

AN EYEWITNESS ACCOUNT

by
Dan Wilson

The following written narration was presented at the inquest convened to investigate allegations of humiliation, torture and murder of a prized cow in the area of El Alamo, Baja California Norte, by members of the Valhalla off-road race team. The hearings were held in the Visitor's Center of the famous "Santo Tomas Winery" as that was the only facility in the region of sufficient size to accommodate the masses of government officials, media representatives and concerned citizens in attendance. The Witness presented his account in written form rather than by direct testimony, as he feared upon return to Santo Tomas he would be arrested and jailed in the same facility, which formerly housed Valhalla team member Steve S. The author did not fear a deprivation of liberty for his actions, but rather that he would be forced to give endless accounts of Steve's life to the many close, personal friends Steve made during his incarceration. The author was also concerned about the possibility of a prison riot, should he unwittingly advise the convicts that Steve had married shortly after his parole. These accounts are true, as they have been written.

Senors, Senioritas, Abogados, y Licenciados:

The burden of modern living taxes every individual, and there is but little time in the day to accomplish all that need be done. It was but two weeks ago that I sat to sort through months of accumulated junk mail. Only at that time did I discover the last four issues of the Valhalla Update. While reviewing them in search of valuable coupons, I first learned that not only was the famous Baja 500 off road race impending, but that I would be driving and navigating the course from mile marker 180 to the finish with Valhalla founder and shaman, Mike S. I had been involved in previous Baja 500 races as a spectator and as a pit crewmember and I was aware of the conviviality and excitement of the event. Of course, because of Valhalla's previous performances, the conviviality and excitement usually commenced at Hussong's Cantina at about noon the morning of the race. Few Valhalla members had any experience driving the race car, and I did not know what to expect. Having known Mike for many years to be a calm and rational person, I never expected he would do what he did to that fine cow. This is an account of my involvement as a driver and co-driver of car 998 from the race pit at Valle de Trinidad, which we left at 4 p.m., to the finish near the fish market in Ensenada after midnight.

Mike was still adjusting the onboard radio as I shifted into fourth gear and watched mile "2" click on the odometer which we had reset at the last pit stop. We had screamed out of Valle de Trinidad moments before and were about to begin our ascent through miles of treacherous switchbacks in the Sierra de Juarez Mountains. For no apparent reason, Mike tapped me on the knee and motioned to pull the car to the side of the road and stop. He was chuckling.

"Aren't we a couple of chumps," he said?

"We certainly are, Mike," I agreed. "But why stop the car at this most important juncture of the race, before the route through the mountain passes, just to state the obvious?"

"That was Steve G. on the radio. The pit crew didn't refuel the car at Valle de Trinidad. A chase truck is driving the gas out to us now. I guess we're the butts of a very fine practical joke," he chortled.

"Oh, no, Mike," I replied. "They would not engage in frivolity knowing the danger that is before us. I'm sure they merely wanted us to be properly rested after that grueling 90 seconds of racing."

"Regardless," Mike said. "This allows us a unique opportunity to view and learn from the driving techniques of racers in those lower classes that are usually hours behind us. Look, there goes 'Herbie, the Love Bug.'"

As we waited for the fuel to arrive, a 1972 Chevrolet Impala driven by a very elderly man with nine sheep in the back seat rolled past. Two ewes leaned out the rear window and bleated tauntingly at us.

"We're lucky to be behind them," Mike observed. "They will set a steady pace and we're sure to be through the next twenty miles by nightfall."

Blinded by the dust cloud created by the Impala, the chase truck carrying our fuel drove past our parked race car and towards the mountains.

"I'm glad for this moment of solitude," Mike said. "It allows us the opportunity to reflect upon how truly fortunate we are to have a crew as competent and efficient as ours is. By the way," he added, "none of them were conceived in a sexual tryst that was constrained by the bonds of matrimony."

Near mile 205, we left the treacherous mountain switchbacks and descended onto the rolling hills of the Pacific Ocean side of the Baja peninsula. Flowering cholla cactus and brush bathed in hues of scarlet and yellow flowed down from the rocks on our right and kissed the edge of the road. A sea of green vineyards blanketed the valley to our left. Naturally, we thought of alcohol.

"Perhaps this very field supplies the grapes for that ever-delightfully Santo Tomas wine," Mike postulated.

"It is indeed most excellent," I agreed. "I am especially fond of the chardonnay when accompanied by a young fish properly seasoned. The wine has a slightly fruity taste."

"I agree," said Mike. "However, the cabernet sauvignon is most to my liking, and the recent vintage is especially desirable. The abundant rainfall of the preceding calendar year has decreased the acidity of the soil and increased the sugar content of the grapes. Ergo, they are especially tasty. Also, their most skillful vintner, Ramon, was captured in an immigration raid in Whittier and deported, and he has now returned to his former employment at the winery. The cabernet is a most fitting compliment to the steaks prepared by Valhalla team members Jerry and Ben."

"Two fine gentlemen," I interposed.

"Yes," Mike opined. "It is fateful that we have Jerry as a member of this race team, as he brings to the preparation of the car the degree of care and dedication which are his hallmarks and which are evidenced in all facets of his life. We would not have had our previous success with this race if not for his involvement."

"And Ben," I surmised, "could suffer an unexpected financial disaster, become impoverished and destitute, and still be respected by the same number of people who now think highly of him."

We drank an imaginary toast to our comrades and set our sights on the 210-mile marker.

As we traveled toward Highway 1 we would occasionally downshift from fourth gear to second gear and cause the engine to scream and the wheels to slide uncontrollably for no other purpose than to petrify those small children that lined the road to give us a "thumbs up" and to sell Chiclettes to the drivers who had crashed and lay bleeding beside their vehicles waiting to be evacuated by helicopter. Soon the road changed from crushed granite to red, adobe clay and we passed a few dilapidated dwellings that bore the color and consistency of refried beans. We were again reminded of the poverty of this desert paradise and our conversation turned to macroeconomics.

"They lack sound business judgment," said Mike. "Consider the lime. It constitutes a major portion of their daily dietary intake. Three parts of the national drink, the margarita, are comprised of lime juice."

"Five parts at Hussong's," I added.

"A dozen limes are included with every order of nachos. Should you request seafood in a restaurant, a separate bowl is required to contain the limes. Every taco stand in every town has a mound of limes on the counter and a case or two of them on the floor."

"And with every cerveza, a quarter slice of lime is pressed into the bottle," I added.

"Right," said Mike. "In just that fashion I saw Mike N. consume two bushels one evening before he made his first excursion to the men's room."

Mike then grew silent. Fearing that the blower supplying filtered air to my helmet was malfunctioning and the resulting decrease in oxygen had impaired my cognitive reasoning, I analyzed Mike's comments slowly and as carefully as I could. After a few moments I decided to risk a display of my ignorance and asked Mike a stupid question.

"What do limes have to do with the deplorable level of poverty that we are speeding past and honking at?"

Mike responded in a true Socratic fashion with a well-phrased question. "You have been through the Baja," he said. "From the Sea of Cortez to the Pacific Ocean and Tijuana to Cabo San Lucas. In that time have you ever seen even one lime tree?" After a short pause he added, "They import limes at a premium and distribute them far below acquisition costs. Should the Mexican people

charge a fair price for limes, they would restore the economy and remove the economic blight which curses this country."

The road straightened and our speed increased and there was little time to further ponder the observation. Soon we crested a hill and passed an old man who was standing by the road with a pig that was the color of a corn tortilla. Mike thought of his friend, Gil.

"It is especially comforting that good, decent and noble persons such as Gil, Mike N. and you have chosen law as a profession so that you can help the downtrodden and dedicate your skills to the benefit of mankind. Nearly every day at the County Sanitation Districts, I monitor the sewage flow and dream that I could be a lawyer and help others, starting full time with my immediate family. By the way," he added, "my mother awaits arraignment on five additional charges of civil disobedience and she'd like for you to give her a call."

"I saw her as we crossed the border at Tijuana," I revealed. "She was wearing horns and had banderillas sticking out of her back. I think she might have been protesting the bullfights, or something."

"She even practices barricading at home. Last week she blocked my dad out of the toilet for three hours. He finally went outside behind the garage. He doesn't know how it happened, but he accidentally sent a stream over the fence and into the neighbor's garden. He wiped out the old lady's agapanthus and she says he tainted her corn crop. She called the cops and it could become ugly."

"It's in the nature of mothers today, Michael. It used to be that middle-aged housewives gathered to have tea, do a little quilting, and make a few cookies for a bake sale. Now, they make bombs. They have secret handshakes when they meet in the supermarket. They've become militarized. My own mother has started wearing a camouflage bathrobe around the house."

Mike sighed. "You know what really annoys me?" he asked. "I think she took those horns from my Viking costume and ruined it for her amateur theatrics."

As we drove, Mike continued his soliloquy on the virtues of the legal profession. I was so proud to be a lawyer that I even thought of making a payment on my student loan. At the end of his eloquent expression, Mike added: "Now I've got to take a giant leak real bad."

The road was dusty and gritty; its components were the very tough Law Firm of Granite, Quartz & Clay. Obsidian and Basalt were present also, but they had not made the ranks of senior partner. We left the dust at mile 225 and crossed Highway 1 and traveled northwest to the ocean.

The terrain, which parallels Highway 1, is dramatically different from the land but a few miles inland; fields of onions, cabbage and wheat grow along the road as if the residents are trying to make a good impression on the people traveling the main highway.

"This is where I proposed to Valorie," Mike said.

"You proposed at the intersection of Highway 1 with a graded dirt road through a field of cabbage on way to Ejido Erindera?," I inquired.

"No," Mike said. "I mean in Baja California."

Like lemmings, we moved toward the sea.

The road to Ejido Erindera followed a creek, which wound without reason through the mesa that leads to the water. Deep green foliage and miniature trees grow to the edge of the road. Impertinent rocks jutted at irregular intervals and a light mist condensed on our face shields. Mike recounted every single spot on the road where a race car ever had, or could have, hurled off the road, crashed, burned and thereby deprived the drivers of acquiring the coveted imitation cloisonné finisher's pin. As Mike did often to inspire us through difficult portions of the race, he began to loudly hum the "da da - da da da - da da" that served as the opening musical notes to Wagner's opus on valor and victory, "The Flight of the Valkyrie." Unbeknownst to Mike, however, at about the twelfth "da" he inexplicably changed the tempo and key and soon the "da da's" began to resemble the melody from Sheena Easton's 1982 megahit, "My Baby Takes the Morning Train." We reached the ocean at mile 243.

Vicious waves of viridian blue pounded the volcanic walls that stand as land's defense against sea. Sharp, craggy rocks were visible at the base of the steep cliffs along which the road ran.

"I would be most grateful," Mike claimed, "if you would consider decreasing your speed to a more temperate level. Should we lose control and plunge off these cliffs, we would certainly harm various crustaceans, which have formed encounter groups below, and could adversely impact the ecosystem of the tide pools. Moreover," he added, "Jerry was hindered in his preparation of the vehicle by a two week vacation and a painful case of hemorrhoids occasioned by his poor reading habits. Consequently, there may be a modicum more grease and petroleum deposits on the exterior of the motor than one would customarily find on something other than, say, a Mexican oil tanker. Should we land in the water we could conceivably cause an oil slick which would inconvenience the surfers down on the beach."

Begrudgingly, I shifted to third and was more conscious of my environment until we descended onto a sandy beach at mile 255.

"I caught crabs on this beach one evening and took them into town," Mike said.

I envisioned a quaint cantina up the road with a candle, a bottle of the very-delightful Santo Tomas wine, and enough limes to prevent scurvy in a flotilla of pirate schooners. In my mind, a senorita named "Gordita" boiled the shellfish and rolled the meat on to fresh tortillas.

"Luckily," Mike said, "I was able to find a Pharmacia that was open late and I blasted the buggers with some medicated shampoo."

Near mile 263, we turned inland toward the town of Santa Tomas, original home of the celebrated Santo Tomas Winery, and our speed quickened. It was not particularly prudent to increase our

pace at this juncture, and there was nothing about the road or our race strategy which suggested holding the pedal to the metal. At this stage, however, we had been in the car for nearly three hours, and the constraining kidney belts along with the tightly fastened five-point harness system had compressed our bladders to a miniscule size. We hurt, and the gurgling of the Ejido Erindera creek and the crashing of the waves along the beach intensified the pain.

"We'll make a stop past Santo Tomas at . . . , er, . . . you know the town."

"Yes," I said. "At . . . ah, . . . that little town that begins with a "U."

Neither of us could bring ourselves to say "Uruapan" as that name was too phonetically similar to "urinate," and that was an activity we squirmed to forget. We blew past the welcoming committee sipping Santo Tomas wine outside checkpoint 5 and raced toward our pit a quarter mile beyond at the town of "U."

In the brief distance between checkpoint 5 and the Valhalla pit lay the small town of Santo Tomas, home of the famous El Palomar Hotel and the Law Offices of Ernesto Gomez Navar Sanchez Gonzales, Abogado. Ernesto had taken his mother's maiden name of "Sanchez" which was a customary practice in the Hispanic culture. As Ernesto was an important man, however he also took the maiden name of his grandmother, which accounts for the "Gonzales." Ernesto tried to take the name of his mother-in-law, but the old woman argued fiercely that she still needed it so Ernesto took her savings instead. When the Valhalla team first met Ernesto four years before, he was a struggling country lawyer trying to earn a living and keep his babies in diapers, himself in limes, and his wife in line. It was only after he assumed the defense of the defendant in the notorious Steve S. criminal case that he gained fame, wealth, and a very favorable endorsement in the ninth edition of Frommer's, *The Dumb, Drunk American's Guide To The Baja*. Ernesto had remained a good and loyal friend to the team, and when he saw the race car pass before him he was so excited that he directed both his secretary and his paralegal to wave at us on his behalf. Ernesto had written an unsolicited letter wishing the team health, fortune, Godspeed, and all of the other courtesies lawyers often express. In the letter, he speculated that if we were not careful and became involved in a cow incident near El Alamo, we would probably finish seventh in the race. Unfortunately, the letter was not typed and mailed by his secretary until two days after the race and we were deprived of his valuable advice at the time we needed it most. Regardless, we promptly paid his bill for reviewing our file and thinking of us as the debt contained an especial discount for his especial friends.

The Valhalla pit just past checkpoint 5 was manned by Brian H. and personed by Valorie B., who had been proposed to in Baja California and thereafter toasted with a sparkling wine containing lime slices from a noted winery in the region. Mike cut the engine and we both bound from the vehicle and ran toward a large saguaro to investigate its backside. After 100 miles of bumps, dips, rocks and gullies, the act of doing what had to be done required a light and delicate touch not unlike that needed by a vascular surgeon operating on a very bruised patient in great discomfort. I voided for nine and one-half minutes straight; Mike took a little longer because of the intricate "drawings" of Vikings and nymphs he made in the dust. Mike emitted shrieks and groans, and it was later that I learned that he had ventured to close to the cactus and a few needles had

penetrated the fireproof exterior of his Nomex jumpsuit. Back in the car, an unidentified member of the pit crew gave us a status report:

"You are in tenth place, five minutes behind car number 923, which is sponsored by the El Ministerio del Turismo del Baja Norte. You will soon enter deep canyons and loose radio contact for the next twenty miles."

As he was finishing a small, delicate child came to the passenger's side of the vehicle.

"You look depleted and famished, sir," she said with her sweet voice.

"Yes, my dear," I replied. "It has been most grueling and a slight repast or morsel would lift my spirits and aid my ailments."

With this she handed to me what appeared to be a partially eaten fish taco, which had been softened, in her tiny palms. I opened my mouth in a peculiar fashion, as it is most difficult, I had discovered, to eat while wearing a full-face helmet. At the very moment I was about to insert the bite into my mouth, Mike floored the accelerator and the taco slipped from my hand and passed through the crevice between the exterior of my chin and the interior of the helmet. It journeyed down the fire retardant skirt that ran from the bottom of the helmet inside the fire suit to the center of my chest. The taco lodged somewhere near my collarbone. It remained there for 135 miles and 5 hours until I removed the helmet at the finish line whereupon the taco fell to the ground and was later discovered and consumed by Steve S. during the festivities.

At mile 295, Mike veered the car from the main highway and the course continued through the civic center of Uruapan. Range cattle looked on disapprovingly as we sped past, quail scurried into the underbrush and occasionally a roadrunner would run next to us down the road until it realized it had far better things to do than race in the Baja. As we reached the suburbs, the road forked to the right onto a goat path strewn with large boulders. The section of road before us from Uruapan, past the peaks of Tres Hermanos and through the deserted mining town of El Alamo was arguably the most technically demanding section of the race and possibly the worst road north of the equator. Any car, which could conquer the forty miles of boulders, mud pits, and unmarked roads through canyons, creek beds, and wastes of sand, would certainly be a contender in the competition. That is, if the vehicle and drivers could remain functional and a competent pit crew awaited them at the next stop. As we were about to commence our trip through Baja hell, Mike suddenly pulled to the side of the road and began making major adjustments in the volume and frequency of our onboard radio.

"Mike!," I exclaimed. "You will cause horrible distortion in our communiqués!"

"Chuddup, cabrone," he threatened.

It struck me that Mike's diction and enunciation, formerly that of a Naval Academy graduate, an officer and a gentleman, had changed. Mike sounded like a punk from the worst barrio, or like one of Ernie, Jr's relatives after some especially satisfying street carnage. Mike pressed the transmit button to "on."

"Theees eees nueve-dos-tres carro to nueve-dos-tres peeet nombre siete" he snarled. "Alto trabajo con peeet nombre siete. Cerveza fria con mucho limon, y muchachas con tetas grande en mi casa. Vamanos. Adios. Vaya con Dio."

Mike readjusted the dials on the radio. "923 is now a 'Did Not Finish.'" he proclaimed. He eased the car into gear and we climbed over the first boulder.

Darkness fell eerily over the dirt road heading east. A lazy moon silhouetted the peaks of "Tres Hermanos" and the luminous eyes of nighthawks gleamed in the light of our five halogen headlights as the birds searched under the cover of darkness for the marmots that burrowed under the boulders that lined the road. It struck us that French explorers would name mountains "Grand Tetons" in honor of female mammary glands, while lonesome Mexican frontiersmen would call such peaks "a trio of brothers." We thought of Steve S. and the brotherhood of inmates in the Ensenada jail.

We made exceptional time and passed a number of vehicles on the road to El Alamo because of the skillful driving of Mike and even more so because the accelerator had broken and the motor idled near the tachometer's redline. To keep awake we spoke of many things. We spoke of the women who truly loved and admired us, which made that tenth of a mile speed by in a flash. Finally, we began listing all of the special items of the Baja that we were privileged to see. After an intense botanical review, we began listing the animals we had seen, of course naming them by genus and species whenever possible.

"I saw a couple of lizards and a gopher snake," said Mike.

"And there were bunny rabbits and those things that looked like albino chipmunks," I added.

"Remember the donkeys and sheep?," Mike asked.

"Who can forget those birds?" I inquired. "I saw gray and blue quail, a hawk and a seagull."

"And I saw a couple of vultures following Colletti and Davis' 906 car," Mike said.

"I think I saw some pieces of the shell of a rare desert tortoise in the road back there," I furthered.

Soon, we had begun to exhaust the list and we began pressing. "I saw Brian H., Phil M., Dave R, and Steve G. out in town last night," added Mike. We were silent for a few moments and then, in a simultaneous flash, we both instantaneously remembered the animal we had failed to include in our inventory. "A COW!!!!!!!"

Astronomers tell us there are more than three billion stars in the galaxy. On a dark, clear night in the desert, the sky is alive with twinkling dots, but only one thousandth of the total can be seen by the naked eye. That is, unless a person has been struck by the hoof of a large red cow, after it had been hit by a Class 9 Baja race car traveling at over 40 miles an hour, then hurled over the hood of the vehicle and into the section of the car otherwise reserved for the co-driver, before it rolled back to the right side of the road from whence it came. In that case, all three billion stars are visible as

well as a few dozen other nebulae not yet charted. Unfortunately, the pain of the moment of impact with the cow blurred much of my recollection of the moment, but this is what I recall.

I noticed the beast on the right side of the road seconds before it spurted into our path and then, hopefully, cow heaven. For a fraction of a second, I made eye contact with the creature; it had the same crazed look often seen in photographs of persons arrested for running naked through the half-time entertainment on Super Bowl Sunday. The impact struck the cow in the head and left shoulder, and caused it to do a backward flip to the right similar to the dismount from the uneven parallel bars that made Mary Lou Retton an Olympic star and a late night fantasy date of my race partner. We never slowed.

"Damn," Mike said. "If Jerry had installed that Viking hood ornament as I asked, we could have brought the beast into checkpoint 6 and barbecued a few steaks while waiting for the chase crew to show up."

We were silent for a while. Other range cattle along the roadside looked hatefully at us; word travels fast in the cow community. Later, we began to speak of what caused that cow to bolt. Neither of us had any experience with beef gone bad, with the exception of a few steaks Ben had barbecued the week before.

"Maybe it thought it was a rabbit," Mike said.

"Or, it could have been an adrenalin junkie and needed another fix," I said. "Or, more possibly, I know what happened."

I knew that Mike was an avid believer in conspiracy theories and a big fan of the Oliver Stone movie "JFK". Mike had seen the film three times because of the subject matter and the fact that the movie was very long. The length of the film allowed him to do the "popcorn surprise" a number of times in one sitting.

"We didn't kill that cow. The cow was dead when we struck it. I think I saw Colletti and Davis' 906 vehicle come from off-course on the grassy mesa to the right. It struck the defenseless beast and flung it into our path. I'm positive if we return we will find their tire tracks to the right of the road and then we can lodge a complaint against them with the SCORE officials for being off course."

I had barely finished when Mike turned a sudden "U" and returned to the site. He thought this presented a perfect opportunity to disqualify a competitor and improve our position. The time it took for us to backtrack and investigate, however, was slightly longer than the time lapse between the period when the winner finished and we crossed the line.

When we reached the site we discovered that Valhalla goodwill ambassadors Gil S., Jim R., Steve S., and Carl R.-P. were already on the scene. Gil had dispensed all of his business cards and in the excitement had retained himself for representation in his own wrongful birth suit. Jim advised the cows of available health, life and disability insurance policies. In the surreal setting of the site, over the sound of our engine, the death gurgles of the cow and the wailing of its' owner, we hear Steve S. counseling a group of ranchers on safer and more profitable methods of making a living.

"Er, . . . , ah, . . . In the history of securities no diversified portfolio has even been obliterated by a Class 9 racer," we heard him say.

Carl did magic and card tricks for the calves and inquired whether the estate of the decedent bovine had any baseball cards, gold coins, Rolex watches or fine art prints needing liquidation. As we left we saw a number of the relatives of the deceased eating Gil's completed "billable hours" time records, which had been left unattended in the front seat of the chase truck.

"That was the most unusual and exciting thing that ever happened to me," said Mike.

"Michael," I sternly replied. "I was with you twice before your 19th birthday when you lost control of your car and totaled it and then we had to tell your dad. Striking a cow isn't that much different than a maple tree or a stalled bobtail truck."

"Not hitting the cow, fool. Didn't you see it? Just before the accident off to the left of the road was an orchard of lime trees."

We drove toward the finish as fast as we could because of our competitive nature as well as the fact that we didn't have Mexican insurance.

The rest of what I recall was hours of bouncing and jostling in total darkness, the quick turns and the jockeying for position. Then there was exhaustion, discomfort and then, nearing completion, relief, satisfaction and the exhilaration of the finish with flashing lights, loud applause, adulation, the pouring of the sparkling Santo Tomas wine and the final "thumbs up" for the video camera.

Of course, all of that occurred in my motel room long after the race.