

Black Thunder

Words: **Chris** Pics: **Alan & Violet**

In a bid to continue bringing you, like always, "real world" Kiwis taking on the rest of the globe, here is part two of the Black Thunder Racing story from the salt flats of Bonneville. If you missed part one (issue 39) here is a quick re-cap plus how Alan and the team got on...



The view Alan had been waiting to see.

Alan Thoresen is a man on a mission, and has had an interest in going to Bonneville since the late eighties when he saw a documentary on the television. But it was the culmination of him turning 50, two years ago and the hype surrounding the Burt Munro movie that made Alan decide it really was time to do it, as he explains, "I got the Burt Munro DVD which had a second disc showing loads of footage of Burt over on the salt doing his runs, and it had a lot of interesting information on it." Alan admits to having huge admiration for the great man and especially the way he went about making it to Bonneville, so he thought it would be great to follow in his footsteps.

The sponsor, Chris from Go Logistics, said that if he was serious and decided to go for it, he wouldn't mind getting involved. So with one major hurdle already overcome, Alan decided that this was it.

Alan's last drag bike was a ZZ-R1100 so the obvious choice for his new race bike had to be the new ZX-14. With a claimed 200PS @ 9500rpm out of the crate, a long wheelbase and the all-important Ram-Air, the latest missile to join the Kawasaki stable would be perfect for the job. The bike itself is pretty much standard, just with a large Nitrous Oxide (NOS) bottle strapped to the rear. It also has an air-shifter, which allows Alan to swap cogs with a simple press of a button and also the clutch has been beefed up to deal with the extra horses.

Bonne-bound...

Alan and crew departed Auckland bound for Las Vegas, to rendezvous with the bike, which was waiting for them there. They arrived in Las Vegas to find the bike was all okay and intact - although the shipping crate had taken some hard impacts in its journey through the high seas.

After a tour of the Goodyear Racing HQ, where they just missed John Force and his daughters, (you may have seen them on TV in NZ as top USA Drag Racers - they were picking up some tyres from Goodyear) they called on Steve, a guy at Las Vegas Dyno Tech who made his Dyno available the next day for some testing on the Kawasaki ZX-14 Black Thunder.

The day before departure for Bonneville was extremely busy as team



Black Thunder had to collect NOS bottles from Fast and Furious Performance out by the Las Vegas Speedway, and then head a few buildings down to Dynotech, where Steve helped set up and dynamometer test the ZX14. The bike shut down the dyno when it reached 204mph in top gear, and about halfway through the range, as the bike was faster than the dyno limits, so all looked promising, providing they could get up to these speeds at Bonneville.

That afternoon the team picked up their final crewmember Andy Goodridge, from Te Awamutu, who decided to join at the last minute. That evening was spent at the Las Vegas Speedway "Bull Ring" watching Violet's nephew, Joe DeGuevara, racing. Later that evening a notice went up on the big digital display board, with the message "Welcome Black Thunder Racing from NZ, and Good Luck at Bonneville!!".

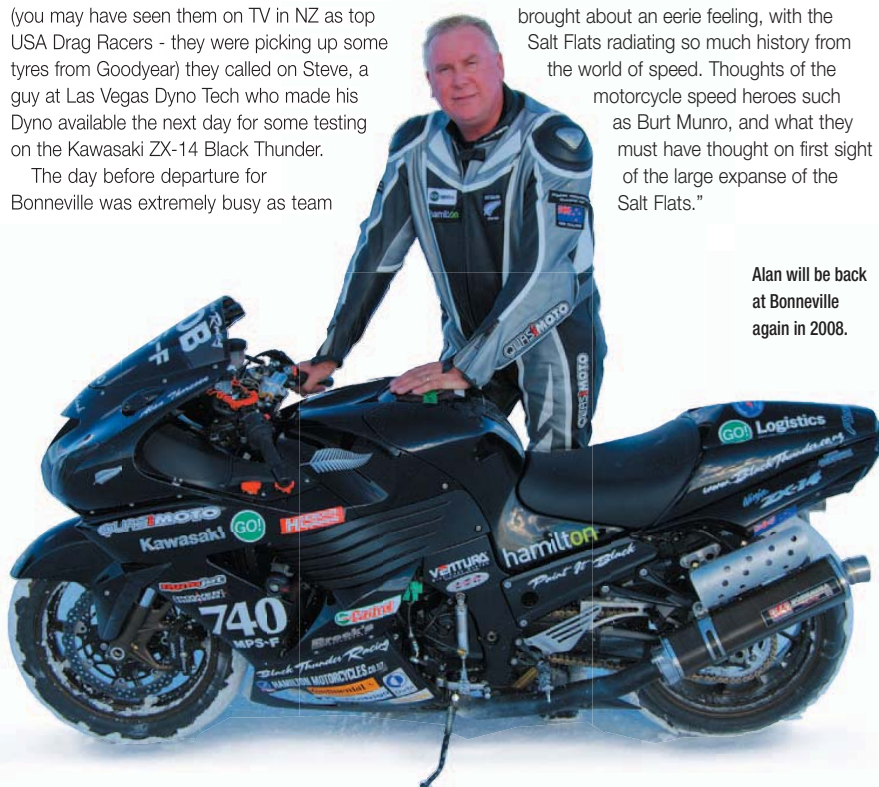
Early the next day they loaded up the trailer for the Bonneville departure. Alan re-calls, "Pulling into Wendover around 6pm, getting a glimpse of the Salt Flats as we approached the town... brought about an eerie feeling, with the Salt Flats radiating so much history from the world of speed. Thoughts of the motorcycle speed heroes such as Burt Munro, and what they must have thought on first sight of the large expanse of the Salt Flats."



Alan's with wife and PR Manager, Violet.

Friday morning was technical inspection as Alan continues. "As we approached the 'gathering area' we joined a longish queue for technical inspection. A couple of really friendly officials basically took us by the hand to show us the procedures, and get all of our paperwork completed, and we then took the bike to technical inspection. There was a lot of interest in ourselves and the Kawasaki ZX14 Black Thunder, with lots of people taking pictures of us. We ran into a couple of issues in technical inspection, the first being we were re-categorised to run under MPS-F Category, which has a current record of 214mph, so our sights of a lower record speed were washed away. Secondly, we were told that we had to put metal straps around the battery, as they felt the factory retention strap was inadequate, so after a lot of asking around, Neil got a couple of hose clamps he put together to meet the Bonneville Inspector's requirements. The final issue was we needed some engine class capacity decals made, so we had to modify some existing letter decals into numbers, which Violet painstakingly carried out." The bike was then fuelled up and fuel tank sealed, to prevent any additives being used.

On Saturday the briefing was held with a huge number of competitors present, and then team Black Thunder joined a long queue, to start his licence qualification racing at Bonneville. After a couple of hours the team was on the line. "I headed outside with my leathers, helmet and gloves, and looked down the salt, mentally preparing myself for the run - my first run had to be more than 125mph, but no more than 149mph, for my D



Alan will be back at Bonneville again in 2008.

ZX14 Nitro

Long, smooth but little in the way of traction.

licence. I started off very slowly, as the salt was like ice for wheel spinning, and slowly built up speed to run within the licence parameters for the speed. I found a rough patch at around the mile marker, however the ZX14 and I kept a good track to run up through to the 3 mile marker, and then slowly closed the throttle... NO BRAKING! As the speed ran down I slowly veered off to the left of the track and rode over to the return road where I shut the bike down, and unzipped my leathers while I waited some five minutes in the scorching heat, for the Black Thunder Crew to come and pick me up. Having a D licence I went on to do a second run and qualified for my C Licence, which allows me to run to 175mph."

Sunday's run was hampered by bad weather. Also the run was hard work due to loss of traction, and high speed wheelspins. At around 180mph, Alan opened the throttle - the rpm went up but the speed was stationary. They got through regardless and are hoped for better weather next time.

Monday temperatures of up to 105°F and density altitudes of almost 8000ft were impacting on the tuning and performance of the ZX14 Black Thunder on the Bonneville Salt Flats. Alan had run the ZX14 on courses one and two, however to date, Alan tended to favour course one as although it still had some rough patches, they didn't seem as bad as course two. Having qualified to run on the long courses, which they call the 200mph courses, the ZX was still having traction problems with the rear wheel spinning at speeds around 175mph, which made the ride rather exciting.

Back on the salt on Tuesday, and once again the weather was as hot as the past few days. Neil and Andy prepared the bike and did a few adjustments on the chain. After changing the gearing, Alan was one position away from the start on long track number one, and just about to mount the bike when the NOS line fitting blew out on the NOS hose. Neil tried quickly to fix it, however they had no spare fittings as they'd never imagined a fitting failure. As Alan was now on the line about to start his run, the Kawasaki had to run without NOS.

Alan explains, "Becoming a little more confident on the salt, I accelerated a little harder noticing the back end of the ZX14 squiggling a little, as the rear wheel was seeking traction. My speed fluctuated to around 180mph then back down to 175mph as I lost traction on the salt. We were using readings from the GPS rather than the speedometer to confirm speed versus engine RPM where I could

detect wheel spin or loss of traction."

This day was a day of Kiwi ingenuity and experimentation in a quest for speed.

Traction and the slippery surface was still the issue, so the decision to add weight to the bike was made. Doing what a Kiwi does well, the team fretted around the pit area at Bonneville and managed to borrow two 20 kilo blocks of lead, and with the help on an ex-pat Kiwi who borrowed a gas plant, they were able to melt down the lead into two baked bean cans. The two cans of lead were mounted into the FRP manufactured NOS bottle tail fairing, and strapped in place.

"I took off for the next run and developed a really wild weaving of the rear of the bike," Alan says, "which I thought I could power out of. However the weaving became more aggressive, and at about 120mph I elected to abort the run, as the bike was becoming uncontrollable. I turned off track number one before the mile marker, and waited for Violet, Neil and Andy to come and pick me up with the motor home and trailer."

The lead weight proved to create a too high and too aft centre of gravity and thus the instability experienced on the ZX14 on the salt. Another run without the weight and with the NOS nozzle modified was tried and the bike handled well on the salt. Other than the high-speed wheel spin, Alan still passed at around 179.99mph. After more head scratching, weight was added at the axle, and the team called into a local auto shop and brought 50 wheel weights, which Neil melted down on the gas cooker in a baked bean can and then poured into the centre of a spare axle.

This worked well and was refitted to the bike after being refuelled with 100MUL, which was one of the approved race fuels at Bonneville. Alan talks of the adjustment, "We did a run and the bike handled well but a little surging was encountered, which we suspected may have been a NOS flow issue, so we elected to try the next run without



The team were proud to fly the NZ flag in America.

NOS. We ran the bike without NOS for the next run and it performed well, however we still encountered the dreaded high-speed wheelspin when playing in the 170s.

We elected to lower the tyre pressure and run again almost immediately after our return to the start line queue."

Disaster

Starting off reasonably hard down the strip getting a little wheel spin, Alan quickly started shifting through the gears, using the air-shifter, aiming for an entry speed of around 170mph into the timing zone. The speed looked good through the traps and he was running about two metres off the line on the right-hand-side of the strip, tucked in behind the fairing. Alan went past the 4-mile marker at around 175mph and his speed was still picking up slowly, when the back wheel suddenly slipped to the left, pointing him directly at the 5-mile photo cell, which is made of a timber and PVC pipe construction.

I'll let Alan take over, "I had no time to correct and I hit the timing marker at over 175mph, sending plastic and wood in all directions. Despite the high-speed impact I was still able to control the bike, and keep it upright, however I could not brake and with the high speed I soon hit the five and a half mile marker as well. I managed still to stay upright, as the bike slowly rolled to a stop. I had to take a few minutes to recompose myself after my high speed crash and exit from the track."

Unfortunately, the Kawasaki ZX14 Black Thunder had sustained considerable frontal damage after



the impact and the whole lower belly pan part of the fairing had gone, along with parts of the lower side fairing. The new windscreen was smashed completely, with debris on Alan's lap from parts of the fairing, wood and PVC from the timing markers. Shortly after the recovery vehicle (motor home and trailer) arrived to collect Alan and take him and the bike back to the pits to inspect the damage.

It was soon discovered the damage to the bike was sufficient to end team Black Thunder's racing at Bonneville and completely diminish any chances of taking the record this year. It had been a hard

lesson on picking up techniques and trial and error with various configurations of the bike for Bonneville, however the mishap has not dampened any enthusiasm in the search for speed, and with a few dollars spent on "Black Thunder" back in NZ, Alan will be up and running again.

"The thoughts of Bonneville 2008, are in my mind and I know the appetite has been whet for the rest of the team. So we will see how our funding goes for development of the bike, and trip planning for next year.

"We might be down but we are not out!" **BRM**



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