

20 years of Shahzada, by Halifax Hayes in year 2000.



Halifax Hayes, *Photo by Robert McKenzie*

To write an article about an event that I have been closely involved with for 20 years, is a marathon in itself. You would probably think that it would be easy for the old bugger to click his thongs together and down the yellow brick road of Shahzada we would go, no way! From the 1st Shahzada to the 20th it seems that in my mind there has been no break, each year has rolled into one long 7600 km ride. Ross has asked me to write about the 1st ride.

My memories of the first Shahzada are clouded in good old St Albans dust. I do remember that there were a few very hot days. One in particular when those waiting in the check point were getting worried about a group of riders that were seemingly taking a long time for the afternoon leg. So, being a concerned chief steward I went looking for this group. The concern was not justified for not far from base camp, in a large cool water hole they were found swimming with their horses. Gear and various pieces of clothing stacked up on the bank, and I was assured that all was well. They were having a wonderful time and would be back in the prescribed time, asking that I alert their strappers to the fact that appropriate drinks and dry clothes would be required. One of these riders, whose name I won't mention, went on to be the first rider to receive the honour of 10 buckles. Seventeen years later, he misread a course marker & ended up in the same water hole (in flood) at 7 am in the morning.

In the early years of Shahzada, to ride 400km was very much a mystery. How fit does a horse have to be? How & what to feed? Will there be a farrier? Will I need leather pads? What will I do for food, my strapper can't cook! All these questions and 100 more to be answered.

It must be remembered that in those days that except for 1 or 2 special events of 150 miles, (e.g. Tumut sesquicentenary 150 which was run over 2 days), the Tom Quilty was the only 100 mile ride. There were the Snowy Mountain rides, Adaminaby and Tumut, both 75 miles (at least that's what they said. A Tumut mile was at least 1½ miles of anyone else's and if you could finish a Snowy Mountain ride then you and your horse could take on a Quilty without a worry in the world. Wyong had a 75 mile ride (remember the America Trip Ride) and the rest of the 7 or 8 rides were 50 or 60 mile rides.

A film company approached Chuck Stephens (chief steward of the Quilty for many years) and Colin Adams with the idea of running a 500 mile event to publicise the film "Bite the Bullet" in 1976. After many meetings and it's on again, off again, finally 49 horses and riders were vetted and OK to start. Sydney to Melbourne here we come, with 12 riding days and 2 rest days and did they go! By the end of the first leg, 20 miles, at least 12 were out and by evening of the first day 18 were heading home to their own paddocks. A very sobering reality for the remainder of the field. Speculation that no horse would reach Yass was rife. But all of that is another story and what has that all to do with Shahzada? Well of the 14 that finished, 7 riders were from the St Albans Club. We had learnt so much about distance riding, so much about our horses and had such a good time. Even though it was hard and exhausting work we had made many new friends. Many of the unlucky riders that vetted out stayed with the ride and gave invaluable help to other riders and the organisers which still happens at Shahzada and is very much appreciated.

Anyway a year or 2 past, there was the Quilty to ride and a few new rides to attend and of course the ever famous "I will never go back to Taralgra Ride", where every year the 'Never Go Backs' would be found at the Pre-ride. Sometimes around the camp fire you hear Bite the Bullet riders reminiscing about how good it was and remember etc blah blah blah. It occurred to me that some riders were longing for a challenge. They had their very much prized Quilty buckles and so many 50 & 60 mile buckles that a trip to the scrap metal merchant would keep a horse in feed and pay the vets bill for 10 years.

One night sitting by the fire staring into the flames, a brandy & dry in hand, I was passed Hoofs & Horns. It was my turn at last, (living in a household of 3 horsy females, the strapper is very much down the pecking order in such matters). There it was, an article about "**Shahzada (IMP) The Military Endurance Test**". First year 250 miles, 2nd year 300 miles and 3rd year 500 miles. Weight carried was 186 pounds all up, no lightweights, (sorry a slip of the pen). Within an instant I had riders able to start any time after prevetting, riding at any time & any distance that they thought their horse could manage safely, so long as they rode the 2 legs on the first & last day all would be well. Example, if the rider choose on the first day 80 km and then thought the horse was feeling good enough to go out and do another 40 or even 80 km that was their choice. Just imagine how busy fearless Ross would be kept keeping tabs on every one. Vets & stewards running around night & day would make a great event. The next morning full of excitement & bursting with irrepressible enthusiasm, I rang Lyn and Adrian Bailey, fellow committee members & asked if we could meet that evening. That night, having sworn Adrian to secrecy (over a glass of lemonade), Lyn, Adrian, Sue May and myself pondered over the whys & wherefores. I remember that Lyn said that the ride would have to be a clover leaf otherwise it would be a nightmare to run. So out came the maps and by the end of the evening it was clear that 250 miles of tracks were available.

Sanity prevailed & after several cups of coffee, the idea of Shahzada was up & running. Through out the next year with help and input from Geoff Rose, Paul Grieves, Alan Mackinder, Paul Chandler, Rob McKenzie, Colleen Clancy & others, the format of Shahzada was established. The Saturday before the first pre ride we had no idea how many riders would enter but much to our surprise 26 starters were going to be at the starting line at 4am.

I don't think Phil Munn or myself slept for more than an hour during the week. Checking gates & markings keeping up firewood, pumping water and praying that the vet for that day would be in time for the first horses. For the first couple of years we called on the services of various endurance vets and at the time 2 days was all they could spare. I recall on one occasion the vet for the day was late to arrive due to an early morning foaling. So there was no other option than to vet the early horses ourselves, for most of the committee were qualified TPR's and any way the vet would be able to see most of the field when they left for the 2nd leg. All was going well, heart rates were good (we could count in those days, lub dub equalled 1 not lub 1 dub 2). Respiration, no problems and as for lameness not a sore horse could be seen.

The ABC TV Crew, who had arrived early and had finished filming river crossings and interviewing riders, would now like to interview the Head Vet to round off their story. Of the group around me, not one was (appearance wise) Head Vet material. There are times when the chief steward of a ride finds his or herself in a most indefensible position, where minties and jelly snakes run out and a kind word or smile is not going to work. It is at these moments one needs the great patron saint of endurance riding to intervene and he did.

Sitting on a fence watching was Paul Chandler. Paul and Cyclone were always immaculately groomed and having finished the first leg early were now showered and shaved. So who else but Paul and what an interview it was. From the tip of the nose to the tip of the tail television audiences around Australia were left in no doubt that the care and attention given to endurance horses was foremost in the world. I am sure that if Doctor Ruben Rose of Sydney University had seen the interview, Paul would have been given a doctorate in Vet Science and honours to boot.

In those early rides, riders were worried that they might forget the colour of the day so Robert McKenzie had come up with the idea of putting colour tape on the bridles. Each morning before they started, riders would present their bridle to have their day colour applied. This method worked very well until young Ken Frazer entered. Ken was totally colour blind. Patsy Sinfield riding Juanita (a mule) offered to take Ken around. Patsy, who was short sighted and wore glasses which tended to fog up with early morning dew and Ken, were often seen at ride intersections studying signs and cleaning glasses. Much to their credit they did not get lost.

As the ride progressed, we noticed that horses got better and by Wednesday they were up and ready to go. Not so the riders, they generally got worse. So much so that on Wednesday and Thursday night Phil Munn (remember Phil? what a great help he was) and myself used to undertake to walk the horses who didn't have a strapper, or whose rider couldn't convince or wake their strapper, (almost nobody walks horses at midnight any more). So instructed by the rider about how many times to walk the horse around the pub, Phil and self would get 3 or 4 horses out of their yards and away we would go, around and around the pub. It often became a social occasion because in those days we always had a huge log fire in the middle of the road out in front of the pub. So around a couple of times then stop in front of the fire warming the horses and talking to other dutiful riders or strappers, then off around the pub again. This practice had a couple of draw backs, especially if the yards were close together and contained bay horses. If Phil or self made a mistake about which yard was which and which bay was which, (remember it was usually pitch dark and foggy), at times the wrong horse was walked or even more confusing for an exhausted rider, the right horse was put back in the wrong yard. I was timing horses out on a cold and slightly damp morning when 2 riders who had been riding together came up to be timed out. One was saying her horse wasn't feeling quite right and maybe the vet should have a look. Half dazed in the flood light the penny dropped, right saddles wrong horses. Within a few minutes, the gear was changed over, all was well and I was instructed that Phil and self's walking services would no longer be required.

Every Shahzada has so many stories, it would need a book of large proportions. Maybe one day when I have nothing to do... but there are tracks to be made, water to be pumped, buckles to be plated, etc, I would like to make a very special thank you to all the riders, strappers & helpers who supported Shahzada throughout the years. It is your support that has made the ride the success that it is. See you at my 96th pre-ride talk.

Thank you all...Halifax

ps, should you see Diane McKenzie at the ride wearing dark glasses, a tin cup around her neck and a white walking stick, please put a small coin in the cup. She went cross-eyed deciphering my writing, thank you Diane.