

Hitt Wash Crossing

30 July, 2007
Hitt Wash
Santa Maria Mountains
Northwest Arizona, USA

The white Toyota Tacoma pickup slowly moved into the water, dipping its front wheels in gradually and proceeding until the rears were also half submerged. It paused on the river's shelf with the water in the slack side pool lapping gently against the rock rails running from the front to rear wheel wells. The rails would protect the lower body of the Tacoma from rocks, but they could do nothing to protect it from the raging torrent splashing the hood.

The Tacoma paused, then rolled down off the shelf into the river channel. First the front wheels, then the rears. They were fully committed now. No turning back, no way to reverse back up the step, the only way out was the opposite river bank. All they had to do was traverse the boiling, rolling, exploding flood waters that separated them from dry land.

The truck moved forward gingerly, out from the protection of the near river bank. As soon as they entered the flood current, the rear of the truck was immediately lifted and swung downstream. As I watched from the cab of the Fuso, the Tacoma started moving down the flood waters, caught in the roaring current.

Time slowed dramatically. I had plenty of time to consider friction coefficients, buoyancy factors and rates of acceleration. The acceleration rate was relevant because about six meters downstream a line of large semi-submersed boulders crossed the flood swollen river. In the milliseconds that I processed the information it became clear that the downstream side of the Tacoma was going to slam into those boulders. And just as certainly the relentless current that was piling up water higher than the handles on the upstream door would lift that upstream side and flip the truck on its top, trapping the occupants under the muddy, debris filled water.

Inside the Tacoma were two friends and my wife, Stephanie.

My heart stopped, my breath already long arrested. The wipers swung a long, slow arc across the Fuso's windshield, from start to finish at least a month elapsed. I saw our entire life together pass, all the adventures, all the discoveries, all the memories, all the laughter and all the love. I could see it all, and could see it all ending against those boulders, drowned in that muddy water.

I sat frozen, unable to help, unable to change reality, unable to prevent this catastrophe, unable to reel back in the chain of decisions that led us to this place, this river, this flood, this crossing. I was merely a spectator, a bystander in what was unfolding to become the most tragic drama of my life.

Suddenly the Tacoma came alive. The instincts of the driver, trained in the dunes of the Sahara and the pistes of Northern Africa ignited. All four wheels spun. The truck bucked and rocked as first one wheel gripped, then was lifted off the bottom by the current, the opposite corner, forced down, gripped, then lifted. The truck was caught in a rocking, bucking dance of death with the river. It inched forward, then bounced downstream, then struggled forward, then slid back.

The slow rain drops splattered on the Fuso's windshield. They were large ones, distinct, and individual. They made unique pools on the glass as they disintegrated and then ran down the glass in tiny rills. Their life, their unique time in existence was now over, and they became nothing more than a memory of a special, brief time in this world before they joined the featureless mass of liquid scouring the landscape in front of me.

The Tacoma, shuddering, slipped again. The line of boulders was steadily pulling them in with a magnetic, unstoppable force. In just a few more moments, those three lives would be as three raindrops, once unique, once distinct, soon to melt into the homogenous waters of the once-were.

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The driver, with expert skill, technique and touch feathered the throttle and adjusted their line. Each tiny adjustment of throttle and steering, a quarter of degree here, a half a degree there, would yield their fates. With each millisecond, a thousand decisions, unconscious reactions transformed into infinitesimal variations of control. There was no time for thought, no room for conversation or input, this came down to skills developed and honed through real life training and talent that comes only from the genes. The driver's vector point of nature and nurture would determine their fate: life or death.

Slowly at first, then with gradually building acceleration, the Tacoma moved upstream in a diagonal path. The driver altered their line slightly. The Tacoma rocked back, and then with a mighty heave, climbed up out of the hole in the middle of the crossing. When it came down from its leap of freedom, as if shot from a bow, it crossed the remaining waters and reached the rain soaked road on the far side of the wash.

Slowly, the occupants climbed out. Scott, our friend, trainer and guide, from the passenger seat, Stephanie, my wife, from the back seat, and then Anais, the 17 year old French girl, from behind the wheel.

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Anais and the Toyota Tacoma

Photo by Stephanie Hackney

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Toyota Tacoma entering the river crossing – Scott Brady driving, recreating the crossing



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Photos by Douglas Hackney

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The Fuso crossing was much less dramatic.



Photo by Scott Brady