

From Captain Anthony Roupell

The Etape du Tour 16th July 2007.

Foix to Loudenvielle. 200 km. Five major climbs. Total vertical climb 14,000 feet.

The big day started with reveille at 0330, and departure by coach to collect the bikes that had been stored outside Foix, following registration the day before. We then had a 15 km ride into Foix, which was a good warm-up before the official start at 0700. The weather conditions were perfect, but we had been warned that the temperature was due to rise dramatically. The atmosphere was wonderful, with huge crowds shouting encouragement, and great camaraderie amongst the riders. The first 20 km were rather crowded, until the climbs began to spread us out, but the pace was good, and the etiquette amongst riders excellent. Looking down from the top of the first climb, Col de Port, was the magnificent view of cyclists snaking back all the way down the valley. The second climb, Col du Portet-d'Aspet, went without incident, but I felt very humble as I passed a young man with only one leg, and not even a prosthetic one to balance him. I simply don't know how he did it. A super-human effort, and truly inspirational. The descent took us past the magnificent memorial to the great Italian rider Fabio Casartelli, Olympic champion in 1992, who we all saluted, which was a stark reminder that getting things wrong on a descent can be fatal. The third climb, Col de Mente, started to really test the legs, and one saw the first signs of people suffering and walking. I had set myself a target of cycling the whole route, and am thrilled that I managed it, but had no disrespect for those that did walk. They were probably hurting more. Half way up this climb I got the first dreaded cramp, incredibly painful, and ones legs literally lock up. All one can do is get off and massage the muscle until the cramp abated, which normally took five minutes. No more time to admire views, but total focus on keeping the pedals going and forcing electrolyte drinks down. I drank over 24 pints of water on the day, with only one natural break, but this was partly due to the extreme heat later on. I had five further cramp attacks, which was nerve wracking because it is the one thing one cannot control, and I just prayed it did not set in permanently, which would have been the end. Half way up the third climb the route started to look like a war zone, with riders slumped by the road side clutching their stomachs or legs with pain, and despair etched on their faces. Interestingly many of them were young bloods who had flown past me on the first two climbs, but had just overdone it. The descents were exhilarating, and most so fast I dared not take my eyes off the road to look at my speed. There was an amusing moment when, with a policeman on a large BMW motor bike riding next to me, I saw a 70 kph speed sign ahead, and as I passed it looked down to see I was doing 73 kph. He waved and I had a quiet chuckle. The thrill of this descent was tempered by the knowledge that the main climb of the day, Port de Bales, 19 hellish km with several inclines of over 10% lay ahead. This climb really proved to be a horror. To make matters worse the temperature was touching 40, and some sections of recently laid road had become a molten mass. Something I hope they sort out before the Tour arrives next week. There were now more walking wounded than cyclists, and the sides of the road were scattered with those who just knew they would not make it. It was tragic to see, and especially those who were obviously in great pain. These were probably the toughest two hours plus that I can remember, and reaching the top was a

huge relief. I grabbed some water and power bars and set off on the descent. One of the privileges of this Etape was that this was the first time that this monster mountain, Port de Bales, had been included in the Tour de France, due to the fact that it has only recently had its road surface prepared for road racing. The descent was hair-raising, very steep and narrow, a concrete gutter on the inside and a near vertical drop on the outside, with no safety barriers. No margins for error, but an amazing adrenalin fix. Next we had the final 10 km climb up the Col de Peyresourde, before the descent into the finish. The beginning was very steep and the cramp came back, but I was able to massage it out, put my head down, and grind upwards.

I reached the top alongside a young Scot and we just patted each other on the back and said bravo. What a great feeling that was. All the hard work had been done, and now it was an exciting descent all the way to the finish. Despite arriving several hours after the winner the reception at the finishing line was amazing with huge cheering crowds, and I was frankly in a bit of a daze as the official put the bronze medal around my neck. The first thing I wanted to do was find out about the three friends with whom I had trained so hard for the past seven months. I was convinced that one of them was in front of me, and was so disappointed not to see him there. The disappointment got worse when I found out that all three of them had been forced to retire, one of them half way up the final climb, which was such bad luck, and it left me with a very empty feeling. I bumped into a friend of my son who had had a high speed fall descending a corner, when his tyre came off his wheel! The medics bandaged him up; he mended his wheel, and went on to finish over two hours in front of me. Stoic stuff. On the coach back to our hotel I chatted to one of the riders about the charities we were riding for. I was most touched when we got to our destination and he pressed his card into my hand and said 'I very much want to contribute to your Regimental charity, please be in touch'. I could not have asked for a better ending to a rather special day.

So at the end of it all over 8000 riders set off and under 5000 returned, marking one of the highest fall-out rates in the record of the event.

My time of 11hrs 27mins is probably twice what the professionals will do next week, and they will have already done two weeks of furious racing. I take my hat off to them.