

# It's Not Just About the Jets

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It started with a good-deal squadron guns detachment to Key West, Fla. during the winter of 2004. This evolution was the squadron's first one after the holiday stand-down, and everyone was looking forward to some good flying and "warmer than we were used to this time of year" weather.

As soon as people started talking about Key West, I started thinking I should take some leave before the detachment to visit family and friends all along the East Coast. I figured I would need to make this journey on my bike: a 2003, 100th-anniversary-edition, Harley-Davidson Fat Boy.

In making plans for this adventure, I went to the Harley-Davidson website. My biggest concern would be the cold, and I had just the answer: one government-issue, anti-exposure suit, complete with aramid liner. Don't worry, we'll revisit that decision later.

With my ride planned, bike packed, seabag (with clothes) strapped to the sissy bar, and saddlebags loaded, I set out for Key West by way of North Carolina; Atlanta, Ga.; and Ocala and Palm Bay, Fla. The round trip would total more than 3,000 miles, and I really was looking forward to the ride.

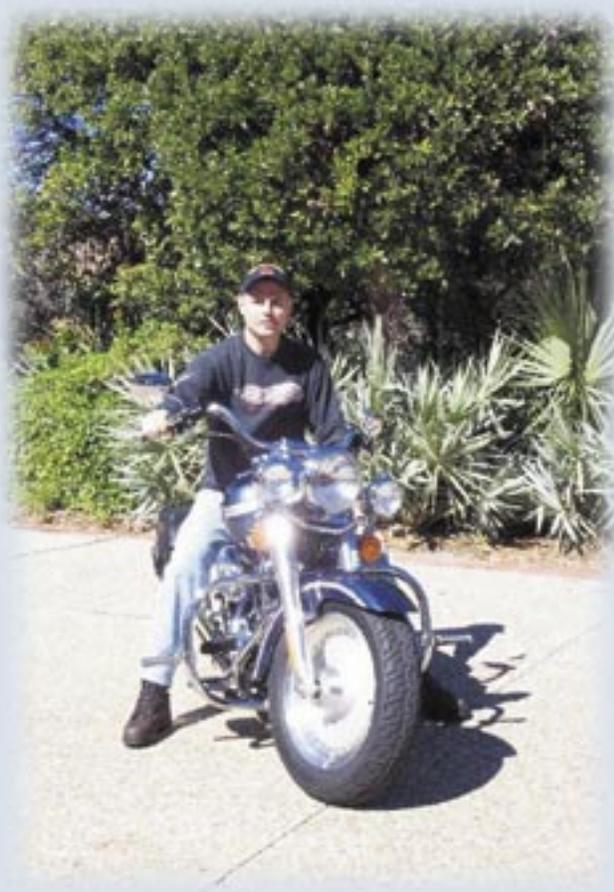
The reason I'm putting this experience on paper is because I learned a lot from it. First, I learned that Map Quest is a great thing. It's accurate for directions, mileage and time—for a car. With a motorcycle, you can bet it will take longer than planned. I was getting 40 mpg on my bike, but, on a 200-mile tank, you just can't drive very long without stopping. You also can't ride very long

when it's 32 degrees Fahrenheit outside, with 70 knots of wind in your face.

I left Virginia Beach at 0645, and my first goal was to reach Atlanta by the end of the day. I wanted to pull in at a respectable hour in the late evening, so I'd be rested and ready to go the next day. This goal, though, proved to be the first of many that didn't work out as planned.

Because reading a map on a motorcycle isn't as easy as reading one in a car, I took a scenic tour—more accurately, an unplanned detour—through North Carolina. I drove through dinner, finally arriving in Atlanta at 2334. I didn't hit the rack at my cousin's house until 0400, which meant an early start the next day was out of the question. I decided to sleep the day away and travel at night for the next seven-hour leg of my trip to Ocala. I wanted to be there by Saturday morning—I had a hard commitment I couldn't miss.

Twenty-five hours after arriving in Atlanta, I hit the road at 0100. The traffic was very light, the weather extremely cold. The anti-exposure suit was holding up well, but the gloves and boots weren't working as well as I would have liked. This problem goes back to always preflighting your gear or having the proper equipment for your job. I had my usual Harley half-shell helmet and a woolen ski mask for my face, but they weren't enough. I needed a full-face helmet or something much better than a scarf and a towel wrapped around my mouth. I pushed myself to go at least 50 miles before stopping to thaw out and to get gas. I finally made it to Ocala at 0845 that morning. I took the next week in Palm Bay to recover from the past



The author on his bike in Palm Bay, Fla.

days on the road and to get ready for the final push into Key West—so far, so good.

I left Palm Bay on Sunday afternoon in the middle of an overcast sky and slight drizzle. This first exposure to rain wasn't too bad now that I was in warmer weather. I was able to ditch the dry suit and enjoy the ride. By the time I made it to Key West, I had had the sun in my face for six hours and was thinking I might be a little sunburned. The next morning, I looked like an Indian raccoon, with a red face and very white eyes. "Should've packed the sun block," I thought.

Aside from the cold, this first half of my trip was pretty good. The return leg, though, is the one that really brought out the learning points.

I decided I would take a straight shot back to Virginia Beach, only stopping for gas and to rest here and there. With no detours for family or friends, it would be a 1,200-mile trip, compared to the 1,900 miles I traveled to get to Key West.

It turned out that the weather in Oceana was going to be nasty the next day, so the jets were going to hit the road early in the morning to beat the weather at home base. I thought I would get a jump on the jets and hit the road while the guys were briefing to fly out. This time, I was fortunate enough to get the parachute riggers to carry home most of my gear, so all I had were full saddlebags.

Once we finished up our kangaroo court and did a final farewell for a couple of our aircrew leaving the squadron, I was ready to hit my rack for a few hours before getting on the road. One of my squadronmates came up and asked when I was leaving. I told him after I had gotten some sleep and had checked out of the BOQ. He also asked about the weather, and I told him I would be fine since I had my dry suit with me. He wanted to know, though, if maybe the weather was an ORM issue. "Naw, it's just a little cold—I'll be fine," I said.

That conversation was my first clue things would be different on my trip home. I checked out of the BOQ that morning and was on the road, wearing all my heavy-weather clothing, except the dry suit. I really was enjoying the ride.

I got to watch the sun come up while heading toward Miami, Fla., and found myself grabbing a late lunch in Melbourne, Fla., eight hours later. "So

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far, so good," I thought—prematurely. By the time I hit Jacksonville, Fla., it was starting to get cold, and I could see some rain in my future. As I headed to Savannah, Ga., it was starting to get nasty, and I was wondering if pushing the situation was such a good idea, but I pressed on.

Now I remember that any time there's a doubt, there's no doubt—right? Around midnight, I was

very wet and cold, and I needed to stop a bit to rest and to recover some warmth in my body. I realized how hard it is to ride at night, especially in bad weather. It's even tougher when tractor-trailers whiz by, and you get caught in their airstream. They can shake you up pretty good. Try doing all this while riding with one hand on the throttle and the other cleaning off your glasses so you can see. Oh, and I almost forgot the construction zone—complete with cones and a ditch on one side—that wasn't well lit.

Suddenly, all I could think about was an old church joke: At 45 mph, you're singing "Just a Closer Walk With Thee; at 55 mph, you change your tune to "Nearer My God to Thee;" and, at 65 mph, you switch to "Lord I'm Coming Home!" That's how I felt. I think I was more scared at that point in my trip than I've ever been in an airplane, and God was hearing about it as I rode.

Once I made it through the construction zone, I stopped for another long rest and thaw-out period. As the sun came up the next morning, I was almost to the end of my interstate travels and ready to finish out the last five or six hours on smaller roads. I wanted to get home really bad, and nothing was going to stop me. Even as I was writing this "there I was" story in my head, I didn't stop and heed my own advice. I made it home around 1230 that day, more than 30 hours after I had started.



Another photo of the author in Palm Bay.

After spending an hour in the shower, thawing out, I began to reflect on what had happened over the last couple of days and how close I had come to planting myself along the way. I compared my ride on the Harley to a Tomcat flight and found lots of similarities. I learned many good, albeit old, lessons, starting with the problem of get-home-itis. How many jets have we lost this way? How many of our Sailors haven't come back from holiday stand-down because they pushed themselves too far and left this earth behind?

If it's so cold you have to wear your Navy-issue anti-exposure suit to survive, shouldn't that fact be telling you something? We use these suits to keep us alive in emergency situations, and here I was, wearing it voluntarily for a motorcycle road trip. Did I break my crew day? Absolutely! What's a \$50 hotel room for six or seven hours, compared to a hospital stay?

My initial planning was good, but, when the planning deviated from the execution, I should have called a time out and regrouped. Instead, I pressed on.

The funny part about this trip is that I ended up with my Harley in Key West, prepared to do some quality riding. From the BOQ to Duval Street and back was a whopping three miles, though, which meant I could have walked almost as quickly as I rode. And, the real kicker is that there weren't any

ladies standing around, waiting for somebody to go by on a cool bike and offer them a ride—so much for having the Harley in southern Florida.

After driving almost 3,200 miles, I was back where I had started, alive and well, and hopefully a bit wiser. The final thought for this adventure is that if a good safety officer had come across my plan, he would have put a stop to it. Did I forget to tell you I'm the safety officer for my squadron? 