

Wharton State Forest Trail Ride 2/16/03
Bruce Kalin

On Feb 16, 2003 I met with a small group of “die hard” military vehicle enthusiasts at the Wharton State Forest for what would turn out to be, one of the most memorable excursions I have ever participated in.

Mike Popovitch, a member of the local New Jersey Unimog club, as well as an avid off roader, organized the event. Mike, who lives on the Jersey shore trailered his beautiful 1987 U1300L Unimog to the starting point of the trail ride, which was a small field with enough parking for those who trailered their vehicles, plus an entrance gate to a trail in the Wharton State Forest. David Hulme drove another Unimog, a 1969 U404 from Howell, NJ. Scott Daniels drove 3 hours from Mountainside, NJ also in a Unimog U 404. He was instrumental in helping Mike by staying in contact via radio about the progress of the trip. The other Unimog U1300L came in from Pennsylvania, driven by Scott Moreland.

Unimog is a manufacturing division of Mercedes Benz, and in true Mercedes tradition, these trucks are first class in both function and looks. Like Mercedes, these trucks do not come cheap, with the average cost of a vehicle like Mike’s running over \$20,000. So, if you’re thinking about trading in your deuce, you might want to think twice about that decision.

Mike had contacted me, as well as several other MTA, and Unimog club members a few months earlier about his idea for a trail ride through a section of the New Jersey Pine Barrens. Mike has been off roading in south Jersey since he was a kid, and has a great deal of experience with the area and organizing trail rides. However, leading a pack of green monster vehicles through the narrow, sandy trails on a day that snowed so heavily it brought visibility down to about 5 feet, was not something he had done before. Mike’s meticulous planning and attention to detail was evident every step of the way, and was instrumental in the safe ride we participated in, despite Mother Nature’s uncooperative attitude that day.

I had some trepidation as to taking my deuce through the trails with low hanging trees, since most of my recent income had been given to Beachwood Canvas for a new cargo cover. Jude Meehan, always one to step in and solve a problem, offered to let me drive his newly acquired 1987 HUMMVEE, which he planned to tow down to Wharton. Now how could I pass up an offer like that? So, the morning of the ride I met Jude at the Kmart lot in Manahawkin, not far from my home, and about 45 minutes from Wharton State Forest. I parked my wife’s blazer in the lot and jumped in Jude’s F-250 4x4-crew cab with his HUMMVEE, which was securely mounted on the trailer behind his truck for the ride down to Wharton. It was still a bit cloudy when we pulled out of the lot and the weatherman had been warning of snow, but who’s afraid of a few inches of white stuff?

We hadn’t been on the parkway for more than 5 minutes when the snow began to fall. It was kind of light at first, but with the HUMMVEE on the trailer and the decreased visibility, Jude played it

smart, and safe by reducing his highway speed considerably. Jude called Bill Peaslee on the cell phone, which was coming down with Mark Lesko in his Kaiser 715. We wanted to insure that they were not running into any more snow than we had encountered. We didn't want to turn back, but we also didn't want to get stuck in the middle of no where. Bill assured us that there was very little snow falling when he and Mark left the Jackson area. They were what we figured was about 30 minutes behind us, although on a different route. Mark has done a fine job getting his truck in shape, and his efforts were well rewarded, as the truck did not let him down all day.

I was acting as the navigator for Jude, and as the snow began to come down harder the road signs became more difficult for me to see. It wasn't long before I had Jude heading off in the wrong direction with no way to turn around the truck-trailer combination. The fact that the wiper blades on Jude's Ford left a lot to be desired that morning will not be mentioned here. The pressure was on Jude to keep the truck on the narrow, snow covered back roads, while he was also thinking that he did not want to arrive at Wharton and find that everyone else had already left on the trail ride. I was just hoping that Jude wasn't too upset with my inadequate vision.

When we finally arrived at the planned starting point at Wharton Forest we found most of the other vehicles were already there, parked in several inches of newly fallen snow. It turned out to be over a two hour ride that morning from the Kmart parking lot.

A short time later we were following along with group of Unimogs, an M35A2 with full canvas cover driven by Ken Langdon (who had more guts than I did), Ken's 715 Kaiser, a 1985 CJ-7 Jeep owned by Dan Burke, and a Cummins Powered 1995 Dodge Ram 2500 from Furlong, PA, which was driven by it's owner Pete Woolsey, into the back trails of Wharton State Forest. Jude and I had acquired a passenger / photographer before we left. Brian Heuschkel proved to be a good "back seat driver," the kind that enjoys the ride, and let's the driver do the driving. Oh, did I forget to say that Jude was driving his 1987 M998 HUMMVEE? I have very poor luck with other people's property, and given the circumstances, I felt a lot more secure that if something adverse were to happen I would not be the one behind the wheel.

Oh yes, another little item of interest was the fact that the windshield wiper motor on the HUMMVEE was not installed in the truck. Jude had spent a good deal of the day before getting the HUMMVEE PM'd. However, the shaft on the wiper motor was stripped, and not repairable. With no spare motor available, Jude used a good supply of Rain-Ex, hoping that the windshield would stay clear. Remarkably, his pseudo windshield wiper plan was working as we traversed the first twenty minutes of the trail.

The big Unimogs, with their tremendous ground clearance were leading the way. They also made nice ruts in the trail, which were pretty easy for the smaller vehicles to follow. Bill and Mark were directly ahead of us in the Kaiser M-715, and the considerable difference in vehicle width between the narrow M-715, and the wide HUMMVEE trucks became very apparent as the trail narrowed. We did not see Mark's truck slide even one time, as he easily followed the larger trucks ahead of him. We however, mowed down quite a few of the lower branches hanging over

the sides of the road, and the wide tires tended to “float” on the snow.

We were about an hour into the very first section of the trail when the small trail emptied onto the paved state road. This is where Ken Langdon and his deuce bailed out, for fear of the road becoming increasingly narrow, and the snow becoming deeper. (I think he was afraid of ripping his cargo cover). A few miles of riding on the highway and we then turned back into the forest trails. It was here that the Rain-Ex proved that it was not Snow-Ex. The rate of snow, as well as the freezing just overwhelmed a good product. It was my turn to go to work, as I reached into the hole in the windshield frame where the wiper mechanism rods were visible. A tug and a push got the wipers going. It turned out to be a several thousand tugs-and-push ride.

Another hour later, it was about a foot of snow deeper and the CJ-7 Jeep gave up the ghost. Just goes to show that you really should leave the engineering to the engineers. Since the stock air filter had been replaced with an after market unit, the moisture, mixed with the quickly dropping temperatures created ice in the carburetor, freezing the venturi. No gas down the carb = no go for the jeep. A rescue tow from Pete Woolsey and his Dodge pickup brought the jeep to our next stop, the Hedger House.

We had abandoned a good section of the trail at that point, as most of us needed both a rest stop, as well as a warm pit stop. When we emerged from the trail we found ourselves behind a road grader, plowing along at about 5 miles per hour. When Jude was finally able to see far enough ahead of the grader to pass, we picked up speed and flew down to the Hedger House at about 15-mph.

The Hedger House is a combination 7-11, bar, and neighborhood sandwich shop with tables and chairs. It was warm, the people were friendly, and it was pretty much empty of customers. The food was also pretty good, and we took our time warming up and discussing the trip to that point. The Hedger House in Chatsworth was the halfway point for the planned route. In the actual route, it became the turn around point for all of us that remained.

The Jeep owner, Dan Burke who works at Beachwood Canvas in Toms River, called AAA. To our amazement, they actually were going to come out and tow him home. I used to think it was a waste of money to buy AAA. I can tell you that I went home that night with the intention of signing up, only to find out that my wife already had us registered.

It was about 40 minutes back to the starting point via direct paved road from the Hedger House. We managed to pass the grader again, while he was on his return trip down the road that was getting snow covered faster than he could plow it off. The snow continued to come down with a vengeance as we pulled in to the field where the trucks and trailers were parked. We were met by a couple of Park Rangers, who spent the next 20 minutes checking out the vehicles, along with registrations, insurance, etc. They also were kind enough to let us know that there was now a State of Emergency declared for the area, and that we could not leave the park going southbound. Fortunately, we were all headed north. It took a little effort for Mike Popovitch to get his truck

out of the snow with the Unimog on the trailer, but after a few tries, he was free and we all headed toward home.

We had dropped off Brian, who promised to mail me some of the photos he had taken, and replaced him with Bill Peaslee, who became a passenger after Mark headed north from the Hedger House with his M-715. On the return route, Mike, who was towing his Unimog, and Jude, who was towing his HUMMVEE passed the Hedger House once again, so that we could insure that Dan was not still sitting there waiting for AAA. Remarkably, Dan and the Jeep were gone, hopefully toward the safety of Dan's house. Jude and Bill drove me back to the Kmart lot, where I expected to find my wife's truck either snowed in, or plowed in. To my amazement, the truck was sitting between two very large snowdrifts, with very little against the truck. It easily made it out of the drifts in 4-wheel low range. Oh, did I neglect to tell you that the wiper blades on Jude's beautiful F-250 worked as well as a couple of swizzle sticks? Even though Kmart had closed due to the storm, Walmart next door was still open and Jude was able to replace the blades for the ride home. By the time the snow stopped, south Jersey had a total of 26 inches of snow on the ground. I couldn't remember seeing snow like that since I was a kid.

I've attached a copy of just one of the many information e-mails that I received from Mike Popovitch prior to the trail ride. It is certainly to his credit that we all had an enjoyable day. You can see from the plans where we started, and how much of the planned trip we actually had to eliminate due to the storm.

An addendum from Mike:

Our drive home was uneventful and slow. We drove past the Hedger House also to see if Dan was there and of course he wasn't. My biggest concern that day was the safety of the drivers. On our ride down the Parkway, when we reached the New Gretna toll plaza, a pickup truck almost slammed into the rear of my trailer. Fortunately, I saw him sliding and I pulled forward to let him hit the guardrail. It was scary but being alert helped.

Although Mother Nature played havoc on the trip, it was definitely worth it. It's rare that people get to see the Pine Barrens with that much snow. We can all boast and say that we were out playing in the storm of the century. You might want to include something about Scott Daniels who drove 3 hours from Mountainside, NJ in his Unimog 404. He was instrumental in helping me by staying in contact via radio about the progress of the trip. I give him a lot of credit since he was tired and cold from the long drive and this was the first time his truck has ever been off road. He's a good guy and also helped me as a spotter during a trip to Virginia last year.

I would like to reschedule this trip for late April so let me know what would be a good day for you and I will put the word out. Like the previous trip, I want to educate people about the Pine Barrens and have fun at the same time.

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If you're interested in the next trail ride, contact Mike via e-mail. If it's not snowing you may see me there.

Bruce

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