,” says TK staring at the data on his monitor.

“I hope so,” adds Nitro. The readout in front of him indicates that the power required to

accelerate straight up through the storm is using up the separator disc at an alarming rate, and there are only a few seconds left at full thrust.

Surfing the Wind

“Ten thousand feet,” says TK.

Terry can tell he must be getting to the top of the cyclone, the bike is starting to move and handle easier by the second. He hears Nitro saying, “You just passed eleven thousand feet.”

“Whoa!” thinks Terry, “This is way higher than this thing has ever been. Far out!” Just as Nitro tells him he passed twelve thousand feet Terry feels the rocket shut off. The separator disc is used up! At the same moment he suddenly realizes it’s silent. He’s not in the storm anymore; he’s *above* it.

Instead of all that noise and mayhem around him, there’s stars and a crescent moon. It’s so quiet and peaceful that Terry momentarily forgets what he just flew through, and the danger of the present situation! He feels his passenger give him a pat on the shoulder, just to say thanks, but also reminding him that he’s not alone up here and has to get on with the job at hand, which is to get away from the storm and find a safe place to land. This is great, there’s enough wind under him that he’s surfing on top of the cyclone! What a trip!

The spell is broken by Nitro’s voice in the earphones giving him a compass heading.

“We’re going to bring you into the landing strip at the Coast Guard station, it’s a thirty five mile glide, but TK says you can make it - easy.”

“I’m glad he thinks so,” thinks Terry. He takes one more spin around on top of the cyclone and using the speed he’s built up riding the swirling winds, he picks up the heading Nitro has given him and slings off into the night.

Once they leave the weather behind, the night is crystal clear. Looking back, they can see the swirling, snarling storm glowing with phosphorescence. Everything is so picture perfect that Terry and his passenger hardly notice that it’s quite cold up there – well over ten thousand feet!

The trip is over all too soon. After one soaring turn around the Coast Guard station, they glide in for a perfect three-point landing.

In the trailer, Celeste, Nitro and TK congratulate each other. They pulled it off! Terry’s out of the storm and back on the ground!

Raising a fist in the air, TK says it for all of them: “BIKESTERS RULE!”

Chapter 15

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