

The Jeep That Saved the Day

And our lives

By Del & Stacie Albright

The trucker behind us on I-80 near Truckee, CA, said he figured we were goners when the Jeep made the FIRST 360 at 55 MPH on the freeway with the jeep trailer coming disconnected yet upright, held only by the safety chain. Then when he saw me steer out of that for the SECOND spin with the trailer headed sideways and still flopping on the chain, he knew we were going to be statistics. Yet we survived it; no one got hurt, and after a few repairs, we drove home the Jeep with the trailer. It's a story worth telling.

"Red" the Jeep stayed upright and we must have had the luck of the Big Four-Wheeler in the sky watching out for my driving. I'm still celebrating life even more today. But this story is also about the right gear; the right buildup on your rig; the right training; and the family we call four-wheelers, or better yet, off-road recreationists.

Stacie and I were returning from Sierra Trek by CA4WDC in freeway traffic on I-80 when we think the trailer ball bolt sheared off and let the trailer fly loose from our Jeep at freeway speed with a semi-truck behind us.

Thankfully, the trucker was not tail-gating!

Stacie happened to notice the ball bouncing harmlessly off the freeway into the dirt lane right before I felt the trailer coming around to visit me in my driver's window. All hell broke loose after that.

The stink of rubber burning whiffed by my nose as the sound of metal crunching and banging together filled my ears. We could faintly hear brakes behind and alongside us locking up, but instantly the world started to rotate the wrong way and the only thing I could say was "hang on."

Stacie grabbed the passenger bar and leaned towards the middle as my hands bore down hard on the steering wheel, anticipating the drift and slip of the front tires as the Jeep got tossed by the weight of the speeding trailer. I've been through skid pan and safety clinic type off-road training, so I knew to stay with it; turn into the skid; and use the brakes carefully so as to not slam the trailer into the Jeep too hard thus cancelling my steering efforts.

Turning the Jeep in a drift towards the far right lane and dirt ditches alongside the freeway was my mission. Red was as stable as I could ever imagine, and I could feel the steering respond the way it should. But the weight of the flinging trailer and our freeway speed put us into the first 360 spin on pavement. Then we skidded into the dirt and began our second spin as gravel and dirt flung up from the BFG's, filling the cab with a dust ball that nearly stifled our breathing. Losing visibility I had to rely on feel and instinct to make the last couple turns, fighting the skid and still turning into the drift trying to keep Red upright, rubber side down. It worked!

Thank goodness the Jeep is built right! The MFS custom steering and PSC hydraulic assist is one-ton stuff with CTM U-joints and BFG KM2's clinging to the pavement. The Jeep's suspension is Rubicon Express long arm heavy duty stuff with RE shocks as well. Hanson bumpers provided a lot of rear end strength, in spite of the trailer dragging by the safety chain. And I'm convinced the Raceline Monster Beadlocks kept us from popping a tire off the bead during the pavement burning spin.

The Altop family of wheelers (Gerald Sr. and Jr. and Ron) was coming down the highway, returning from Trek and immediately pulled over to help get the trailer upright. They just happened to have a spare tow bar and proceeded to strip off my hitch bent parts and replaced them with their stuff. They even had a spare ball hitch but it was too small so we broke out the Premier Power Welder and they put a blob of weld inside the hitch to make it fit and viola we were on our way within about 45 minutes.

The Altop's (who are members of the Sacramento Jeepers of the Calif. Assoc. Of 4Wheel Drive Clubs) even took the time to pull over with us at the next freeway exit to check if everything was working okay with the "trail fix" that they did. I gotta say that the off-road community is really a great network of people that go over and beyond the call of duty to help a friend or acquaintance in need. Thanks again to all that stopped to help and make sure that we were okay.

Here are the lessons that were ingrained in my brain from this event. I don't pass these along lightly.

Maintenance and Checking Your Gear: Although I had tightened everything with a pipe wrench after coming off the dirt, that didn't prevent an old worn bolt from shearing off. I recommend you always double check gear and anything that can kill you like trailers, brakes, tires, steering parts. And did you know that trailer balls have torque specifications. Check this out:

<http://www.hitchinfo.com/index.cfm?event=faq&topic=223&question=1752>

Training and Driving Skills: I've taken my fair share of driving training, including skid pan driving, as well as off-road Safety Clinics. I can recommend that you consider something like Badlands Off Road Adventures and 4WD training (<http://www.4x4training.com/>), and the safety clinics put on by state associations like the California Association of 4Wheel Drive Clubs (<http://www.cal4wheel.com>).

Off-Road Family: Never take it for granted how special off-roaders are to each other. We are a family and I've seen it over and over. This episode was a clear reminder of a lot of things, and makes a person think about things like luck, life, and yea, divine assistance as there were a lot of variables in this incident that could have changed a lot of lives. The tow ball bounced down the freeway, harmlessly landing off to the side rather than becoming a hand-grenade through someone's windshield; the trailer could have busted out into traffic; the jeep could have flipped, rolled and bounced several times; and the trucker could have slammed into us sideways after we quit spinning; etc.

But none of that happened. Whew... so cheers everyone! Here's to another day of being a part of the off-road family.