

Fire in the Hole

3 October 2004

“Fire in the Hole!”

I screamed it before I consciously thought about it.

To my right, Dennis, who tells horrific, blood curdling tales of blasting deep in the mines of Colorado, reacted as if he'd kissed the bare leads of a 240 volt extension cord. His head swiveled towards the flames, and then he made an immediate sprint towards the large, wheeled fire extinguisher parked on the end of the gas pump island.

Our mechanic and lead rider, Lin Zhongwei, beat at the flames curling up around the gas tank on our Chang-Jiang 750 with his gloves, but quickly realized it was a futile effort. The gasoline spewing from the disconnected fuel line he'd inadvertently knocked off was spreading fire everywhere, and the bike was parked only a few feet from the nearby gasoline pumps.

As I stood behind the bike watching the flames climb higher, I could hear the shouted Chinese from our guide, interpreter and driver mixed with the calls in English from Patrick and Dennis, but above them all was the roar of the rain pounding on the flat roof that covered the huge fueling area of the Sinopec gasoline station. I'd pulled under the canopy to provide some cover for Lin while he tried to diagnose why our bike had dropped a cylinder and finally sputtered to a halt only 25 kilometers (about 16 miles) from our day's destination in eastern China.

He was already soaked to the skin, his U.S. Army spec desert camouflage pants and boots, Harley Davidson knock-off leather jacket, leather riding gloves, bandana and hat having long before lost their battle with the bone chilling weather and heavy rain. Lin had just about frozen stiff before he'd lowered his pride enough to accept the loan of one of our helmets about an hour earlier. The helmet had helped keep the rain off his face, but couldn't do anything for his nearly blue hands that had been shaking with cold but were now being quickly warmed by the flames he was trying in vain to beat out with his soaking gloves.

With a shout, he leapt to his feet and started pushing the bike out into the rain.

I thought, “Lin, I know its raining, but I don't think it's raining enough to put out this fire.”

But, even though I didn't know what he was doing, I thought it was a good idea to get the burning bike away from the gasoline pumps, hoses and spilled fuel that surrounded us. I added my thrust to the back of the sidecar and we quickly made our way out into the deluge and across the parking lot.

As we distanced ourselves from the pumps I felt relief, and, as I slowly realized that Lin was steering the bike towards a pile of sand in the corner of the lot, somewhat elated. Perhaps there was hope of saving the bike after all. And if not the bike, I thought selfishly, at least hope to slow the flames enough to allow me to strip some of my photography gear off before it all became a towering pyre of Digital Canon Sacrifice.

At this point, I became focused on getting the flames knocked down. As we ran the bike up into the edge of the sand pile the flames were pouring out of both sides of the motor and around the bike's gas tank. Lin and Patrick released the bike and started throwing sand at the fire. I began to do the same, but as soon as I let go of the bike, it rolled back across the parking lot towards the gas pumps. I returned to the rear of the bike and shoved it up against the sand, the fate of the bike and my camera equipment locked in the pannier box now up to the sand-throwing firefighting efforts of Lin and Patrick.

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As they threw sand like crazed prairie dogs burrowing for safety, I noticed movement out of the corner of my eye. Dennis and our driver were approaching with huge rolling fire extinguishers, but before they got there, the flames began to rapidly spread across the ground. The fire had finally burned through both fuel lines and the petcocks from both sides of the tank were pouring gasoline into the flames. The flame front grew quickly as the circumference of conflagration consumed the tires and marched along a large diameter blue hose lying on the ground.

I hadn't noticed the hose as I'd held the bike on top of it, but my eyes now followed it along the ground towards our left to its connection point about six feet away. With horror I realized it was the hose used by delivery trucks used to fill the main storage tanks of the station, which were behind the low containment wall directly in front of us.

My mind began playing a highlight reel of Jerry Bruckheimer class special effect images of the flames running down the hose, igniting the main storage tanks, and all of us, including Steph, Kathy and Christina in the chase van, being simultaneously blown to bits while being immolated in searing flame.

The speed of the fire advancing down the hose was exceeded only by the velocity of the station manager sprinting towards us screaming in Chinese. He'd been pretty complacent while watching Lin beat at the flames with his hands, but upon seeing his nearly new station and career about to be blown to bits, he came alive with newfound purpose and panic.

As the flames shot down the hose towards the main storage tanks, suddenly Bai, our assistant guide and master meal organizer, streaked past the station manager with the chase van's small fire extinguisher in his hand. He opened it against the right side of the bike, knocking down the flames at their source. Simultaneously, Dennis, seeing the danger presented by the blue hose leading to the gasoline storage tanks, kicked it away from its connection point, averting the threat of a catastrophic explosion.

A few more handfuls of sand and the flames were finally out.

Lin collapsed to his haunches, with complete despair pulling down his cheeks, his wet hair hanging down, the rainwater dripping off his chin, his heavily lidded eyes staring blankly at the bike, steaming and ticking as it cooled.

The rest of us looked at each other, not sure whether to laugh or celebrate, knowing only that either option would complete the loss of face for Lin.

I let out a big breath, the first I could recall since my first shout, and reached for my keys to unlock the pannier box and release my camera bag. I pulled it out and grabbed the tank bag, still hot from the fire, its rain cover melted by the flames, and slid it off the bike. I walked them over to the van as the others replaced the fire extinguishers and the station manager tried to regain his nerve.

The rain was still roaring on the canopy as I walked back out into the deluge to retrieve the GPS off the bike. Lin was crouched down on its left side, trying to attach a new gas line. His hands were shaking so badly from the cold he couldn't line up the needle nose pliers with the hose. I asked him if he wanted to push the bike back under the canopy to get it out of the rain. He shook his head violently, his anger and frustration apparent.

"I've been there," I thought while I respectfully walked away, leaving him to his lonely task of resurrecting the bike as the rain poured down in sheets, driven by the howling wind.

I glanced back and caught his eye. There was still a Fire in the Hole. It was the fire in his heart that wouldn't stop until he'd restored the bike he had accidentally set aflame.

That fire was still burning as I rode away on his bike, disappearing into the mists.

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I reach for my keys to unlock the pannier box containing my camera bag as the last of the flames are put out. Along the road in eastern China. Photo by Stephanie Hackney.