



## **SOUTHERN CROSS RALLY:**

# **FIRTH WINS - WE**

**SPORTS CAR WORLD** staffman **James Laing-Peach** took ex-VW works navigator **Peter Smith** along for the ride when we entered the **Renault 10** in the **Southern Cross Rally**. Here is James' story . . .



*Another victim — the Waltz/Cain Morris Cooper S was one of our class opposition that had very bad luck. Here it totters over a creek crossing collecting big points penalties on the last leg.*

**T**HE first Southern Cross rally made claim to International status and did in fact attract three overseas drivers. Despite many criticisms, it justified its claim. There is no reason why with proper promotion it shouldn't gain a prime place in the International rally championship calendar within three years.

The Australian Sporting Car Club didn't rest on laurels of the Redex trials days. Organising more than 500 officials from numerous clubs in NSW and Victoria was complicated; but the rally ran very smoothly, there was always an official to swear at when needed and the Rothman-ASCC team worked well from the competitors' viewpoint.

From **SPORTS CAR WORLD's** side, we were privileged to compete in this major rally for 1966. Originally we thought it the ideal way to follow the rally. Our class win was due mainly to a beautifully prepared car from Renault Australia and efficient support around the course.

Entries totalled 71. Notables were Harry Firth and Graeme Hoinville in the 1733 cc 'Firth Cortina GT', Barry Ferguson and Tony Denham in a 1600 Beetle and, on the International side, Rauno Aaltonen and Paddy Hopkirk both in Mini Cooper Ss. Jack (yes, Galignite) Murray was in a Prince Skyline GT, Doug Stewart (previous Ampol trial winner) in a Morris 1100S (1310 ccs), Geoff Russell (previous East African Safari competitor) driving the Regan Motors' fuel injected Peugeot 404 KF, race track star Doug Chivas with competent navigator Lindsay Adcock was running Alec Mildren's Alfa Romeo Giulia Super, Max Winkless in the rally version Volvo 122S and Greg Garard in a Holden HR.



*Cleared OK. Our Renault 10 entry is scrutineered before start of Rothmans Southern Cross Rally. It finished an easy class winner—and at one stage was heading the winning Firth Cortina GT!*

*The Old Rally Master came from behind to win the Southern Cross Rally. Firth's well-prepared car was thrown into the lead when earlier clear leader Barry Ferguson crashed on the last night.*



*Voom — a Holden hits a water splash in the early dawn. Two beautifully prepared and driven Victorian Holdens placed high, with the Queensland entry holding a class win after rolling.*



## TAKE CLASS HONORS

It wasn't going to be a picnic.

Now for a resume of the rally. First night with over 700 miles to cover was down to Wagga with a meal break at Crookwell. With free milk from the NSW Milk Board and packets of Rothmans, the competitors set off from Roselands shopping centre for a rallying stage to Bell, to clear the city. Jack Murray departed melodramatically in a cloud of orange smoke, wearing a long cloak and gruesome mask.

From Bell the rally really started out into the Blue Mountains. By the bottom of the descent to the Jenolan Caves we struck an unexpected problem with the Renault: almost total fade from those magnificent disc brakes was caused by insufficient cooling air at low speeds. But that drive was no scenic tour. Also the caliper pads were the normal soft type and not so resistant to heat.

Hopkirk was in trouble by the Crookwell stop with a collapsed right side Hydrolastic suspension unit. Both his and Aaltonen's cars had been fitted with English competition units at their own request. Replacement by Australian made units solved their problems, or so BMC Competition Manager Evan Green told us.

Out from Crookwell we struck the first of the special stages. Many of these were set in impossible times and really sorted out the field. One was set around the Wyangala Dam environs where roads dived through construction works. Although route instructions were comprehensive, turns were easily missed and Hopkirk lost 68 points in this special section. Between Jugiong and Wagga we encountered the only real horror section of the trial. Although on a special stage,

this section of badly rutted road with high rock outcrops had been clearly cautioned in the route instructions and with reflective warning tape on trees. Time had been allowed for it and without breaking the car it was possible to lose very few points.

Into Wagga — and the retirement list had grown to eight. Rallier Pty Ltd's Mini was out with rear wheel bearing trouble, Lober's Vauxhall Viva was out as was Barry Arentz after the Jenolan Caves descent. Both Arentz's Cooper S and the Viva were in our class and we had expected strong competition from both until bad luck overtook them. By Wagga there were still 12 cleansheeters, Kennedy (Prince), Ferguson, Kilfoyle (Cortina GT), Roberts (Holden), G. Garard (Holden), Green (Mini S) Hodgson (Cortina), Hilton (Morris 1100S), Drane (Renault R8) J. Garard (Holden), Watson (Holden) and Geoff Russell (Peugeot 404). Firth was down the two points he dropped before Crookwell, Hopkirk was down 142 and Aaltonen 60. We had lost 10.

At Wagga the field was rotated in sections of 24 cars. Our front section (we were car 13) to the back, cars 25 to 48 to the front and cars 48 to 71 in the middle. Thus re-arranged we set out for the second night's run to Albury for a meal stopover (these meal stopovers always came just after midnight and it was entirely disturbing to the still sleeping digestive system) and on to Melbourne.

Then came the highlight. At a small innocent town (a few houses in the hills) called Bethanga rally director Selby-Wood had arranged

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## FIRTH WINS—WE TAKE FIRST CLASS HONORS

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in a clover leaf pattern, three special stage circuits. To everything — including Mini-Cooper-Boeing-707-Ss — the times were totally impossible. The spectacle of Bethanga was further enlivened by the start/finish controls being at the foot of three steep straights (forming the Bethanga intersection). On finishing the sections no one had any intention of stopping until within feet of the control. On dirt the desperates to avoid controls officials, other competitors and pale-faced locals made Clark's four spins at Indy child's play. Lionel William rolled his Holden 3½ times, trials ace Geoff Russell was fooled by long grass when running wide on a corner and bent the Peugeot's steering arm in a ditch and Ken Tubman (Hillman) suffered a broken windscreen through someone's over-exuberant take-off. The Bethanga Stampede is already a legend.

By Albury the leaders were Ferguson (40 points down), Firth (49), Green (48), Kilfoyle (50), Vaughan (52), with Max Winkless (Volvo) and Greg Garard (Holden) equal sixth on 53. On to Whitfield via a section used on the BP rally (the average was about 7 mph greater) and then to Mansfield. Before Mansfield we met the only real quagmire section of the rally. Most, especially the big cars, had no trouble but we arrived to find our class competitor, NSW Motors' Cooper S, well bogged in the best track through the mud. We tried hard to unstick it but when Minis get stuck they're really stuck. After the Stubber/Tyler Holden wagon from WA had gone around through the black mud beside the strings of drying tobacco, we tried with the Renault. Goodyear G800 traction and appropriate bouncing by the navigator saw the 10 through and on to the next control.

The run from Mansfield to Melbourne covered some of the best alpine roads in Australia. Good, wide, well damped earth/gravel surfaces winding for mile on mile along the side of mountains around the Eildon Dam area proved to be one of the most enjoyable sections of the whole trial. Aaltonen, really at home, was reputed to have set a 65 mph average! The Warburton control provided a quick 10 minute breather and re-fuel point before again heading into the hills for a special stage. One interesting feat down to Melbourne was the Green/Keeffe Mini Cooper S which broke its throttle cable. By screwing up the idling adjustment, Evan Green controlled their flight by flicking the ignition switch. This caused him to drop from third to sixth behind Ferguson and Firth, Kilfoyle, Vaughan (Cortina GTs), and Garard/Goulburn (Holden). In classes, the Christensen/Stanley SAAB led A (up to 1000 cc unmod), our Renault 10 led B (1001 to 1300 unmod), the Kilfoyle/Forsyth Cortina GT led C (1301 to 2000 unmod) and the Roberts/Haas Holden HR led the over 2000 cc unmodified class. In the modified classes, Treloar's Colt led E Green's Cooper S, F, Ferguson's VW G and Garard's Holden H.

From Melbourne it was north east through Gippsland to Sale and Buchan then over the Alps via Suggan Buggan and into Cooma. We had been promised 18 inches of snow over Suggan Buggan but found the road clear despite nine inch drifts at times either side. Apart from damage to the Chivas/Adcock Alfa Romeo's rear A frame, the night was only highlighted by the Stubber/Tyler Holden wagon running out of road on a slippery section before Sale. The wagon rested precariously on the side of a sizable drop. By Cooma it was daylight but the run into Canberra included special stages which kept all hands on deck. Our luck seemed to be running thin.

After breaking the anti roll bar off coming over Suggan during the night we suffered a flat on one special stage. With points draining away at six a minute, we had to 'unchain' the spares

prepared for the snow. Soon after this we came on a cattle grid with a number of broken bars and this took toll of the front end. With more than 15 degrees toe-out separating the front wheels we limped into Canberra where the alignment had to be adjusted before we could check in, as working on cars was not allowed in the controls. From first we dropped to third in the class. The major placings remained constant; Hopkirk was down to 189 and Aaltonen 15th on 132, the Avis-entered all-girl crew had had retired with universal trouble with a loss of 2750 which took the retirements to 16.

The final night contained a "hidden" section out from Collector. A special section on the loop around through Yass to Collector contained roads which rivalled the Suggan Buggan and Eildon Dam sections as drivers' delights. But it was also the section which claimed the leader, Barry Ferguson. A tree inappropriately placed on the outside of a corner just after a crest attracted the spritely VW and severely bent its front end. The same tree claimed the Holden/Shephard Mini Cooper S and the Forrest/Miller Volvo 122S. We feel most competitors were very sorry to see the bent Beetle after a very fine drive by Ferguson.

Firth drove to a well deserved win and headed a victorious Ford team (Firth, Kilfoyle and Vaughan). In classes, the steady driving of the Honda coupe brought it home first in A after the SAAB had struck battery trouble on the run across to Collector. Entry from the wrong direction into Nowra and hanging the front wheel over the side of a bridge outside Canberra cost our class competitors Murphy/McSweeney and Walz/Cain (both 1275 Cooper S's) enough points for us to catch up and take a narrow lead of 20 points. After his earlier trouble Geoff Russell came back very strongly to fill third place behind Vaughan and Kilfoyle with the Regan Motors' Peugeot 404 in class C. Holdens completely dominated the over 2000 cc classes, D unmodified and H modified. In class E the Ryder/French Cooper won after the Colt 1000 rolled on the last night. Class F was fought out hard between BMC's Evan Green/John Keeffe Mini Cooper S and Colliers Automotive Services' Bob Drane/J. Wellard Renault R8. The BMC entry won but the Renault split it and the other works BMC entry, Bob Holden's Cooper S. Firth took class G ahead of Swedish Motor Imports' entered rally version Volvo 122S which was beautifully driven by Max Winkless and third was the Hopkirk/Chapman Cooper S.

Miss Carol Shaw and Mrs Lynn Keeffe in a BMC prepared Mini Deluxe won the women's award, ourselves the under 25 award with Bill Nolan and Mike Alexander second (Renault Gordini) and Rauno Aaltonen and Tom Lancey won the overseas award.

The Internationals, despite their troubles, were very impressed with the rally. They suggested gates should be completely avoided, times for special stages should be tighter and preferably run on closed roads and that if this were done there could be greater spectator interest.

On car reliability the Volvos won on starters-to-finishers average; four out of four. Five of the six Renaults finished, eight of the 10 Minis, eight of the nine Holdens, four out of seven Cortinas and Volkswagens . . . (normally so reliable) had only one finish out of six starters. Despite dismantling Firth's engine to replace a cam follower Ford spent comparatively little for good result. Likewise with Holden. The Holden drivers, especially Greg Garard, are to be admired for the way they handled the big cars through the tight alpine sections. BMC had little to crow about. Admittedly they had spent time preparing the Gallaher 500 cars but the detailed preparation of the Internationals' cars was poor.

Then 1966 Southern Cross will be remembered by competitors for Barry Ferguson's fine drive and subsequent bad luck and for the Bethanga special stages. In Australian motor sport it could well be the event which will put Australia on the international rallying map. #