

DIARY OF THE STARLITE SAGA

by Paul Young

August, 1985

My friend Steve Popko convinces me to go on a PCASD Rally. This is our first Time-Speed Distance (TSD) rally, but we understand enough to try and follow the instructions and arrive at the checkpoints on time. We learn that a rally is comprised of legs between each checkpoint. Each leg we are given a score, which is the error between the actual time we arrived at the checkpoint, and when we were supposed to arrive. The closer we get to the true time, the lower our score (lower is better). The score is measured in hundredths of a minute (0.6 second), so if we were off the correct or 'true time' by half a minute (either early or late), our leg score is 50 points. Our total score is the sum of leg scores, so being early on one leg does not cancel being late on another. We got lost occasionally, but not so much that we couldn't make it to the finish. Even with a splitting headache, my navigating with Steve driving his 924 got a trophy in Novice class. And a rally team was formed.

December 8-9, 1995

After ten years and many TSD rallies together, Steve convinces me to go on Starlite, an all night Monte Carlo map rally from Santa Barbara to Las Vegas. I am again the navigator, fiddling with maps, instructions, a compass, and a gallon of coffee. He is driving my 911 Turbo with zeal. Here we are told the true time for each leg, but not the checkpoint location - that's why all the maps, instructions, etc. The goal is still to arrive at the checkpoint inmarker exactly on time - not early nor late, but different on Starlite is a standoff location for each leg on the route. These are stops along the rally course where you are given additional information on the checkpoint inmarker location for that particular leg. Usually the information is the standoff worker pointing out a flashing light in the distance (mostly at night, remember). The navigator takes a compass reading from this light, which is located at the inmarker. Now, one plots a line on a map for that compass bearing from the standoff, and where it intersects an eligible road is where the inmarker is. Sounds easy, but the inmarker might be seven miles distant or forty-seven and it often crosses the possible roads at several points! You must go to the standoff for each leg before that leg's checkpoint or inmarker. Oh, and once you leave standoff, you can't stop, though you can go as slow (or fast!) as you wish. In the novice class for our first Starlite, we fail to trophy.

December 13-14, 1996

Same Starlite team, same 911 Turbo (without heater, and man is it cold!). Same result - total score of 723. This is the total error for all legs, in hundredths of a minute, so we had an error of 7.23 minutes. May not sound too bad for 14 hours, but the event is usually won with single digit scores; like 2, as in 2 hundredths of a

minute (0.02), which requires a perfect score of zero on several legs! We had one leg with a 500 (maximum error of 5 minutes) and another with a zero, but a long shot from an award of any sort.

December 12–13, 1997

Third Starlite, same team, different car – the 928 has a heater that works, so it gets selected for the task. The heater and increased room for all our stuff is welcome, but the Bakersfield fog and treacherous Sequoia ice give us two legs with 500, and a total score of 1132. They did have a TSD section from Lone Pine to Death Valley, where we were supposed to figure our theoretical true time for that part. Even running in novice class, we bested all the regulars and experts and won the TSD award. Maybe we're only good at TSD rallies.

December 6, 1998

I drive the 928 in an autocross to exercise it and relearn its 'feel', since the plan this year was to switch roles; Steve navigating, and I would finally get to drive. The car performs admirably considering it's 21 years old!

December 11, 1998

11:00am

I pick up Steve in the 928, and we stop to get a nice, new sighting compass – the old one was accurate, but slow, and we decided that spending 5 to 10 minutes at the standoff was part of our problem.

4:15pm

After dreadful traffic through the LA area, we arrive in Santa Barbara (Goleta actually), and get fuel and Italian sandwiches, and snacks for the road. Yum!

5:30pm

We tech-inspect the 928, setup the CB and rally clock, and head into the registration area to collect our materials, maps, and instructions. We are on the PCA team, as we have been in past years. Pat and Debi Norris are the only other San Diego Region members on the team. Though most folks rent cars with automatics, Pat and Debi proudly brought their 944 with the huge incinerator rally lights. The entries for Starlite have stabilized at about 60, though they were well over a hundred in years past. About half enter in the regular class, with the other half split between novice and expert (the more difficult classes have more information to gather along the way, and drive a bit longer course). We're in regular this year, having been in the novice class for three years already. Oh well, so much for any chance at a trophy. Or so we thought....

8:10pm

After poring over maps and instructions with Steve for the last two hours, I think he has a good handle of this map navigation stuff. Our route is carefully planned; we have our true times, and a bit more knowledge of where the checkpoint inmarkers might be. We head for the last OPP to POP (Piss On Porcelain) for a long while, then get in the 928 and move up to the starting line.

8:26.00pm

Being car 26, our out time is 8 o'clock plus our number (the staggered start ensures that all the cars don't try to cross the inmarker all at once). Pat and Debi are number 19 -- seven minutes ahead of us, so we're not likely to see much of them. We're off down US 101 on the first leg, a bit nervous, but wide awake, even without coffee.

10:10pm

After two hours of driving, we're at standoff (SO) for leg 1, South of Magic Mountain on CA HWY 14. We see the flashing light for the inmarker. Steve marks a compass bearing on the map while I mark my territory on the planet.

10:14pm

Back on the road towards checkpoint 1. We miss a turn, but we knew it was hard to see and we've got enough time thanks to only spending 3 or 4 minutes at the SO. As we determine we have less than a mile to the inmarker, I bring the speed down to about 20mph. We round the last bend, and see the string of rally cars lined up and crawling towards the inmarker. We have a bit under three minutes to go. My heart is thumping!

10:32.69pm

We cross the hose at inmarker 1, pull up to the officials, and receive our timing slip. We had a good score on this first leg, a perfect zero in fact! Wow, a great way to start, but we can't fiddle around congratulating each other, we need to get on with leg 2. We blast back onto highway 14, and on to 138 towards Victorville. Traffic thins out so we can make decent time. Off 138 towards US 395 and nearing standoff 2. In a maze of twisty little roads everywhere, our hunch about this leg was right: the inmarker is located shortly BEFORE SO2 -- if you take the most direct way. We drove a more circuitous route, thus avoiding the trap of hitting the inmarker before the standoff.

11:42.70pm

We cross the inmarker hose and get our official time. Another zero! Steve gives me this crazed look as I engage warp drive and blast us off in the direction of leg 3. Now we're getting way out there, both in remoteness of location (East of Victorville), and time (meaning less traffic and more freedom to MOVE). On a side road before standoff 3, we slow down to pass a local constable searching some non-rally vehicle. We heard later it was a sobriety checkpoint. Good thing there wasn't a sanity checkpoint anywhere. We pull into SO3. Again, Steve makes quick work of the bearing on the flashing inmarker light. Slightly embarrassed, I use the ladies' bush (shrub actually), since the line is way shorter than the men's. As we approach where we think inmarker 3 should be, I spot a familiar sign: PCA IN.

December 12, 1998

12:51.33am

We cross the hose and pull up to the rally worker. "Decent time," he says. We recognize the voice of Joe Boucher, our friend from PCASB. Joe has been a long-time rallyist, and supporter of Starlite – he's even won the event overall. Oh, our score on leg 3? ZERO; Steve and I were amazed! Back to task, we head off of HWY 247 looking for some obscure letter pasted to the back of a stop sign on a dirt road in the middle of nowhere. Actually it's near Landers, which is famous only for being nearly destroyed by a 7.3 earthquake in 1992. We miss the street (way puny sign), make an Emergency-Bat-Turn, pass the sign the other way, make another screeching EBT, and Steve hops out to read the letter off the sign (we need to tell the SO4 worker the letter or incur a penalty). Now for some more puerile entertainment at 1:30am, I light up the 928's tires sending the gerbils scurrying everywhere for their lives. The first scheduled fuel stop at 260 miles into the event is in Twentynine Palms. I figured to get coffee too, since I was sure we'd end our string of zeros and the adrenaline would wear off. The local 7-11 was selling a ton of beer by the cases (not to Starlite participants, thankfully), but was woefully short on coffee. I cautiously filled my thermos with the contents of the one pot they had. The only aroma I could identify in the bewildering brew was 'warm'. Close enough. That, plus several liters of Mountain Douche oughta keep me awake. Back onto HWY 62 with a full tank and into the darkness to SO4. Steve has become a master with the compass and navigation, as I barely have time to continue leaving my scent trail and get back into the driver's seat.

2:08.34am

Across the hose again, a bit late this time I think. Hot Damn, another ZERO! This is a dream, not true, way unreal, can't be happening. And onward to SO5, where they change the true time for everyone and place the inmarker just a few hundred feet after standoff -- with the added constraint that you can't leave SO until 0.30 (18 seconds) before your true in-time. This is confusing, but we figure it out with only a minute to spare. It's gonna be tough. Most folks try to motor on at an even speed, but I launch the 928 at our departure time, and slow way down to creep over the

hose at exactly our in-time -- another stinkin' zero. Oh nurse! We are cookin' now -- no need for coffee! Leg 6 is wide open, it's 2:30am, with NO opposing traffic. Even with H-4 headlamps, there is a point at which the lights can be overdriven. At this stratospheric velocity I now realize why driving lights like Pat's paint removers would be useful. Still, the 928 is phenomenally stable and smooth at ludicrous speed (the dips provided a bit of a spectacle though, especially when trying to pass slower rallyists). At SO6 we notice the inmarker seems to be on an uphill section of road. Also hard to judge the distance and if the road is steep and curvy before hand. We proceed with reasonable caution, looking through the binoculars, trying to locate that inmarker more accurately. Finally we see it on a dip-laden uphill section. We've got some time to kill, but manage to keep the car rolling.

3:01.37am

And another, unbelievable zero. How can we keep this up? We've completed over half the rally and still have a perfect score. Wide eyed with all the juvenile enthusiasm a couple of middle aged old farts in an aluminum rocket can muster, we surge ahead. As we watch an awesomely beautiful moonrise, I am thinking "Man it's nice having a heater!" With my driving style, the 928 is thirsty, so we make an unscheduled fuel stop in Parker, just across the border in Arizona. Only time for a splash, and then North on AZ 95 towards Havasu. Now things get tricky. We can't find the road that leads to the island for SO7. Other Starlite rally suffragettes are similarly confused, wandering around Lake Havasu City as quickly as possible without alarming any local authorities. I inadvertently start down the road with the inmarker on it, but fortunately realize it before we went too far. Time for the EBT! We finally find the bridge access and head over towards SO7 -- the wrong way! Just short of entering the standoff backwards (a 500 point penalty), I notice our error and make yet another EBT. Now we spend more time backtracking and looking for the road we missed to go to SO7 correctly. Finally, we're there, take a quick bearing, no time to de-coffee, and split. As fast as we dare, I charge up the inmarker road looking for the checkpoint, wishing we had forgone that fuel stop. Time was running out, going ... going ... going ... There it is! With 0.15 (9 seconds) left, I brake the 928 abruptly (but not completely), and burp it across the hose at ...

4:39.63am

for another zero. Our minds are numb, our veins thrumming, the 928 is positively purring along, having as much fun as it's had in a long time. So are we. We continue North, then crossing back into California, through Needles, and into Nevada towards Laughlin and standoff 8. There, high on a rise we look across the valley at the burgeoning dawn and a faintly visible flashing light in a mountain pass way into Arizona. Though only 20 miles directly, it's over an hour's drive away. There's a huge concrete drainage ditch that a bunch of us are testing for capacity. We leave SO8 and proceed briskly, across the big valley of the Colorado River, and into Arizona again. Then through Oatman, a touristy old western gold town, which seems like a ghost town at 6am. Through the winding pass road on historic Route 66 Northeast of

Oatman, we are wondering where the inmarker is; Two miles ahead? Ten? We have 15 minutes to go and it feels more like it ought to be ten miles away, so we plunge ahead. Next thing we see is Pat and Debi (car 19 -- seven minutes ahead of us), creeping along slowly on a switchback just above us with a couple of cars between them and the inmarker. I look at the clock. 9.50 minutes to cover what appears to be less than 0.2 mile on a steep uphill grade. We are not supposed to stop either, remember? Now, this is going to be a big problem. Plus there's this spotter dude, looking for cars that stop moving before the inmarker. Cruel. I round the last hairpin heading up the hill to the inmarker. We've still got 5.50 on the clock with about 500 feet to go; though it looks like only 50. By this time the smell of the clutch has turned to billows of putrid white smoke coming out from under the 928. It seems like forever. The spotter is looking at our car but can't see it for the smoke. I am ready to bail as I hear my poor car crying out "Please, no more!" I reassure it, and promise it ANYTHING in return. Things would have been better if we had chucked the rally earlier and I could just be nine minutes early. But we had a string of seven perfect zeros to protect. "Steve, ya know what?" "What?" "It's gonna be time to cross that %*\^(#* hose, and I'm gonna have the clutch all the way out, and the gas flooded, and the car is just gonna roll backwards down the hill." "Uh-oh. Say Paul, you got that fire extinguisher handy?"

6:44.38am

Hose crossing finally. In a tremendous cloud of stifling smoke. And believe it or not, another zero. Thankfully we were at the summit so I could coast down the far side. As we arrived at the breakfast stop in Kingman, everyone in the parking lot held their noses. We got the same treatment in the restaurant since our clothes had been totally polluted by that volcanic eruption beneath the 928. Normally I like to catch a nap at the break, but it took all of 45 minutes just to get some intercoursin' orange juice and wash my face. Besides, I couldn't imagine it being restful inside the still smoldering, reeking car. Driving North on US 93 while Steve dozed, I was truly grateful for that disgusting, vintage Twentynine Palms coffee. The last standoff (SO9) was located at the lookout point on the Nevada side of Hoover Dam. We got our compass bearing from a photograph identifying the inmarker since it was daytime now, and flashing lights only work at night. The clutch was toast: in fourth gear I could press on the accelerator and watch the tach swing up without the car's speed changing. It was imperative to carefully budget our time so as to minimize creeping. We were dazed and tired, yet we could almost taste the win. Anxiously pacing ourselves, and counting down the minutes and miles to the inmarker, we missed a turn. Fully a mile later we realized our mistake. Time again for the EBT, and I pressed the pedal as hard as I dared, just short of igniting the miserable clutch while we dashed back trying to catch up. We passed creeping rallyists; car number 39, car 36, ... where the hell is that inmarker? The clock was counting down rapidly; the road was crawling by imperceptibly, yet the scenery was a blur...

9:52.86am

At last the final hose. And our score? 2.58 late. It could have been 0.05 or 5.00, it wouldn't have mattered. We had managed to snatch defeat out of the jaws of victory.

11:00am

At the hotel, we collapsed, exhausted. After we stopped beating ourselves up, we realized what an impressive performance we did. And started to strategize about next year. The new compass was a definite improvement. Steve navigating and me driving seems to be an effective team. What about vehicles? The Land Rover is tempting; comfortable, roomy, good visibility, heater that works. Plus, an automatic transmission which makes creeping off the last fraction of a mile easy. Or fix the heater in the 911 Turbo? A bit small, but a thrilling ride. Maybe take the 928 again since we need to repair the clutch in it anyway (I figure that last part of Leg 8 was about \$20,000 per mile). One thing's for sure: we'll be there in '99 ready for another 14 hours of blissful insomnia!