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## **TORCHMATE ROLLS THE DICE AT TERRIBLES TOWN 250**

Anyone other than a fighter pilot would be shocked at the sight of an unlimited desert truck screaming through the terrain. Having participated in my third desert race, I am still awestruck by the power, violence, and danger of these machines. Soon after the start of the Terrible's Town 250, I stood in Pit #2 and watched a distinct trail of dust rise 10 miles away. The dot at the head of the plume quickly made its way around the mountain range until I could see a dust cloud rise above the near horizon. Tension could be felt in the pits as everyone rose from their chairs and inched toward the course. Hands went up and everyone cheered. I caught sight of the leader. The truck floated over the bumps like a hovercraft and suddenly lurched sideways. The driver was undeterred and never let off the throttle. He got it straight again and shot by us at well over 100 mph. The roar of the engine was deafening and the top layer of dirt and rock literally rose behind the tires. Rocks pelted our pit trucks over 20' away and I felt the excitement of a little boy at Christmas. Sensibility left and I fidgeted for the next three hours waiting for my leg of the race.

Before I tell my story, we better rewind to the mornings race of the slower (everything is relative) classes. Leaving the start line shortly after 6 am, Lance Clifford took the wheel of the #1705 Torchmate Jeep with navigator Mike Shaffer. The 2008 Best in the Desert champion team was well prepared and in the hunt for a top finish. After starting near the back of the pack, Clifford came through the first pit in third place. While necessary for a win, the daunting pace was taking its toll on the Jeep. The gears in the front axle were the first to go after a hard landing. Next, the rear driveshaft separated due to some unnatural flex in the suspension. These were small problems compared to the unseen damage in the transmission that eventually took 2<sup>nd</sup> gear. Clifford commented, "You run everything in 2<sup>nd</sup> and we were forced to max it out in 1<sup>st</sup> gear at about 30 mph." The pair ran as fast as the engine allowed but slower teams were able to gain. #1705 eventually crossed the finish line in a respectable 5<sup>th</sup> place.

Now back to pit #2. Bill Kunz and I watched the computer intently and finally saw our tracker show movement on the course. Teammates Jones and Bolton had started the race and the 19 starters in our class spread out over the first few miles. We soon got a report from pit #1 that a caliper had been damaged and the brakes were failing. Regardless of the damage (or danger) #7231 kept pace and was quickly through pit #2. We anxiously awaited any radio traffic of progress and soon heard both good news and bad. The Torchmate Ranger was well into its second lap but entirely without brakes. As the intensity grew, we again caught sight of the truck as it rolled to a stop for the crew change. The wide eyes of Jones and Bolton instantly told the harrowing story of racing a truck with no brakes and gave me insight into the adventure that lay ahead.

Fortunately for me, some wrenching, clamping, and hammering by the pit crew got us rear brakes and we blasted out of the pits into the unseen desert expanse. Only a mile later we sailed by a lonely \$400,000 pile of burnt rumble that only hours before was a high end race truck. There were no camera crews as in NSACAR, no mob of fire personnel, and no tow truck. Just a defeated former truck smoking in the sun and a reflection of the seriousness of desert racing. We continued on, bouncing over the whoops and

weaving through the sand washes. Bill's excitement periodically rose as the brakes faded and we pummeled corner embankments. Mine did as well when the GPS read 101 mph on a dry lakebed. We finished our first lap and found a great pace in the miles of rocky washes near the start of the course. Suddenly, the truck as upset by an unseen boulder buried in silt. The sharp jarring monetarily slowed out pace and we felt a strong vibration and the unfortunate sound of metal on metal. I jumped out only to discover a broken front suspension link. It appeared that the damage had been done so we pushed the Ranger another 55 miles with a loose and clanking wheel. While our pace was badly hampered we still managed an 8<sup>th</sup> place finish.

A sincere thanks goes to the whole Torchmate crew that made this race possible. While The #7231 Torchmate Ranger undergoes repairs for the upcoming SCORE Baja 500, the Torchmate team heads back to the rocks for round #2 of WE-Rock in Cedar City, UT May 2<sup>nd</sup>.

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