

Sahara Safari

The roughest, toughest road test of all time—4,500 miles driven in ice, snow, rain, mud, sand and sun.



B RITISH motorcycle products, machines and accessories are the best in the world. They can withstand the most arduous and trying conditions that can be found anywhere. We know—they took us across the Sahara Desert and back.

Our machines were two 1960 BSA A10's, 650 c.c. twins coupled to Watsonian sidecars. The only non-standard fittings were manually operated advance and retard mechanisms on the mags, large section trials tyres and gaitered front forks. Both machines wore Avonaires and carried Stowaway panniers.

One of the sidecars was a commercial box and carried spare petrol, water, tools and tinned food—plus sleeping bags, camping equipment and various odds and ends. A total load of OVER 500 lb. excluding the extra weight of two spare wheels carried between the box and machine in a special rack. The amount of gear was so great that special racks were made by Terry Fry of Hampton.

The other sidecar, a normal touring model, carried a passenger, and various photographic equipment. It also had a spare wheel, five gallons of extra petrol and two gallons of water loaded on to various parts of the chassis.

All refuelling at points throughout the trip was done by the Mobil Oil Company, they provided petrol, oil and grease. We fully endorse their products and the efficiency, courtesy and help given to us by their stations in England, France and Africa.

Climatic conditions were varied. Below freezing in France and over 98 degrees in the desert. We had rain, snow and ice in Europe;

sand and blazing sun in Africa.

The roads and tracks were as varied as the weather. Some Algerian roads as good, if not better, than the M1. Others rutted and stony tracks, deep in sand and corrugations that shake the fillings out of your teeth.

This is the day by day diary of the trip.

DAY 1 Left RAC club, Pall Mall, London, after examination of machines by RAC Chief Engineer. Arrived Lydd Airport and crossed to Le Touquet by Silver City freighter. Total time of crossing, including all formalities with French Customs, less than $\frac{1}{4}$ of an hour. Weather rainy as we drove south to Paris. City very crowded with evening traffic. Found Mobil Station and refuelled, then rode on to Evry-Petit-Bourg where we had an evening meal and a couple of hours rest at the home of two French motorcycle enthusiasts Alain and Francis Gannon. Total mileage 223.

DAY 2 Left at 3 a.m. and continued south towards Marseilles. Decided to alter alignment of sidecars to suit camber of French roads. North of Valence Geoff Monty noticed that his ammeter showed no charge—hasty check indicated fault in cut-out. At Mobil Station in Valence we stripped out the regulator and found two wires loose—no doubt due to vibration of *pavé* roads. Repaired these but still no charge. Found armature burnt out. Impossible to find dealer at this late hour so continued on to Marseilles. As Geoff's battery became flat we changed it with the one from my machine, then changed again. Reached Marseilles at 2.30 a.m. spent rest of night in cafe. Mileage 516. *over*



Both the pictures on this page show typical desert tracks—the deep sand frequently stopped the bikes.



Above left: a quick stop for a glucose drink. Above right: this track was a corrugated bone shaker.

DAY 3 Found Lucas dealer in Marseilles and waited at doorstep until he arrived. Very cooperative man who supplied us with new armature. Rushed to dockside and spent next hour trying to get on to boat. Very confusing performance both to Frenchmen and foreigners like ourselves.

Machines lifted on to ship by cranes and then packed into hold. We retired to cabin to catch up on sleep. Crossing rough but we appreciated French food and enjoyed company of French soldiers returning to Algeria after leave.

DAY 4 Entered Algiers harbour at dawn. Passed through customs with no trouble. Representatives of the Mobil Oil Company waiting on dockside with Rene Goetz the Algerian Moto-Cross champion. They led us to petrol station and Rene organised a replacement for the cut-out. He and his brother worked with us while we changed the armature.

Mr. Alfred Fox of the British Embassy gave us information on the road conditions and we left Algiers at mid-day. Wonderful drive in sunny weather up over the coastal mountains and then through the fabulous gorges of the Atlas mountains. Geoff's dynamo was now charging.

French military road blocks every few miles reminded us that this country was at war. We turned a corner of the road and found ourselves in the middle of a company of French artillery mortaring the hill-sides—we left rapidly.

Past the mountains the country began to get browner—the road rougher—and we stayed the first night at Boughari. Local Gendarmerie were very friendly. We had first Arab meal of cous-cous in native cafe.

Camping here was forbidden because of terrorists and we spent night in an ancient "hotel".

DAY 5 Ancient hotel had modern fleas—this encouraged early rising and we were on the road before dawn. With machines coated in ice we drove south through a light mist. Glad of Barbour suits with thick woolly linings. Sun rose as we approached first road block and military waved us through after examining papers. Road only one vehicle wide but southbound traffic has the right of way—this is because of the blinding glare of the sun. We changed the lenses in our goggles to a dark green.

At noon the sun was hot and as the long

fast ride heated the engines Geoff recommended that we changed oil at every refuelling station. The first was at Djelfa and our machines caused quite a stir in the small Arab town.

The road now had deviations at various points and was quite rough. This cut down our speeds. Dangerous bends were navigated with care as the road was not wide enough to carry two vehicles side by side. Both machines running well.

Towards Ghardaia the road became first class. Very wide and very smooth we were able to drive at 60 m.p.h. plus. We arrived at Ghardaia just as the French Military closed the road for the night. After reporting to Gendarmerie and having documents stamped we left machines under guard in the barracks and found small hotel for the night. The Hotel Rocher was clean and comfortable and we enjoyed a good night's rest.

DAY 6 We again began before dawn and noticed along the route that hundreds of telephone poles had been cut down by terrorists. Sight of armed convoys brought back unpleasant memories. We wondered if the sub-machine guns carried by French sentries at the road blocks were loaded—later found that they were loaded and cocked.

Road surface was good but there were drifts of deep sand across it. These are invariably round fast corners and we had a few exciting moments navigating them. The road was incomplete here and we had several long stretches which gave us a good indication of what we were going to meet ahead. The tarmac ended and we found nothing but a rutted track ahead, sand and dust are over a foot deep in places and we were soon smothered in a layer of red. There were pot-holes and rocks and it became difficult to do more than 10 miles an hour. The country was now barren, just large sand hills hundreds of feet high and occasionally the tents and camel herds of wandering Arab tribes.

At lunchtime we arrived at El Golea, the town where the Duke of Edinburgh rested on his way to Ghana. We had ridden well into the desert. After refuelling and changing the oil we drove out of the town. There was no road whatsoever. Just tracks, deep rutted through soft sand. Large hidden rocks became a constant menace.

We had to strip and clean both carburetters. Sand and dust jammed open the slides. I lost the large nipple that fits into

the twistgrip but we made up one out of a short length of wire wrapped round the cable. The track became corrugated and this shook the machines and sidecars badly at any speed over fifteen miles an hour. We saw a lorry and stopped to ask the driver of the road conditions ahead. He told us that they would be the same all the way south.

We decided that in order to complete the mileage we must ride fast regardless of the possibility of damage to equipment.

We climbed on to the Tadamaït Plateau through deep sand. A few miles farther on we found that Geoff was no longer with us. On returning we saw him examining his sidecar wheel. The suspension spring unit had been smashed off by a rock. We jacked up the sidecar and changed the unit. We had two spares for the sidecars and two for the machines (the latter two units were Geoff's personal property).

Within 20 miles the second unit broke and we replaced it again. We dug the machines out of the sand every few minutes.

It was dark when we arrived at Fort Mirabel, once built for the Foreign Legion this is now used by the infantry. We were invited to dine with the French officers and spent the night in one of the "cells".

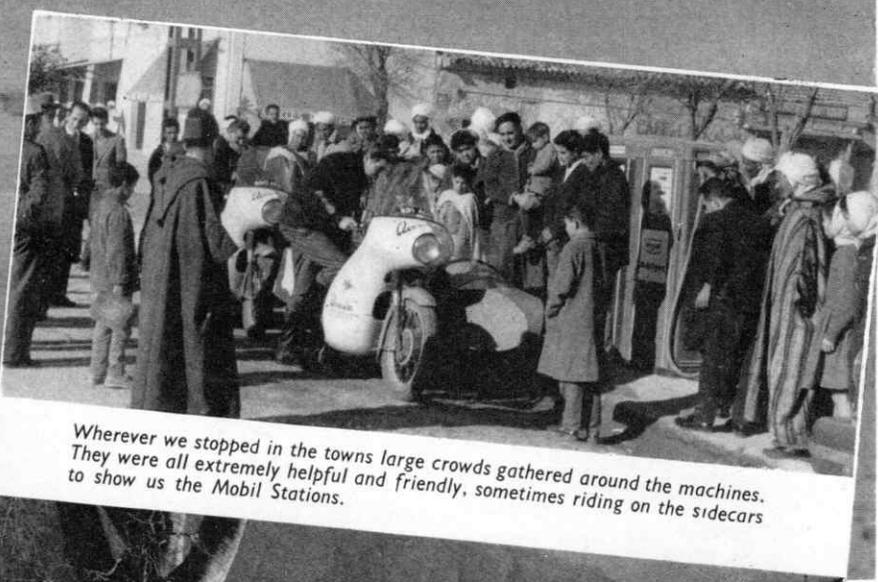
DAY 7 The Plateau consisted mainly of small rocks over a black sandy crust. There were no hills to break the monotony and the horizon was perfectly circular. Nothing living could be seen. Only the tracks of previous vehicles indicated the route. The suspensions took a terrific hammering. Geoff's machine broke a third unit and the wheel began to lean in dangerously. The heavy weight it carried strained everything over the rocky track. We had now only one unit left.

Cleaning the carburetters became an hourly job. Mirages made driving uncomfortable as we became more and more tired. The others were now envious of the peak on my helmet.

We lost our way in the afternoon and after driving for a couple of hours decided to retrace our steps. It had become dark and I slid the outfit into a heap of rocks. At first we thought that the machine was a write-off but the fairing took most of the impact and the damage was restricted to the mudguard, front wheel rim, forks and exhaust pipes. Ron was thrown through the sidecar windscreens and cut his nose.

After finding the original track we carried on to Ain Salah. Leaving the dreadful plateau was a great relief although in the dark everything still looked the same. We had a strange illusion that we were driving through forests—this must have been because we were now very tired.

After again reporting to the police we spent the night in the only hotel in the town. Mileage for the day was 315.



Wherever we stopped in the towns large crowds gathered around the machines. They were all extremely helpful and friendly, sometimes riding on the sidecars to show us the Mobil Stations.

DAY 8 Awake early we found that this was indeed a beautiful town. No trace of Western modern civilisation. Just mud huts and a majestic ancient fort captured by the Foreign Legion. All the inhabitants wore native dress and camels and donkeys seemed to be the only means of transport. The French soldiers in Saharien dress, baggy pantaloons and long white cloaks with red bandoliers of bullets looked very picturesque.

After a couple of hours work on the machines—just regular maintenance, checking cables, adjusting brakes and clutches, resetting tyre pressures to cope with almost red hot sand—we again drove south.

The road was deep in sand and we had to dig out the machines time after time. This frayed tempers but any anger was directed against the track rather than each other. At three in the afternoon we turned about at Tiguelguemine and headed north again for the return trip. This was very hard to do for not far south of us were better tracks and Nigeria, swimming pools and English speaking company.

We passed Ain Salah in early evening and made the run up to the plateau again. The evening became night and we were sore and almost exhausted with the hardest day's run of the trip when we reached Fort Mirabel again at 2 a.m. after 405 miles of rough going.

Ron's work was harder than Geoff's or my own. He was recording the trip both on tape and film. His gear suffered badly with dust and constant vibration and he was a mass of bruises. We made rope handles for him to hold on to on the sidecar. Over the very rough ground he sat on the back of the seat—trials fashion.

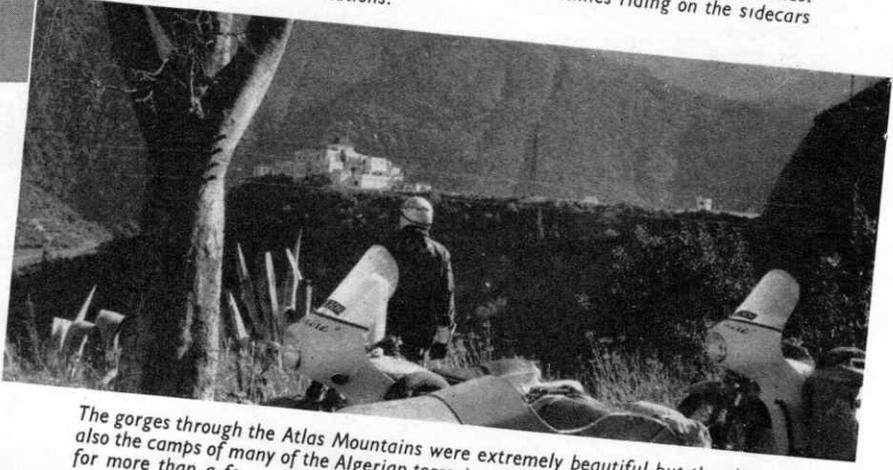
The guard at Fort Mirabel lent us three straw mattresses and we just had enough strength to crawl into our sleeping bags—fully dressed.

DAY 9 In the morning, by the light of a torch, we found that the last suspension unit had broken on Geoff's box sidecar. The shock of the road without this unit fractured a joint of the suspension lug and the wheel was now leaning even further towards the machine.

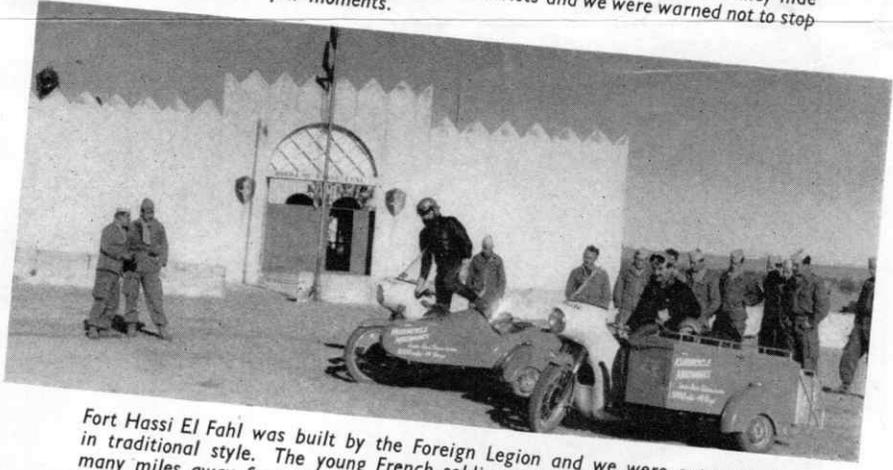
Geoff found a discarded lorry inner tube on the desert; it was the biggest we had ever seen and Geoff strapped it to the sidecar. This tube saved the day, for cut into bands, we were able to make a rough but efficient suspension by looping the rubber around the swinging arm and pulling it back to the sidecar mudguard's rear stay.

Geoff coupled two spare chains together and made one end fast to the inner side of the sidecar chassis, the other side he fastened to the wheel suspension. This prevented the wheel from leaning in any further.

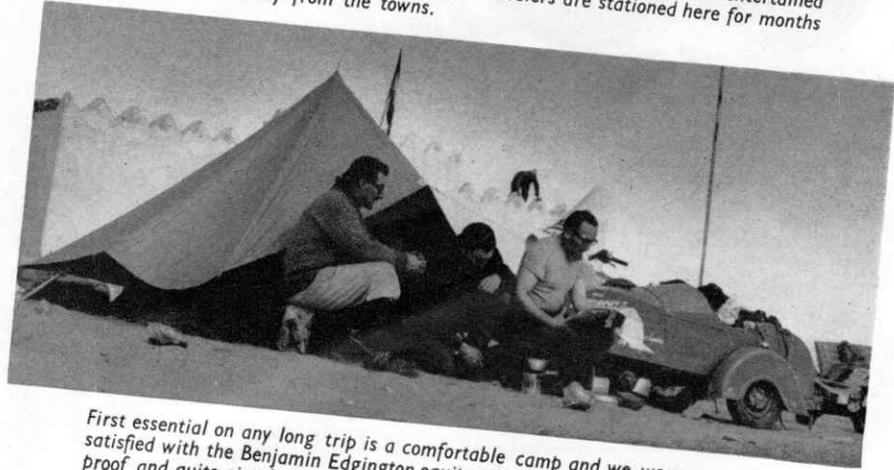
This work took most of the morning and we seemed to be miles away from anywhere. With the engines stopped on the



The gorges through the Atlas Mountains were extremely beautiful but they hide also the camps of many of the Algerian terrorists and we were warned not to stop for more than a few moments.

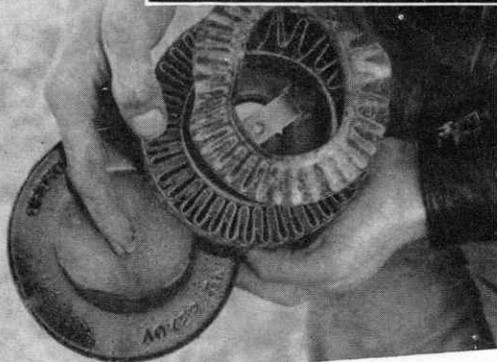


Fort Hassi El Fahl was built by the Foreign Legion and we were entertained in traditional style. The young French soldiers are stationed here for months many miles away from the towns.



First essential on any long trip is a comfortable camp and we were more than satisfied with the Benjamin Edgington equipment. The tent was warm and insect proof and quite simple to erect.

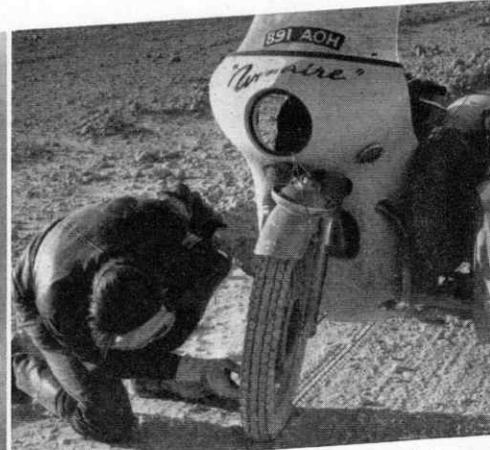
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The sand and dust was so fine that the filters needed cleaning every few miles; we tied oily rags around the air intake.



Once the dust had penetrated the filter it jammed open the slides of the carb; this meant frequent stops to clean them.



Greatest danger was from large rocks and here I am examining the damage caused by hitting one hidden in the soft sand.



This was the result of the crash but Geoff was confident that all the gear would return home with us.



This "spanish windlass" of chains held the suspension until we found a garage to straighten the tubes.



Ever seen anything like this? It gives some idea of the road surfaces that were encountered on the trip.



The fully loaded box sidecar—it carried as much weight as could be carried in a light truck or car.

plateau there was absolutely no sound at all. The only living thing we saw in the desolation was a huge red locust.

We were now all very saddle sore and Geoff was sitting on a sheepskin waistcoat. Our knees were skinned where they had been touching the tank rubbers and it was easier to ride standing up.

Late in the afternoon we reached El Golea again and managed to find a garage with brazing equipment. After unloading the box we repaired the damage done by the rocks of the plateau. Geoff also managed to repair one of the suspension units and so back in our original condition we reached Fort Hassi El Fahl, as the road was closed for the night.

Here again, as on many occasions during the trip, we were all very grateful for the guidance of Benjamin Edgington, the camping equipment people. The camping gear they supplied us with was ideal. The sleeping bags were warm and comfortable and the tent easy to erect, draughtproof and light.

DAY 10 The going was better again and we were making good time although there had been sandstorms in the previous few days and the roads were covered in some places. The machines kept running well and we wrapped oily rags around the filters to help keep out the dust—this meant that we could go for as long as four or five hours without cleaning them.

There were the wrecks of abandoned cars along this section of the road and obviously some of them have been here for many years. A grim reminder of previous unsuccessful attempts to cross the desert.

A French officer asked me if we would be in Algiers on schedule. I replied that with luck we would be. His answer was that of the hardened Saharien. "You'll find no good luck in the Sahara Desert."

At about six p.m. we reached Fort Tilrempt and shortly after we had been stopped and informed that this was as far as we were allowed to travel that night, we found that the pilot jet cap screw had dropped off my carburetter. Geoff's ingenuity came to the rescue again and he astounded the garrison mechanics by effecting a repair with a short length of plastic tube, a small bolt and a length of wire.

He pushed the tube up over the bottom end of the pilot jet securing it in place with the wire. He blocked the other end of the tube by screwing in the bolt and then tied the tube up against the carburetter—result, no leaks and the machine was running.

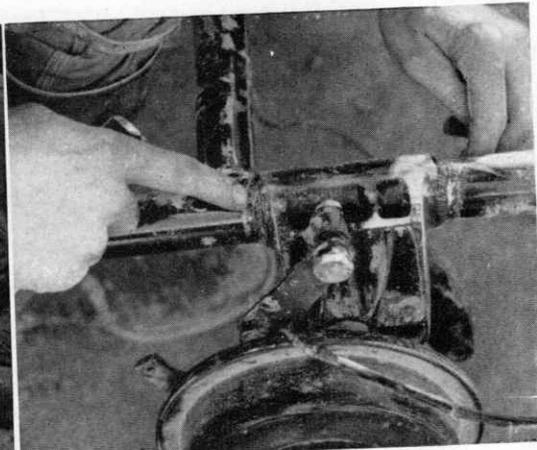
The French were most hospitable and we answered hundreds of questions about the machines and equipment.



We had to keep up high speeds although this guaranteed damage to our gear and this sidecar brake was torn clean away.



The suspension springs were smashed by stones and the great weight of the gear we carried—nothing could have survived.



A particularly large rock seriously bent the suspension unit where it sleeved on the heavy tube chassis of the box sidecar.

DAY 11 Some 20 kilometres after leaving the Fort we saw the tops of oil derricks in the distance some miles off the track. It was just dawn and we decided to take time off to investigate these. They belonged to a German company searching for Butane gas. They had built a portable town in the middle of nowhere. They had drilled their own well and their cabins were air-conditioned. We were given an English breakfast washed down with very French Cognac and coffee.

We became rather angry later that day as we were stopped on the road at four-thirty p.m. The French N.C.O. refused to let us go through to Boughari although we would have been there within half an hour.

This put us behind schedule. Later when the Commandant arrived we learnt that there had been two terrorist attacks on vehicles on this road within the previous three days—the day before one of the Foreign Legion platoons fought a battle with some terrorists in a nearby village.

DAY 12 Up before light and we were ready to go as soon as permission was granted.

We got away at first light and some hundred yards down the road found a whole company of horse-mounted Foreign Legionnaires. Their officer clapped his hands as we rode by and the men waved their kepis and shouted to us. They were a wonderful sight with red and blue cloaks and white belts.

As we drove up into the mountains again the machines seemed to run easier in the cooler air. After the heat of the desert this was comfortable riding. No more trouble with the filters and although the roads were bumpy by English standards we found them easy going.

We stopped at Boughari to say goodbye to the Gendarmes who had helped us on our way south. They told us that on the day we had left the town it had been attacked by terrorists who were firing down from the hills. More telephone wires were cut and the road signs along the route we saw were riddled with bullet holes.

At last we entered the gorges again and rode down through the fields of orange trees. We stopped and Ron and I picked some to take home to our families.

Ron's chest was giving him a lot of trouble and we thought that he had torn a ligament. We all showed signs of wear and Geoff's nose would be worth a story all of its own.

We reached Algiers and the friends we made in the British Consulate and the Mobil Oil Company. We were entertained at the Consulate in the evening and began to feel civilised again. The machines spent the night in the workshop of Rene Goetz.

DAY 13 When we collected the outfits from Rene in the morning, in order to load them on to the boat, we found that he had already repaired another suspension unit, this time for my own sidecar. It had been missing completely but I had not noticed. This oversight must have been due to tiredness as I had remarked that the machine was pulling to the left but thought this was due to the heavy camber of the narrow road.

We loaded the machines at 9 a.m., and then treated ourselves to the pleasures of a haircut and shave at a local barber's.

At last we were on board the ship bound for home. Although we had only left Algiers a little way behind it was already getting colder. We ate heavy meals to prepare for the last part of the trip and went off to bed early.

DAY 14 France — almost home again. It was minus seven degrees centigrade and really freezing hard. We had more trouble leaving the port—a very complicated procedure made worse by the fact that our French was a little rough. We eventually got away at 10.15 a.m.

After driving for a while we were freezing

and no matter what we did we had to stop every half an hour and thaw out by violent roadside exercise.

Geoff had very bad cramp in his shoulders and my right hand began to give me some trouble. We found that by wrapping the sleeping bags round our legs we made better time. We did not stop during the night.

LAST LAP It was dawn as we passed through Paris and refuelled in the city centre. We were feeling the trip now far more than the machines. They just seemed to keep on running. It had begun to snow and the roads had a coating of ice.

At last Le Touquet and an understanding Silver City official found us room on the first available plane; within half an hour we were back in England.

We left the airport and were pleased to find the roads clear of ice although it was still cold. This last leg became a major physical effort and we were grateful when we met Alec Smith, a personal friend and contributor to this magazine. He led us back to our final destination at the RAC club. We had driven non-stop from Marseilles, 739 miles in 37 hours.—BOB WEBB. ●

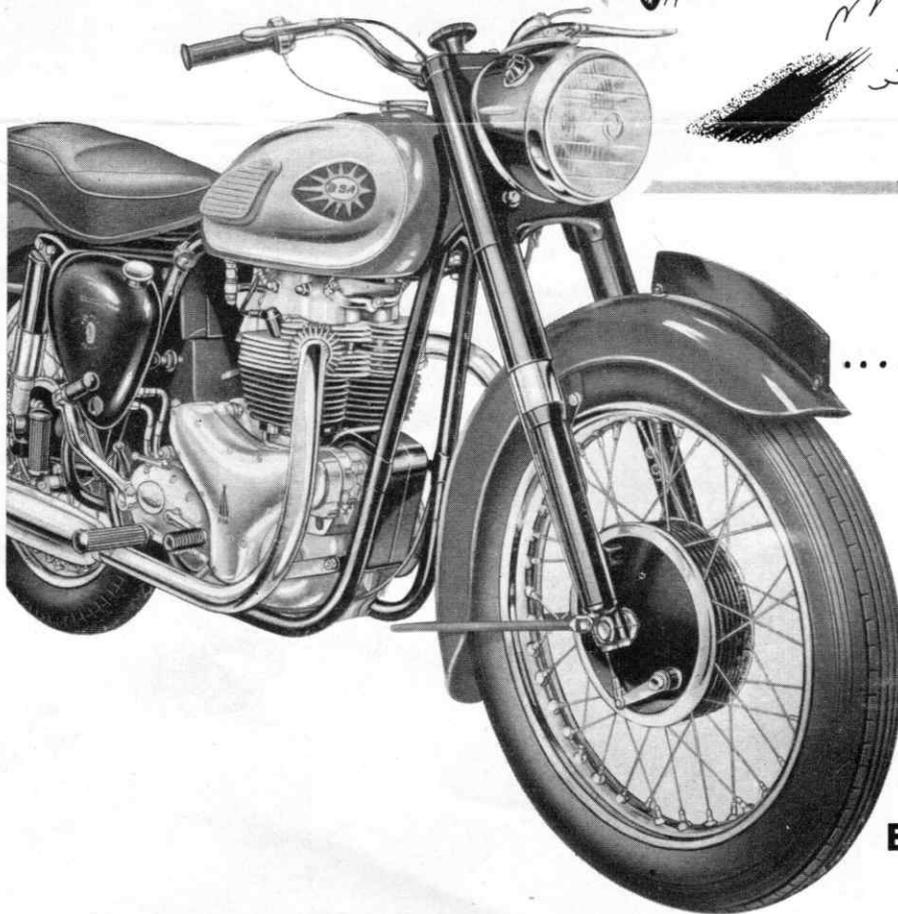
EQUIPMENT USED AND CARRIED

- 2 BSA A.10's. 650 c.c. Twin cylinder machines.
- 2 Watsonian Sidecars.
- Mobil Oil Company fuel and lubricants.
- Dunlop tyres.
- Lucas Electrics.
- Renolds Chain.
- Avonair Fairings. Fitted with ICI Perspex Screens.
- Stowaway Panniers.
- Champion Sparking Plugs.
- Wipac filter links and Dip Switches.
- 15 one gallon ICI Alkathene water containers.
- 3 4½ gallon petrol cans.
- 2 Special Tubular carriers by Terry Fry Products, Station Road, Hampton, Middlesex.
- 3 Alkathene drinking cups.
- 3 Barbour Suits.
- 3 Aviakit 'Super Jet' Helmets.
- 5 Lewis racing boots.
- 3 Lilo air beds.
- 2 Lilo water bags.
- 1 Remington razor.
- 3 Timex watches.

- 6 Stadium Goggles.
- Boots Chemists medical equipment.
- Maconochies tinned food.
- Dictaphone 'Dictet' recording equipment.
- Jenolite rust neutraliser.
- Complete tool kit (personal).
- 3 pairs Slazenger racing gloves.
- 3 prs. Slazenger Touring gauntlets with waterproof covers.
- 3 D. Lewis body belts.
- 3 prs. D. Lewis sea boot stockings.
- 3 prs. D. Lewis Tuffler scarves.
- 3 prs. Reg Cross racing overalls.
- Michelin Road Maps.
- Benjamin Edgington supplied the following equipment:
- 3 sleeping bags.
- 3 sets eating irons.
- One petrol Primus stove.
- 3 plastic plates.
- Tent with flysheet and built-in ground-sheet.
- 6 string vests.
- Each rider was allowed one pannier for personal clothing.
- Total weight of gear—over 700 lb.

rapid acceleration

and there's
still more
to **BSA**....



.... CONTROLLED POWER
STOPPING POWER
FLEXIBILITY
PERFECT BALANCE
HAIRLINE STEERING
EYE APPEAL
EXTRA COMFORT
ECONOMICAL RUNNING