



# THE 1981 FINKE DESERT RACE

## GOING NOWHERE, AS FAST AS POSSIBLE

*The Finke Desert Race is on the short list of unique Australian motorcycle events. Staged annually since 1976, it runs riders from Alice Springs to the small town of Finke, 230 kilometres away, in less than two hours. Then it's back again next day. Work that out. There are no arguments when they claim it to be Australia's fastest desert race.*

By **GEOFF ELDRIDGE**

photography by Geoff Eldridge and Damien Ryan,  
Foto Centa Alice Springs

I first learned about the Finke Desert Race in 1980 (pronounced "fink", not "finkey" as the ACU of SA think). The reason was that I heard both Stephen Gall and Phil Lovett were going, that there was an amazing amount of money up for grabs, and that everyone was building enormous front-mounted fuel tanks to run the distance.

"They're mad!" I thought. "Who in their right mind would ride 230 kilometres of desert in less than two hours with a bloody great fuel tank mounted to the forks?" I packed my bags and headed off to Broken Hill's Pro Hart 1980 Pine View two day instead, because at least it sounded halfway normal. All weekend at

Broken Hill I thought about those mad fools in Alice Springs racing their Open Class petrol tankers; a week later I heard that Stephen Gall had blown up when he forgot to switch over from the front tank to the main tank, and that Phil Lovett had broken an axle and withdrawn, leaving the win to some local hero who had won it three times.

My preconceptions about the Finke were only strengthened by all this.

Some time afterwards, talking with Lovett revealed that it was as bad as I thought: everyone geared their bikes to do 120 mph (that's right, mph!) and carried about 23 litres of fuel! And the 230 kilometres did take only two hours! Visions of tough, brutal locals accustomed to staring out at vast expanses of desert and all riding Open Class machines geared up to absolute maximum, all flashed through my brain. Definitely not my type of fun, and I forgot about it for nearly a year.

But I wasn't destined to be able to ignore it completely. This year, shortly before the event was due to be run (it's been run on the same weekend since the very first one six years ago, the Queen's Birthday long weekend), I received a phone call from Barry Taylor, Secretary/Treasurer of Alice Springs Motorcycle Club. It was an official invite. I was a bit iffy until he grudgingly admitted he'd been authorised by the Club to offer airfare and that Alice City Suzuki had a brand new RM125X they'd let me use. I'll ride anything for an airticket, so it was all on, and the details were worked out.

When I arrived it was straight around to Alice City Suzuki. I was keen to see what a gen-u-ine desert racer looked like, and since it had been prepared locally I figured it would be pretty right in the gearing, fuel capacity and jetting departments.

They did a great job on it, was my first reaction. It was a new X model (I'd half expected an RM125C or something — sometimes messages get jarbled in long-distance phonecalls when people are trying to talk you into

**A** A few minutes before the start on day one, everyone lines their bikes up across a paddock next to the Alice — Finke road. A shotgun signals the le Mans start, and then it's on for 230 kilometres.

**B** Lo and behold, the famous Finke River. You'd never know. The town of Finke is about five kilometres south of here. Big deal.

**C** Robert Honsa flat out in the desert. This shot was taken from the helicopter which was used to ferry the doctor up and down the course. Honsa's bike was about the fastest on the road trip.

**D** Geoff Curtis says: "When you go as fast as me, you need a wind-shield!" His bike was the best presented of the entire field — just look at the quality of that front fuel tank. Due to back injury, Geoff has been forced to retire: the NT has lost its finest rider.

**E** Third off the start line on the second day, Phil Lovett proved that he is a fierce competitor no matter what race he's in.

A  
E



# FINKE

travelling a long way for a race you'd rather not know) and it looked unreal! A Don Vesco skinny/fat tank was neatly bolted on in place of the usual X model tank, the rear sprocket was made specially in Adelaide and was barely bigger than the rear hub, and up front of the forks... well... the neatest, coolest looking desert racing extra fuel tank you've ever clapped your Carerras on! Fetched from the local Alice lawnmower shop, it was a Victa black plastic fuel tank mounted to sturdy brackets fixed to the triple clamp bolts. The fuel lines from the two tanks merged at a T-junction near the carburettor, and there was a second fuel tap under the front tank.

Wayne Woodberry, the mechanic and one of the local heavies, told me that the trick was to ride the first part of the race with only the front tank turned on, wait till the level had drained down below the filler cap of the main tank, then turn the second fuel

pm Friday and here they were proposing that I hop on the bike and charge off down to Finke "to see how the bike runs". I don't even go that far for my holidays, yet it sounded as if 230 kilometres to them was like walking across the road to the pub.

They sure visualise things differently out in the centre of Australia.

At the same time that I was getting some idea of the way the locals regarded riding the Finke, I was beginning to understand just how seriously it was taken. At Alice Suzuki it was taken very seriously indeed: the only big-deal motorcycle event of the year commanded the attention of Alice people as much as

## BELOW

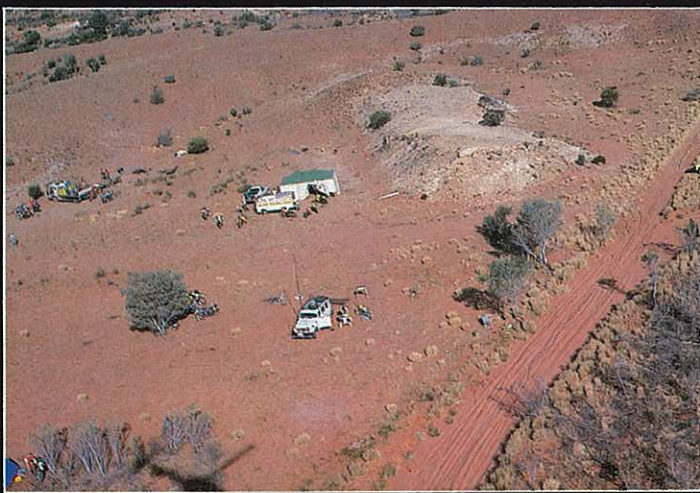
As soon as he arrived in Finke, Greg Lutze methodically and quietly began checking over his specially prepared 500 Honda. He'd been having problems with a leaking oil gasket on the way down, and despite temporary overnight repairs it gave him more problems on the run back, dropping his time somewhat.



**ABOVE** Robert Honsa (right) talks with Damien Ryan's parents before starting the first day.

**RIGHT** Peter Stayt was favoured to win, but made the fatal error of not refilling his front tank

**BELOW** Dan Farrell, down on the tank and on the gas.



tap on so fuel was draining from both tanks at once. By doing this you avoided siphoning the fuel from the front tank when full, into the main tank and overflowing it.

I remembered what had happened to Gall and decided I wouldn't try to go too far before switching over.

Then the guys at the Suzuki shop asked me if I wanted to ride down to Finke.

"We'll run you out there in one of the trucks. We've got fuel and all..."

"That's what I'm here for, to ride the Finke," I answered.

"No. We mean, do you want to ride down and back this afternoon? To get the feel of it."

"Oh." I muttered weakly. "No, no, that's OK. No need for all that fuss. Why, I'll just ride it a bit to satisfy myself about the jetting. That'll do..."

They had to be joking! It was 1.30

the Mister Motocross series commands the attention of the top motocrossers in Australia.

The Suzuki people had a full support crew ready to travel halfway down to refuel the Suzuki team, and another crew who were to travel all the way to Finke itself to erect the overnight tent and get all the spares ready. They had thought of nearly everything except the possibility that the bikes might not make it. Wayne Woodberry was the Open Class hope and seemed widely tipped to do well if he finished, while Grant Petrick was favourite in the 250cc Class.

That afternoon we called around to Peter Stayt's workshop to see how both Peter and Lovett were doing. Lovett was the only one there and he was busy filing down his 390KTM piston: it turned out he had ridden to



**ABOVE** Finke. Nice place to visit and all that. Actually, the town is about one kilometre away (just visible, upper left). The finish line for the run down is just there near those trees to the right of the landcruiser, just about where that chair is parked next to the track... aren't you glad for little tidbits of data like that?

**LEFT** Wayne Woodberry, sponsored by Alice City Suzuki. Later, he ran out of gas.



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Finke and back that afternoon but had seized the bike just 5 kilometres from the end, after 455 kilometres! This was his second seizure of the week (he arrived early to get his bike right, and on Friday night reckoned he was far from satisfied with the way it was shaping up).

Peter's YZ465H sat on a crate looking perfectly prepared and obviously ready. The next day, Saturday, was impound day, between 1.00 pm and 4.00 pm. It was obvious at impound that everyone took the Finke seriously. Since I'd arrived that was the only thing people wanted to talk about, and the local radio stations both carried interviews and hot tips, with the commercial station running regular spots for days before the start and also during the race.

Preparation was just as serious: for people living so far from major racing centres, the Alice riders sure know their racing. Everyone has a professional attitude and the bikes reflect it. Easily the best prepared

was the YZ465H of Geoff Curtis, who is the only person to have ever won the Finke three times (1976, 1978, 1980): it featured a beautifully crafted alloy fuel tank mounted to the forks, complete with a plastic see-through windshield! It made all the other top riders envious, I'll tell you that. Next year there'll probably be dozens of them.

Geoff Curtis wasn't at all like I expected a sun-bronzed outback desert dominator (!) to be. He's quiet, well informed about tuning and racing in general, and very friendly. There's no flashy "I'm the champion" business with him, just polite friendly conversation. Geoff is an original Alice-born rider and has competed in motocross, enduros, the Mt. Ebenezer-out-near-the-Rock 12 Hour, and speedway. The 1981 Finke was to be his last race, because of a back injury he received at a speedway meeting and which he continued to aggravate at subsequent speedway meetings until he really did it in at Orange Creek (NT) in a motocross meeting in 1980. To say Geoff has been the NT's best rider in the last few years is an understatement.



**ABOVE**  
Look at this! An ambulance in Finke. The ACU would be glad to know that Alice Springs MCC goes to extremes to ensure rider safety.

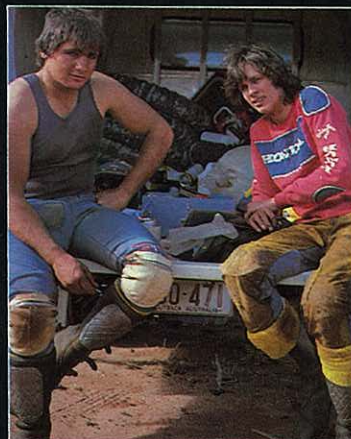
**BELOW**  
A dejected Wayne Woodberry (left) and a rather pleased Kent Parkinson. Wayne has just DNFed another Finke, and Kent just finished 4th on day one on a Honda CR125 watercooled. Try it someday, in a field packed solid with 120 mph YZ465s.

**BELOW**  
Barry Taylor rode so well on the way down that he had a flat tyre. Such speed, such style. Barry pauses in the middle of getting the tyre off the rim to pick his nose and reflect on life. "I think," he commented soberly in his deep, resonant, authoritative voice, "this reflects my machine preparation, my professionalism, and the total dedication with which I have approached this event."



**ABOVE**  
Damien Ryan (left), President of the Club and Phil Lovett's sponsor, says: "Phil, the new style helmet is fine, and the poofy Italian ISDT jacket I can handle, but thongs? No way!" Lovett retorts: "Don't you worry, Edna, it'll all be OK when I bring you that bag full of money on Monday!" He did.

**BOTTOM**  
Paul Wright from Mt. Isa, rode his work hack 10,000 kilometre old IT465. This shot was taken at Finke where he contemplates his bent forks, the result of a high speed get off.  
**BELOW**  
Greg Lutze gets the 500 Honda mobile.



Another rider heavily favoured in Alice to win was Robert Honsa: he really only came to prominence in 1980, finishing 3rd outright in the Finke. Known for his ability to fine-tune a bike, Honsa is heavily favoured to be at Deep Well first this time.

From Adelaide with a specially prepared Honda 500 was Greg Lutze, who usually races motocross: he was warily regarded by the locals as a dark horse. In the 200 class, the most favoured rider was Kent Parkinson who keeps turning up on 125s — last time he had finished 10th outright on a Suzuki 125. The other rider in the 200 class that everyone seemed to have high respect for was John Fiddler who, at 40, was probably the oldest rider in the event. John once rode a BSA Bantam from Alice Springs to Adelaide and some other out of the way outback places the names of which escape me at the moment.

But all this wondering about who's going to beat who starts getting to you after a while. Lovett and I were billeted at Damien Ryan's house (the Club President) and for the duration of the stay Damien could talk or think of nothing but the race. A million miles an hour, all day, he talks Finke. After a while you find yourself being drawn into the numbers game.

And since Lovett was the only rider I knew anything about I was hoping he'd do well and become the first non-local to win. But when he missed machine examination and still wasn't happy about his jetting,

and when I thought of how worn the poor piston must have been (I calculated that, after numerous flings with the file, Lovett had reduced the piston to a 250 and had honed the barrel out to a 495. There wasn't much chance of it seizing again, I tell you that!) I didn't really give him much chance.

But it didn't worry me unduly. I still hadn't seen the course and it was a complete mystery to me. Deserts to me were still cactus, spinifex and wide, w-i-d-e open places.

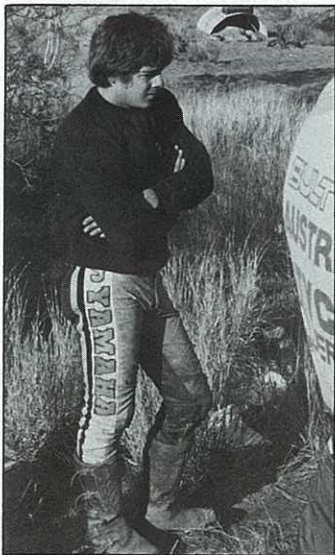
## RACE DAY

### DAY ONE, SUNDAY

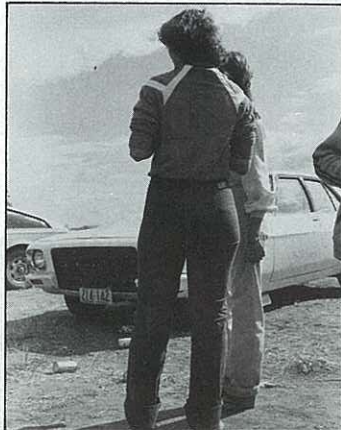
Although it would only take two hours or so to ride each way, there was an overnight stop at Finke. This, they told me, was because it was too risky to ride back on the same track in case someone who had broken down was somehow mobile again and was still coming. That made sense. They also said that it was a matter of tradition. They're heavy on tradition in Alice.

So it's start time on day one and the area is packed! I mean, packed! I didn't know there could be that many people in all Alice, let alone at the start of a bike race. Two things are responsible for this: the massive buildup and the high esteem people hold for the Finke, and the fact that in Alice on a Sunday morning there's not a lot doing



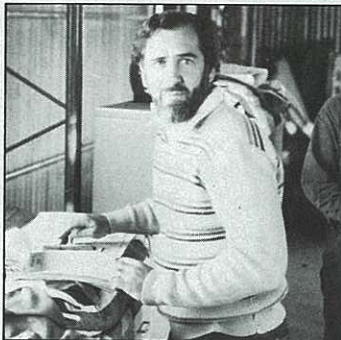


**BELOW**  
For a little town right out in the middle of nowhere, they sure had their share of nice young things in tight jeans.



**ABOVE**  
Glen Baxter, Darwin's top rider, came south for the Finke. He wasn't too impressed on the first day and merely cruised along, but he was on the gas on the return trip and picked off quite a few places.

**BELOW**  
When Peter Stayt finally made it back to Alice after running out of gas while leading, his fiancée Lee (that's her on the right...) said: "Oh, well, Peter, there goes our floor in the house..." Peter replied: "Gimme another beer."



# FINKE

## RESULTS Finke Desert Race Overall

1. P. Lovett ..... 390 KTM
2. G. Rhodes .. YZ465 Yamaha
3. G. Lutze ..... XL500 Honda
4. D. Farrell ..... RM250 Suzuki
5. K. Parkinson .. CR125 Honda
6. P. Wright ... XT500 Yamaha
7. D. O'Dowd .. YZ465 Yamaha
8. J. Perkins ... YZ250 Yamaha
9. G. Baxter ... YZ250 Yamaha
10. P. Kerr ..... CR250 Honda
11. B. Taylor ..... 400 Suzuki
12. J. Fidler ..... CR125 Honda
13. N. Harris ..... PE175 Suzuki
14. C. Carson .... RM125 Suzuki
15. G. Eldridge ... RM125 Suzuki

**Team Trophy:** Alice Springs Honda (K. Parkinson, P. Kerr and G. Lutze).  
**Skyroad Rookie of the Ride Award:** J. Perkins.

**LEFT**  
Chief Pit Marshall John Thomas takes care of scrutineering paperwork and such.

Anyway, riders are rushing around doing last minute things and getting their bikes warmed up for the le Mans start, crowds are gawping, radio people are doing pre-race interviews with anyone they considered had a chance, so that later they'd have before and after comments from the winners, and a general air of tension hangs in the air.

The start is signalled by shotgun: five minutes before start time riders are all moved back from their dead-engine bikes and things get very, very quiet.

This time, at the sound of the shotgun, 74 riders stumbled across to their bikes and were off in a tremendous cloud of dust. Did I tell you about the dust? Bad, real bad.

Anyway, all but one were off and gone. Who was that one? Modesty forbids me to tell, but I had an ovation from the crowd when the bike fired. Then another ovation when I stalled it straight away. The things I'll do to get a story.

By the time I was out to the road, there was no sign of anyone. A few miles later, it became increasingly dusty, then, out of the haze, a white helmet flashed past. Phew! That was close. Better watch out- WOW! Another one! From that point and for the next 45 kilometres, it was an endless procession of hazy riders who were more cautious than me flashing past in the dust. I figured I was making some headway and things weren't as black as at the start.

I also figured the Open Class riders would be probably 15 kilometres ahead.



Living here in Alice means we're a long way from anything, right? It also means that things are harder to come by. And if you live in the outback, it's that little bit harder again.  
No worries.  
Whatever your motorcycling needs here in the Centre, Alice City Suzuki has a motorcycle to suit. From the tough, durable agricultural models,

the competition-bred PE Enduro range, the adaptable trail range (including the new 500cc DR) to the hard-charging top-line motocrossers, Alice City Suzuki is the place you should go if you are in the area.

Let's face it. That's a lot of space. And you'll need a lot of bike. Suzuki. It's a lot of bike for a big place.



Official sponsor of Team ADB during the 1981 Finke Desert Race, riding the superb little RM125X.

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# FINKE

They were. All except Geoff Curtis; his immaculately prepared YZ wasn't as immaculate as it looked, because only a few kilometres from the start the barrel studs pulled out of the crankcases and the barrel came off! His last race hadn't lasted long at all; later he said that perhaps it was an omen and that he was still retiring.

Way up front, it was Peter Stayt putting the miles on everyone. Robert Honsa was there giving him a hard time, but it was Stayt ahead after the fuel stop. Lutze was in there fighting, but his 500 Honda wasn't as quick as the YZs. Wayne Woodberry, too, was up front after a fine start, and Grant Petrick was making up ground after a midfield getaway.

Then the stories of problems began. First top rider to have major problems after Curtis was Lovett: his front fuel tank brackets fractured and fuel started leaking out only 30 kilometres from the start, so he stopped and actually drained fuel from his front tank into the main tank and kept going, hoping to make up lost time in the tighter riding after Deep Wells.

Tighter riding? Ha! Up to Deep Wells, which is some 80 kilometres from the start, it's all 120 mph top-gear-down-on-the-tank-throttle-to-the-stop. At Deep Wells it changes to down-on-the-tank-throttle-to-the-stop-with-a-few-corners and maybe a little 4th gear work thrown in. After Rodinga it deteriorates to about the level of the fastest riding at the old extinct BP Desert Rally.

After the first refuel, Peter Stayt and Wayne Woodberry both ran out of gas. It turned out they both thought they could make it from Bundooma to Finke with only the main tank. That was Stayt's \$2,000 mistake, and his fiancée Lee sighed afterwards: "Well, there goes the floor on our house!"

Wayne was simply depressed, because it was his 3rd Finke DNF.

And that left it pretty much to Robert Honsa, whose bike was running perfectly. He was first into Finke in the time of 2 hours 4 mins 30 secs, ahead of Greg Lutze who was 40 seconds later. Amazingly, Lovett did manage to make up most of his lost ground in the "tighter" riding and finished 3rd at Finke exactly two minutes behind Lutze.

Then it was — it couldn't be! — Kent Parkinson on his 125cc Honda! Amazing! Fourth to Finke on day one on a 125! No-one could believe it, but there it was. That night, Damien wandered around the camp muttering that it would be disastrous if a 125 actually won the event: "Imagine what that would do to the image of the Finke as Australia's fastest desert race!"

I thought to myself that it would probably convince every 125cc rider in the country to enter in 1982, but I was too polite to say as much.

The rest of the field came in dribs and drabs after that. Attrition hadn't been too bad, but then neither should it have been. The course was pretty easy and as long as you had the bike jettied right you could easily make Finke. Everyone settled down to make repairs or adjustments, because the

Finke is one of those races like Broken Hill's Pine View, where you can work on your bike from when you finish day one till when you start day two, and there are no restrictions on tools or parts. It's a reliability trials rider's dream!

Later that night, everyone became pretty well tanked, as the stories around the campfires grew louder and more unbelievable. It seemed that most of the tension of the start and the pre-race buildup had been dissipated and everyone was feeling more relaxed. The consensus was that if your bike did the first day with no hassles, then you could rely on it getting back again.

## DAY TWO

Riders are let start day two in the same order and spacings as they finished day one. That gave Honsa a tremendous advantage, being up front out of the dust. But Lovett managed to catch and pass him halfway back. That meant it was on. From the helicopter the club had hired to ferry the doctor up and down the course in case of accidents, Damien watched as Lovett and Honsa diced it out for miles. Then, Lovett drew out ahead.

That is, until Deep Well: Honsa's YZ had the top speed and extra power on the worn out 390 KTM and he went past Lovett like he was standing still. Lovett figured it was all over then, because it was only straight road from there to the finish: he knew his only chance was for Honsa's bike to break.

Lovett must have the devil on-side — Honsa's chain broke just five kilometres from the finish! You wouldn't read about it. Lovett arrived, on the scene, stopped, tried to tow him by holding on, gave that away as a bad joke, then raced off to finish. That done and without even stopping the engine, he grabbed a rope and went back to help Honsa, towing him home. In the meantime, Greg Rhodes (YZ465) and Greg Lutze both went past for second and third respectively. Honsa was towed in 4th.

It was a classic, storybook finish: team mate tows in broken down rider after race long battle! Sportsmanship rules! Winning rider jeopardises own finish to help team mate! You can imagine it plastered all over the Alice City Times.

The trouble with the plan was that Honsa was disqualified anyway. Lovett was OK because he had finished the race first. But having finished he was no longer technically still a competitor, and by Finke rules only fellow competitors are allowed to give assistance. It was a technical decision, but then again it was a highly technical point.

In another case there was a technical decision made, when Townsville (Old) rider Paul Wright was disqualified for having taken a wrong road. Admittedly, it wasn't hard to do, but he was spotted from the helicopter and the way he'd gone did offer a slight advantage, so although he'd made a genuine mistake and was not trying to gain anything at the time, by the rules announced at the Saturday rider briefing he was out. No questions. A long way to come for a decision like that, and Paul was visibly upset by it.

Kent Parkinson, meanwhile, wasn't able to hold the Open Classers off so well after the staggered start of the second day, and he dropped four places to 8th outright. Still an excellent finish when you consider the calibre of the riders and the fact that he made two fuel stops on a machine geared to do 40 km/h less than the YZ465s. There's quite simply no-one in his class. John Fiddler finished second to him, a few minutes later, after putting in a fine ride.

Then it was into the beer and back home to get dressed up for the official presentation, which is something which would have suited Lovett right down to the ground: he loves to give speeches, win trophies and receive lots of money.

And that was, fairly basically, how the perpetual Finke trophy came to be taken from Alice for the first time ever.

## RIGHT

It wasn't like this all the way, but it wasn't much different either.

## BELOW

This little RM was geared to do about 85 mph, believe it or not. Watercooling is the way to go at Finke.



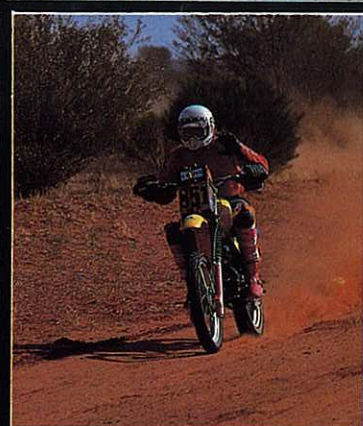
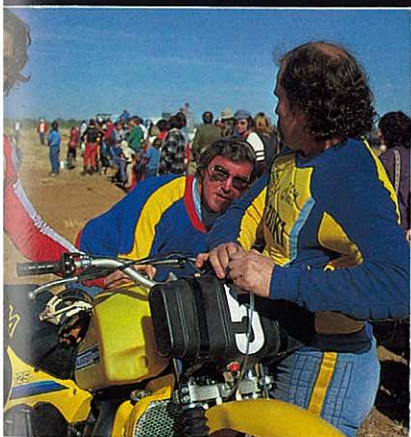
## ABOVE

Even when you are racing in the desert, Team ADB stays clean. Behold the helicopter which was used to ferry three riders to Mt. Ebenezer, some 230 kilometres away from Finke, for a shower after day one. Straight there, straight back again. If you've got it, flaunt it. Peter the Pilot (fiddling with the nose), Damien Ryan (centre) and Peter Stayt (right).

## LEFT

Phil Lovett and Peter Stayt aboard the Shower Express. For someone who rides like he does, Lovett sure didn't appreciate the aerobatics.





**ABOVE**

What about Dirt Bike itself? Alice City Suzuki supplied the bike and did all the preparation: shown here refuelling it are Brian Luht and Phil Air. Check out the front fuel tank: it's borrowed from a Victa lawnmower. The Vescoe skinny/fat tank mounted on no problems.

**RIGHT**

Phil Stoker (right) shows his burnt KTM495 to Geoff Curtis. This happened at Phil's first fuel stop on the way to Finke. That's the most expensive fire Phil's ever going to start, at \$3,000 for the bike. Fortunately, the extent of the damage wasn't as bad as it looks here. Dave Jones photo.



**ABOVE**

Ray Billeau finished high in the placings, but was spotted from the air on the wrong road and was later disqualified. It was a legitimate mistake following a poorly marked intersection, and the road linked back to the course, but rules is rules. Ray was all the way from Mt. Isa in Qld.

**ABOVE CENTRE**

Looks like one of those US desert races, doesn't it? This was shortly after the start on the first day.