

LARRY WALSH



SUIT
to SADDLE

*Cycling to Self-Discovery
on the Southern Tier*

L A R R Y W A L S H

Cycling to Self-Discovery on the Southern Tier

**SUIT
to SADDLE**

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This is a true story. The author relied on extemporaneous notes, paper maps, data stored on a GPS device, videos, pictures, and memory in his attempt to accurately depict events as they occurred. All characters and organizations are real. All photos are the property of the author. *Suit to Saddle* is based on the author's view entirely.

*To mom and dad.
Thanks for teaching us the true meaning of family.*

“Dad, YOLO!”

Tara and Jaclyn on the beach in
Spring Lake, New Jersey
July 5, 2018

CONTENTS

| | |
|---|-----|
| Foreword..... | xi |
| Introduction..... | xv |
| 1. California (Blue Sky, Rugged Mountains, and Desert) | 1 |
| 2. Hello, Arizona! (Desert, Desolation, and Debris) | 21 |
| 3. New Mexico (Silver City, Emory Pass, and Headwinds) | 43 |
| 4. Texas (It is a BIG state!)..... | 77 |
| 5. Louisiana (Gumbo, Hurricanes, and Can You Believe It?) | 140 |
| 6. Mississippi (Buffett, Bull Riding, and BBQ) | 158 |
| 7. Alabama (Forrest, Fog, and Ferry) | 161 |
| 8. Florida (Detour, Debris, and Done!) | 183 |
| Epilogue | 205 |
| Introduction to <i>Forty to Finish</i> | 219 |
| Acknowledgments | 235 |
| Appendix: By the Numbers | 237 |

FOREWORD

Suit to Saddle. That is certainly an appropriate name. However, “Headwinds” also works. That was a recurrent theme throughout the book and the “life journey” that Larry was on. He had been out of work for six months, struggling with the fact that his current vocation was not what he wanted upon his return to the workforce. Hearing him reveal that he wasn’t sleeping, had been losing weight, and was experiencing anxiety all seemed like symptoms of depression. Exercise, which all five Walsh boys used as “stress relievers,” did not help. Watching his son, Brian, play basketball—Larry’s lifelong passion—seemed empty. But riding his bike around his hometown, Mendham, New Jersey, triggered something. He often imagined what it would be like to cycle from coast-to-coast on many cross-country business flights. The desire to test his limits, to reset, became a need.

He describes his cycling group as “everyday folks,” but they were not—how many people do you know who have ridden cross-country unsupported? He repeatedly talks about the need to test his limits. As someone who completed Ranger training, those limits are expansive. Part of his motivation for cycling coast-to-coast was to forget about past challenges with which he had not coped well. His cheerful outlook and willingness to do the heavy lifting—carrying the heaviest group-gear bag—helped his group complete the ride together. His main

contributions, a constant positive outlook and a spirit of cooperation, were what he could offer to their success.

He references riding into the winds in West Texas or the desert in California, how thinking of Kelley, Tara, Jaclyn, and Brian got him through the most challenging times. A long-distance runner myself, I appreciate that the mental challenges can be more considerable than the physical.

His desire to meet people—“take an interest, stop, listen, and people will amaze you”—and his catchphrase “Oh My God” expressing his excitement to ride his bicycle across the country reeled me in to keep turning pages.

We are a close family. Interwoven into his journey are repeated thoughts about his immediate and extended family. In the standard Irish fashion, the Walsh boys are stoic. Larry’s feeling of low self-esteem was noticeable to us all, and even though we verbally gave him our support, he needed to figure out a way to regain his self-confidence and zest for life.

I enjoyed the reference to “pogey bait”—sweets and candy. He should have described our mother’s grocery-shopping routine: five days a week to feed five growing boys, and the countless times when Mom bought 2.5 pounds of boiled ham and placed it in the fridge only to find Larry, within minutes, shove handfuls into his mouth. All Mom could say was “at least put it on some bread!!” I wondered about his barbershop fixation, thinking it must have been related to the “trauma” imposed by Dad when Larry and I were four and five, respectively, getting buzz cuts in the kitchen. It did save money!

It brought a smile to my face when he describes quickly falling asleep on the night before they left San Diego. Several of his brothers, myself included, would have been up all night, tossing and turning. Not Larry. He inherited that “gift” from Dad. He pays homage to our parents when he says “everything my parents did was for their children.” Trying to emulate Mom and Dad motivates us all.

His personal and professional accomplishments are many. Division III college basketball player; Army Ranger; serving in Panama during Operation Just Cause; husband of Kelley; the father of two beautiful young women, Tara and Jaclyn, and son, Brian, who is ready to surpass all his sporting achievements.

Larry's close friends from his time in the military thirty years earlier, going out of their way to meet him in Austin, Texas. His pride in his service and reverence towards veterans. He often talks about the enjoyment of being a member of his local VFW post. I also agree that military service and athletic competition are two disciplines that bring out the best in people.

Visualizing Larry authoring a book was a significant stretch. But once I started reading his daily Facebook posts, which I did first thing every morning during his ride, his skill at this new endeavor was clear. His love for his country is plain to see, as is his respect for folks that do not have much, just Church and Family, and his desire to see people of all walks of life and backgrounds treated equally and with respect.

The rugged mountains in California or the over-100-degree heat in the Arizona desert. The sunset and sunrise at Utery Mountain, mosquitos in Louisiana and Mississippi. Meeting young adults from Brooklyn, Ukraine, and Russia on the road to Marfa, each beginning a new life, like Larry. He wrote about "peddling towards sunshine" the day he left El Paso, Texas. I believe he arrived.

Dr. Timothy Walsh
May 6, 2021
Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania

INTRODUCTION

I retrieved my small nylon 1993 Oakland Athletics cinch sack carry-on from the upper bin when United Flight 1593 touched down in San Diego on September 15, 2018. I exited the airplane like I had hundreds of times before, except I was not wearing a business suit on this trip. The new green Columbia Silver Ridge™ convertible hiking pants I wore complemented my long-sleeve 10% spandex, 63% polyester, 27% nano bamboo charcoal ActivSkinz 100 SPF lightweight blue shirt and my new size 12 Salomon Contagrip outdoor shoes. I did not look to the signs that would direct me to baggage claim because I did not need to. Everything I needed for the next nine weeks was already in San Diego. I hailed a taxi and gave the driver the address for Bernie's Bike Shop on Cable Street. During the ten-minute drive from the airport to the shop, I thought to myself, "There is no turning back. I guess I'm doing this." I stepped out of the taxi in front of the bike shop after paying the fare.

It was a typical sunny Southern California early afternoon. The San Diego streets were bustling with shoppers and beachgoers. A few homeless people sat along the walkway. Seeing a combination of homeless people and beachgoers got me thinking, "Yes, I'm in California again."

I walked into Bernie's small, cluttered shop. Bikes were hanging from the ceiling and the walls and were crammed along the floor, everywhere, except for a narrow aisle leading to the cash register. At the register, I

told the woman I was there to pick up the bike that I had shipped from New Jersey, courtesy of BikeFlights (a shipping service for cyclists). Roger, who ran the store, came out from the back room. He motioned me to come his way, and he led me to Tank, as I affectionately called my bike. It was rebuilt and looked to be in undamaged shape after the long journey across the country. Next to my bike were the four boxes I had also shipped. The boxes held my gear and all my belongings for the next three months.

I walked my bike out the front door, turned right, and then made another right into a side alley, leaning Tank up against the side of the building. I carried the four boxes out the side door and placed them on the ground next to my bike. Then I opened the four cardboard boxes, one by one. Slowly and methodically, I pulled out each piece of equipment and attached it to my bike. I connected the four panniers, two to the front rack and two to the back (a pannier is a bag designed to hold enough gear for self-contained rides over several days or weeks). I inserted five water bottles into separate bike bottle cages, two on the back of the saddle and three underneath and inside the triangle frame. I inspected every item I pulled from the boxes and meticulously placed each inside one of the panniers or attached it to the intended location on the bike. It was like putting a puzzle together, except this puzzle had a purpose: to transport me across the country. I paid Roger thirty dollars for assembling Tank and then took it, with the four panniers attached and fully loaded, for a short spin on Cable Street to ensure that everything functioned properly.

In the brief time I owned Tank, I had gotten a good feel for how it handled on the road. My keen sense of sound enabled me to detect vibrations or rubbing that required attention. I knew it well. Sure enough, the back tire was rubbing against the fender. The mechanic made minor adjustments, and then I was ready to go. I thanked Roger and waved goodbye. Before I pedaled away, Roger remarked, "A guy with one arm just left after picking up his bike." I gave him a nod, not thinking much of the comment. I was ready to start my journey.

I entered the address of the Marriott into my bike's GPS and began the short five-mile ride to the hotel. The glass doors automatically opened as I approached the entrance. I walked my fully loaded bike into the lobby and leaned it against the wall next to the front desk. I was assigned a first-floor room, so I did not have to drag Tank onto the elevator.

Upon entering the room, I unpacked everything that I had packed forty-five minutes before at the bike shop. It was essential that I figure out a packing scheme before the ride began. I separated the items into categories on the bed, table, chairs, side table, and on top of lamps. I tucked my clothing into the front right pannier. The rain and wintry weather gear went into the front left pannier. I placed my extra inner tubes, tires, tools, and water bottles in the right rear pannier; food and other miscellaneous pieces of equipment went into the left rear pannier. I attached my tent and sleeping bag to the rear rack behind the saddle. The waterproof paper maps, pocket light, pocketknife, dog horn, pen, waterproof pad, pogy bait, wallet, and personal identification fit into the front handlebar bag. I packed, unpacked, and repacked several times. If I practiced enough, I would remember where I'd put everything once the ride started. At least that is what I thought at the time. I wanted to be efficient.

My friend Clay and his wife Kristi were treating me to a steak dinner at the C Level Lounge on Harbor Island, overlooking the San Diego skyline. It was to be my last steak dinner until the night before I arrived at St. Augustine, Florida, nine weeks later. I had met Clay, a friend and professional colleague, in 1993. He was one of the few people I talked to about my idea to ride my bike from coast to coast.

Clay and Kristi pulled up in their car outside the Marriott. As I opened the car door and hopped into the back seat, I said, "Oh, my God, it's so great to see you guys! Can you believe it, I'm ready to go!" I reached forward and gave them each a big hug. "Clay, you know there's still time for you to change your mind and join me!" Clay smiled and laughed. But he had other plans. "I'm starting my new job after returning from vacation," he shared.

Over dinner, we talked about family and reminisced about life and unemployment. I had been out of work for six months and had previously confided in Clay about my lack of interest in returning to work any time soon. When they dropped me at the hotel after a two-hour entertaining and warmhearted dinner conversation, Clay and Kristi understood the road I had traveled getting to this point. Whether destiny explains the decisions I made, I'm not sure, but here I was, on the cusp of bringing to a conclusion months of drifting in contemplation. I was ready to go! "Good luck, so happy for you," Kristi said with genuineness of heart. Finally, after a long day of travel, I laid my head on the pillow and quickly fell asleep.

When I woke up the following morning, lifted my head off the pillow, and looked around the room, there was a nervous little feeling twirling around inside me. I realized I was one step closer to beginning my journey across the country. I wondered if I was out of my mind for taking on this challenge. I packed everything, walked my fully loaded bike through the lobby, and waved goodbye to the two front desk employees. The sliding glass doors opened, allowing me to walk my bike outside the hotel, where I gave a thumbs-up to the bell attendant. I entered the address for the San Diego Point Loma Hostel into my GPS and began pedaling away. The streets were quiet as I rode through neighborhoods on this warm and sunny Southern California day. As I approached the small red youth hostel on Udall Street, I found myself contemplating how I had gotten to this point, to this location, about to embark on a bike ride across the United States.

I was alone. I was anxious. I was about to meet ten strangers who had signed up for the journey just like me. Even before meeting anyone, I felt like a fish out of water. I had minimal long-distance cycling experience. (Twice when I was less than twenty years old I had ridden my bike over one hundred miles in a day, once with my younger brother Dan and a second time with a high school friend.) I knew tackling a cross-country ride was normally the pinnacle of a long touring career, not

the first stride. I assumed the ten strangers I was about to meet would be experienced cyclists.

I hopped off my bike in front of the hostel. I looked up a narrow, short walkway that led to the front entrance. The bright California sun was shining, but I was protected from direct sunlight by two large palm trees that stood tall on the sidewalk. I leaned my bike against the outside wall, opened the door to the front entrance, and walked inside.

The front desk was empty. There was a bell and a sign that read “Ring bell for service,” which I did. A young woman approached and welcomed me. I did not need to explain anything about my tour group. I was dressed in cycling shorts, a cycling shirt, gloves, and a sweat cap—my look gave it away. The woman directed me to the courtyard at the side of the building, where she said I could find others relaxing and hanging out. (This hostel was the starting point for all Adventure Cycling Association (ACA) Southern Tier Route tours.)

I walked outside to retrieve my bike and then headed for the courtyard. “Here we go!” I thought, apprehensive and excited at the same time. I had butterflies in my stomach. I opened the gate and saw a few people standing, one person sitting, and several bikes resting up against a wall to my right. A couple of people glanced in my direction but did not acknowledge my presence. I paused and looked around, wondering if these people were part of my tour group. I waved and said, “Hello!” to no one in particular. It was an awkward moment for me, as I had difficulty maneuvering my fully loaded bike through the narrow path leading to the communal area where others had assembled. I had not been this nervous since I delivered a two-minute oral debrief to over fifty soldiers from the 7th Infantry Division, including the commanding general and other higher-ranked officers, when I was deputized to represent my battalion, which deployed to Panama during Operation Just Cause in 1989.

I wondered if people were looking at me. I did not make eye contact to find out. The welcoming was a bit anticlimactic, as if what we were

all about to tackle together was insignificant. “Hi guys, I’m Larry.” I reached out to shake hands with a couple of other men. Wally, sporting a full greyish beard and displaying an air of confidence, was pleasant but unengaging, informing me he lived in Denver.

“I’ve spent a lot of time in Denver, but now I live in New Jersey,” I offered, hoping to continue the conversation a little longer.

“I used to live in Morristown, New Jersey, and I know the good cycling roads in Morris County very well,” Wally added, this time more interested in the exchange. I turned toward the other man, Tom, and asked where he was from. “I’m from Virginia Beach,” Tom said, similarly pleasant but not interested in continuing the conversation. My first thought was that he looked like an experienced cyclist. He had a lean body and long, auburn hair that he wore in a high ponytail hanging over his shoulders.

My eyes focused on another man’s calf muscles as I approached him to say hello. He had the face of a seventy-three-year-old man (which it turned out he was) but calf muscles reminiscent of an elite athlete.

I then introduced myself to Joel. It was a brief conversation; he shared that he was from the Seattle area, but not much else. I moved on to meet Travis, who was sitting at a picnic table toying with his bike tire. Travis was the most gregarious and engaging member of the group. He said, “I’m trying to figure what I should pack for the ride. I probably overpacked, but I still have time to figure it out!” I laughed. I understood his dilemma. Travis added that he hailed from San Francisco and had recently completed the ACA Tour Guide Leadership Course.

A woman walked into the courtyard from the hostel and sat next to Travis. I reached out to shake her hand. “Hi, you must be Joyce. I’m Larry. We talked a couple of weeks ago. I appreciated your advice. I decided to buy a Garmin and use the Ride with GPS app, not the Bicycle Route Navigator app.” I had called Joyce, our tour leader, before arriving in San Diego, to ask for advice on which GPS device she found most useful for long-distance trips. It was another pleasant but unengaging greeting.

My first impression when I met Doug from Minnesota was that he was an outgoing person and an experienced cyclist. Within minutes of meeting Doug, I learned that he built bikes for a hobby and in 1976 was one of the original cyclists who rode across the country to christen the newly created TransAmerica Bicycle Trail in commemoration of America's bicentennial.

I also met Klaus, originally from Germany and visiting the United States for only the second time. He wore a colorful bandanna on his head and stood alone next to his bike in the back of the courtyard. He was a quiet man but, as we would learn throughout the journey, a man with many talents.

Deb and Gary from Chicago walked toward the back of the courtyard, looking for an open space to store their bikes. I initially hit it off with Gary, a six-foot-tall, two-hundred-pound man. "A Surly Disc Trucker, that's what I ride," Gary casually shared while introducing himself and his wife, Deb. "I had a problem with the back tire rim. After two thousand riding miles, the rim cracked. You might have the same problem too, because you're a big guy."

"That's good to know," I said. "The folks I bought the bike from in New Jersey told me I should be fine. I did upgrade from Continental to Schwalbe Marathon Plus tires," I added, as Gary and I continued conversing alone in the back of the courtyard.

We all gathered in the courtyard, getting to know one another. Everyone was low key, engaging in light conversation, filling up uncomfortable silence with small talk. We set up our sleeping arrangements for the two-night stay at the hostel before beginning the trek east. I was assigned to a room that had two bunk beds and a single bed. I grabbed one of the lower beds, and Joel took the other lower bed. Doug grabbed the single, and Klaus chose the top bed above Joe. No one chose the top bed on my side.

We all went about our business, settling into our rooms, making small talk, but mostly getting comfortable in what would be our home for the next two nights. I brought the four panniers with all my equipment

into the room for safeguarding. Why I thought I needed to safeguard my equipment, I do not know. My greatest fear initially was whether I would fit in. But after meeting everyone, a heavy load was lifted from my shoulders—partly because I had finally met my new family, the ones I would share my life with for the next nine weeks, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. I was also reassured when I saw that everyone was of average size and built just like me. All except one were retired. Only one person sported the enormous cycling thighs and calves reminiscent of Tour de France elite athletes. They were all everyday folks, like me.

On this night, two nights before we left on our long journey, we sat around a fire in the middle of the courtyard, reintroduced ourselves, and shared our motivation for riding the 3,100-mile Southern Tier route. There were ten cyclists from the United States and one from Germany. Dan, hailing from Southern California, joined the group just before everyone grabbed a chair to get comfortable around the fire pit. The flickering light and random crackling sounds supplied the perfect environment for the aura of anticipation that filled the air. Joyce opened: “Welcome to San Diego and the Adventure Cycling Southern Tier ride.” One by one, we all shared our motivation for being there. I was uneasy about how much to disclose about my journey to San Diego. My wife, Kelley, my eldest brother, Tim, and my sister-in-law, Gina, knew the details. No one else did.

Whether to share the details had remained a dilemma for me, until now.

When it was my turn, I told them I had often imagined what it would be like to cycle across the country. On many coast-to-coast business trips, I would look out the airplane window and marvel at the landscape below. Flying from Los Angeles to Newark, New Jersey, leaving the hustle and bustle of city life, I had found myself lost in wonderment as I gazed at the snowcapped mountains. I imagined what it was like to live in a small community surrounded by a vast wilderness. I thought about the westward migration. I was in awe at the enormity of our great country. I fiddled with my hands, wondering what would

come out of my mouth next. I told the group that I was between jobs and had decided to take advantage of the time off to meet the challenge. I looked forward to riding through the California desert, testing my limits, meeting new people, and experiencing something I had thought was only a pipe dream. At fifty-six years of age, I wanted to dive in now rather than wait to fulfill this bucket-list goal after retirement. All of it was true, but there was more that I was not ready to reveal.

Before calling it a night, we divided up the group gear. This ride was self-contained, meaning you carried everything on your bike, with no support vehicles. Everyone would carry their own equipment plus one item of the group gear. I sat quietly, waiting for my turn to choose an item. I was the last to select and was stuck with the bag of utensils. It was the heaviest and most cumbersome of all the items, so of course no one chose it. It was now mine to carry.

I was the least experienced cyclist in the group, by a long shot. Doug, Tom, and Wally had previously completed the 4,200-mile TransAmerica Bike Route from Virginia to Oregon. Dan was on round two of crossing the country on the Southern Tier route. Joel had crossed the country, from Washington to New Jersey, once before. Travis, Deb, Gary, Klaus, and Joyce were also on their maiden cross-country voyage, but each had racked up many miles in the saddle touring lengthy distances. While I knew little about long-distance cycling, I knew my legs were strong and ready for the challenge.

Wally asked if I was okay with carrying the bag of utensils. I expressed my concern that I was unsure if I could keep up with the group, therefore arriving at camp later than the utensils would be needed to prepare dinner. Wally told me not to worry, that I would be fine. I wanted to be a good team player, so I gladly accepted the challenge. I felt like I had passed the first “new guy hazing” phase. I was excited and anxious but ready for what was next.

When I was healthy, my usual exercise routine had included playing basketball with the guys. But on December 17, 2017, I tore the plantar ligament in my right foot. On this fateful day, when I fell to the ground

in pain, I realized my basketball playing days would be suspended for a long time. I was frustrated, angry, and demoralized. Since I had turned fifty, every year, on cue, I injured my calf muscle, usually in the middle or toward the end of a game. Suddenly I would hear a pop, and down I would go. Three months later, I would return to the court, only to have the same injury repeat itself again and again. But this injury, the torn plantar ligament, was more severe. I knew it right away.

Playing with the guys on my over-fifty basketball team was a favorite pastime, besides spending time with my family. For a bunch of older guys, we played very competitively. Everyone had a love for the game. We would compete to win. After a win, we would gather in the bar next to the gym to watch NFL football and talk smack. After a loss? The same routine, but the conversation focused on how poorly we'd played and the adjustments needed for the next game. The camaraderie was incredible.

Shortly after injuring my foot, I lost my job at a pharmaceutical company. It was March 5, 2018, and it started out as a typical Monday morning. I arrived at the office ready to begin the day. I glanced at my iPhone to check email before entering the building and saw that the CCO had scheduled a meeting with me. I walked into my boss Mike's office, and I could tell right away something was up. His usual expressive, pleasant leadership style had given way to an uneasy, detached demeanor. He was giving off a bad vibe. He knew something I did not, and he did not want to tell me.

"Brent wants to see me. Do you know anything about the meeting?" I asked Mike.

Mike seemed fidgety. He raised his head, looked in my direction without making eye contact, and with a resigned sigh told me, "Larry, go have your meeting with Brent." I turned around, left his office, and walked to my cubicle. It was 9:00 a.m. I had an hour to contemplate my meeting with the CCO.

The week before, Kelley and I, along with my boss and his daughter, had hosted the 2017 top sales performers at the annual President's Club award trip to the Cayman Islands, compliments of my employer. The

night before we visited Stingray City, the company president shared an update about the company's reorganization that he had announced several months before. Hearing this message, I realized my job was in jeopardy. I had always expected the company to reassign me into a different role or business. But for some reason, on the way to Stingray City, I had a bad feeling in the pit of my stomach. Legend says you will get seven years of good luck if you kiss a stingray on its head. It couldn't hurt, so that is what I did.

I had returned from my trip relaxed and invigorated. I had kissed that stingray and was hoping for the best.

The news of a company downsizing hits affected employees like a ton of bricks. By the end of the day on Monday, March 5, all employees, including those who kept their jobs, learned the fate of dozens of us who did not. Even though only the senior leadership team knew what was going on, there was an ominous feeling in the air. I sensed that this Monday would be my last. I had an uneasy feeling as I knocked on Brent's door. The meeting with him and a human resources representative was brief and professional. I walked into the office, sat down next to the HR representative and across from the CCO. Then unfolded the start of an uncomfortable conversation: "As you know, the company initiated a Project Accelerate organizational review several months ago. As a result of that review, your position has been eliminated . . . Megan will now review your severance and benefits," Brent said in a matter-of-fact manner.

After Megan reviewed my benefits, she asked, "Do you have any questions?" Everyone stopped talking when I looked up at Brent and said my parting words. "It's difficult to receive this news. And I appreciate how difficult it is to deliver it. I'll be fine. My only anxiety is calling my wife to tell her I lost my job." I walked back to my cubicle, paperwork in hand. I sat at my desk, alone, trying to process what had just happened. I texted Kelley, "Kissing the Stingray didn't help." She responded with the prayer emoji. I gathered up my belongings, took my employee ID from my belt, and placed it on top of my desk. Shortly after that, I walked

out of the building for the very last time. Eleven years of working for this company had come to an end, just like that.

I thought I was prepared for what lay ahead. However, with no job and not getting any exercise because of my torn ligament, I began a downward spiral.

A few weeks later, Kelley and I and our son, Brian, took a trip to St. Petersburg, Florida, to visit Kelley's family for spring break. What should have been an enjoyable trip turned out to be the most challenging week of my life. I felt out of it. I walked aimlessly along Gulf Boulevard in St. Petersburg, waiting for Kelley's relatives to arrive. When they did come, I was physically present—mingling with family on the beach, at the pool, at the outside grill—but disconnected emotionally from everything. Feelings of inadequacy consumed my thoughts. I was not sleeping. I was not eating. Nothing I took part in was pleasurable. I knew I needed help when I watched my son play basketball with his cousin and I did not want to be there. Kelley convinced me to go for a jog one morning. I forced myself to jog a couple of miles, hoping to break a sweat and disrupt the vicious cycle. My inability to sweat when the heat index rose due to the combination of sun, elevated temperature, and high relative humidity buttressed my belief that I needed professional help.

I realized I was suffering from depression. The sense of despair I felt was real. Objectively, I knew things were not that bad. My marriage was excellent, and my kids were amazing. Financially, we were okay. I simply could not move beyond my feeling of helplessness. Kelley called my older brother Tim, a physician, and told him what I was going through. The night before we returned home from Florida, I received a call from my brother. Tim opened with, "I talked to Kelley." I jumped right in and said, "I don't know, Tim, for some reason, I can't break it. It just hit me pretty fast." I continued, "I found a counselor and a psychiatrist back home. I have an appointment with each first thing Monday morning. I'll call you after." I could sense his concern for my well-being and his desire to help. I told him I was not sleeping well, was embarrassed, and had lost my self-esteem.

Tim and I had similar conversations eleven years before when I was first diagnosed with depression. In 2007, I lost my job with Pfizer Pharmaceuticals, a company I had dedicated many years to and loved working at—so much so that I picked up and moved my family five times, twice across the country. The loss of that job hit me hard. I remembered that the feeling I had in 2007 was like what I was experiencing this time. I felt like my mind was in a prison cell, surrounded by walls. I was not able to think or see anything except darkness. My mind raced as I tried to break the vicious cycle. Nothing helped. I tried walking a couple of times, thinking I would receive help from a little exercise. On one afternoon in April 2018, a few weeks after I had lost my job for the second time, I ran into a friend in Morristown, New Jersey. He looked at me and said, “You’ve lost a lot of weight.” I pulled it together and made up an excuse, but I knew I did not look well either.

I was afraid, embarrassed, and ashamed of myself. I felt like a child as I told Kelley that I needed her by my side. I did not want to leave the house. I felt vulnerable. I was a shadow of myself. I had been a six-foot-four, 230-pound former college athlete and Army ranger, and that person was gone. Kelley and my brother Tim were my foundation. Without their support, concern, and love, I am unsure where I would have ended up.

My psychiatrist was trying to figure out the best combination of medication to help with my sleep, mood, energy, and interest in life. Once a week, I drove to the medical building for my appointment. I parked the car and tried to avoid seeing anyone when I walked up the stairs to the doctor’s second-floor office entrance. Infrequently, when I saw someone entering the medical building, I looked away to avoid making eye contact.

I had found this psychiatrist when I was in Florida. I did not have a referral; he just happened to be the first who would accept my medical insurance and could see me the week I returned to New Jersey. At our first meeting, I broke down before getting two words out of my mouth. I regained enough composure to share the details of my situation. For

years, when I was a sales representative for Pfizer Pharmaceuticals, I sold medications that treated depression, anxiety, and other mental health disorders. It was an odd feeling sitting alone in that room waiting to be invited in to see a shrink. This was not supposed to happen to me. But it was.

I was taking my medication, looking for a job, and still not feeling great when New Jersey had a bad snowstorm in the middle of March 2018. The storm dropped heavy wet snow, resulting in tree limbs breaking all over our property. I mustered enough energy to clean up around our home, hauling heavy branches to the front of the house, which eventually would be picked up by the town. This physical activity helped focus my attention on a specific goal, that of cleaning my property. When the weather started to improve toward the end of April, I began riding my bicycle around my hometown of Mendham, primarily for exercise.

Finally, after seven weeks, I went from being miserable and concerned about my mental well-being to waking up every day with vigor, energy, and a sense of purpose. I started to appreciate the time off from work. Slowly I began dreaming about the future and what I wanted to do. Depression no longer confined my thoughts to the emptiness of a prison cell. I was sleeping better, and my outlook on life improved.

I felt like I had a purpose when I woke up in the morning. I wanted to get out of bed and begin the day. I did not know what to do, but I knew I wanted to do something. I thought about a friend and former work colleague who had walked the Appalachian Trail (Georgia to Maine) the year before and posted daily updates. I had been hooked and could not wait to read his daily summary. I remembered thinking how cool that experience was and how I wanted a challenge like that. My thoughts about riding my bike across the country came back to me. I was, and still am, a dreamer, and I have always had a habit of acting on my dreams.

When I was a twenty-two-year-old, graduating from college, I was the only student out of 398 to receive a commission through the college Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) and enter active military

service (a handful of other students received commissions as reserve duty officers). I strived to be different. When most soldiers followed a well-defined military career path, I chose the road less traveled. My plans were unorthodox. My dreams were *my* dreams. I requested to be reassigned to Korea for a hardship tour after two years at Fort Polk, Louisiana, serving as a 2nd lieutenant in the 1-55 Air Defense Artillery Battalion of the 5th Mechanized Infantry Division. (Tours in the United States are for four years. According to the Department of Defense, soldiers serve hardship tours in locations where the quality of living is significantly lower than in the Continental United States. Soldiers receive an extra stipend referred to as hardship duty pay).¹ While serving in Uijeongbu, the Republic of Korea, in Camp Stanley just north of Seoul (location of the 1970 film *MASH* and the CBS television series *M*A*S*H* and site of the 4077th Mobile Army Surgical Hospital), I volunteered and got accepted into the Infantry Officer Advanced Course and Ranger School, usually reserved for career infantry officers. I saw scrawny guys proudly wearing the ranger tab, and I figured if they could complete that course, then so could I. I wanted to put myself in demanding situations and challenge myself to new limits. What could be a more bracing and significant challenge than riding a bicycle across the country?

I was glad I followed my gut and did not go back to work. The layoff from my job was a blessing in disguise that I did not realize at the time. Now, here I was in San Diego with my new “family,” ready to begin my trek across the country.

1 Militarybenefits.info



Chapter 1

CALIFORNIA (BLUE SKY, RUGGED MOUNTAINS, AND DESERT)

September 17 – San Diego–Shakedown Ride (3 miles)

In the days leading up to the ride, there were many moments when I asked myself, “Am I really going to doing this?” But here I was, really doing it.

It became very real during my shakedown ride along the Ocean Beach Bike Path on September 17, 2018. (A shakedown ride assesses the bike to uncover problems that should be resolved before departing on a long bike ride.) We arrived at the edge of the path and walked our bicycles through the sand to the ocean for the ceremonial dipping-of-the-tire-in-the-Pacific-Ocean ritual to christen the start of the journey. A handful of people were walking on the sand close to the surf, some with dogs and others alone. It was a quiet, balmy morning. By a little after 8:00 a.m., the temperature had climbed to over eighty degrees, but ocean air was chilly. Blue skies hovered over us, and wispy clouds covered the distant sky. Eleven cyclists were smiling, snapping pictures,

and soaking up the moment. We looked at each other and beamed. Far in the distance to the south, I saw the Ocean Beach Pier jutting out from Niagara Avenue, which connected to the street leading to downtown San Diego. Closer to our location, a rock jetty served as an excellent backdrop for some of the pictures that would highlight the start of our day. Everyone was relaxed, absorbing the moment, a moment I had thought about for a long time. Dipping my bike tire in the Pacific Ocean would become one of many milestones forever etched in my mind.

September 18 – San Diego to Alpine (43 miles)

We woke up at five thirty and began preparing to leave San Diego. We ate breakfast, packed, and secured our gear onto our bicycles. Tank, my new grey Chromoly steel-framed Surly Disc Trucker touring bike, equipped with four fully loaded panniers, fully loaded front and back racks, front handlebar bag, bike pump, and five water bottle cages, was ready to go. The handlebar resembled an airplane cockpit control panel, with everything I needed to navigate directly in front of me, including an iPhone 8, a Garmin Edge 1030 GPS device, an additional Garmin battery pack, a dog horn, a rearview mirror, a gear shifter, and brakes. As we walked our bikes single file through the back section of the hostel to the street, a sense of calmness entered my mind. You could hear a pin drop. I could not believe it. I was about to ride my bike across the country. The next time I saw my family would be after fulfilling this momentous goal.

The first half-mile riding east on the Ocean Beach Bike Path was eerily quiet. The serene Pacific Ocean sounds and tranquil views slowly diminished, replaced by the sight of concrete and buildings and the distinct sounds of car and truck engines whistling by as we approached Interstate 5 above the bike path. We eventually met San Diego rush hour traffic on this Tuesday morning. My primary navigation tool was the Garmin 1030 (a last-minute purchase). I carried two backup navigation

tools: ACA waterproof paper maps and an iPhone 8 with the Southern Tier route loaded on the Ride with GPS app.

Several of us made a wrong turn before exiting San Diego city limits. We backtracked about a mile to find the correct route. About ten miles outside of San Diego, my group gear nearly fell off my front rack. Luckily for me, I was stopped at a red light when I noticed the bag of utensils hanging loosely unsecured next to my front tire. I reattached and made sure it was correctly fastened before continuing. Figuring out how to pack using bungee cords to keep things secure was a challenge. It was sweltering, over ninety degrees, the sun beating down, zero breeze, and the hills were giant. It was not a wonderful way to start my journey!

My quest to become a long-distance touring cyclist began on June 22, 2018. I remember the day well. It hit me on the way home from a fifteen-mile bike ride in my hometown of Mendham, New Jersey. I walked into the kitchen area where my wife was standing, and her friend Nancy was sitting on a bar stool at the counter. I told my wife I was considering a cross-country ride. In hindsight, I said “considering,” but my mind was already made up. I was serious about riding coast to coast.

Kelley knew I needed to take this on. She was one hundred percent behind me. Nancy encouraged me as well. I began searching online for cross-country bike routes. I also started to watch YouTube videos to learn how to cycle long distances. The more videos I watched, the more excited I became. The stars aligned when I found a self-contained cross-country bike ride organized by the ACA that began in San Diego on September 15, 2018, and ended in St. Augustine, Florida, on November 20, 2018.

I called the ACA tour department. A woman named Emma answered the phone. I explained that I was a novice cyclist and asked whether my age (fifty-six) and lack of experience should deter me. She calmly quelled my concerns, saying that most people who ride coast to coast on the ACA tours are of retirement age. First impressions are so important. I honestly do not know if I would have taken the next step, the decisive action, if not for Emma’s can-do attitude and positive energy.

I needed to buy an excellent touring bike and camping equipment, such as a tent, sleeping bag, air mattress, cycling clothing, safety equipment, and other essential items. Emma suggested a couple of different bike brands, one of which was Surly. (I owned a Fuji road bike, which was not designed to withstand the rigors of a long-distance bike ride.) I was not fully committed just yet, but I knew decision day hung in the balance.

I raised the umbrella to shield us from the sun and looked at my wife and kids; this was the day I was making my decision. Spring Lake Beach at the Jersey Shore buzzed with activity on this July 4th holiday week. "I want to ask your opinion," I said to my kids. "I've been thinking about riding my bike across the country and wanted to know what you guys think about that idea." Without hesitation, my girls were all in. Tara, twenty-six, and Jaclyn, twenty-two (at the time), shared their sage advice: "Dad, YOLO!"

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"You only live once!" they said with a smile.

That was the clincher. I made the decision. Or so I thought.

There were plenty of times when I had second thoughts. I often questioned whether I was making the responsible decision. I had zero income and a family to support. Saving money for retirement and my children's college education were our family's financial priorities. I agonized over it for days. I could not think of anything else but the bike ride.

Things became clearer when I thought about the Christmas season. I imagined sitting in the same chair I had spent many hours in, contemplating my future and being disappointed in myself for not taking this fantastic opportunity to follow my dream. If I did not take the plunge, I knew I would regret not going for the rest of my life. I had told just enough family and friends about the trip to hold myself accountable. I did not want to back out. I knew I was ready to go, but I had no idea of the extent of the commitment I was about to make.

I rode my bike around Mendham, thinking about the pros and cons. On one shoulder was my angel, telling me to go for it. On the other, my

brain, telling me to be responsible and get a job. On the saddle of a bike, along the country roads of Morris County, New Jersey, I found myself thinking about life, my family, and riding through the California desert.

The day I finally made my decision, I chose to stay off the saddle. Before I committed, I wanted to make sure I could muster the same enthusiasm for the journey when I was off the saddle. Sure enough, as I sat in my home office watching a YouTube video of someone who had ridden through the desert on the Southern Tier, it hit me.

“I’m doing this!” I shouted. Kelley heard me scream and walked into my office.

“What is going on?” Kelley asked.

I shouted again, “I’m doing this!”

I paid the \$4,900 fee to the ACA. I ordered a new Surly Disc Trucker from Whippany Cycle in New Jersey. Chet, the cycle shop owner, supplied priceless counsel to me as I considered different equipment options. I made about a dozen trips to REI to buy essential equipment. I evaluated various cycling gear during training rides, often returning items I did not need. Overpacking is one of the biggest mistakes novice long-distance cyclists make, and despite my best efforts, I did too.

Leading up to the ride, I watched many cycling videos, learning as much as possible in the abbreviated time I had to prepare. I taught myself the ins and outs of long-distance cycling. What to pack? What to wear? How to prevent back and knee pain? What are the most challenging aspects of the ride? Another question I asked myself: what if I blow a tire? The last time I remembered changing a bike tire was in the late 1970s and early 1980s when I rode to Ocean City, Maryland, from my hometown of Camp Hill, Pennsylvania. I took short videos on my iPhone of the mechanics at Whippany Cycle changing a tire and fixing a broken spoke or chain, in case I needed to repair my bicycle in the middle of the desert. For the next several weeks, I trained daily to prepare myself for what lay ahead. My training routine consisted of cycling about thirty miles per day twice a week with a fully loaded bike (weighing more than eighty pounds). In addition, I rode the stationary

bike in my basement and lifted weights three days every week. I entered the Ramapo Rally on Sunday, August 19, and rode the sixty-five-mile leg in the annual New Jersey bike rally.

At the rally, I met a cyclist who had recently completed the TransAmerica Bike Tour led by the ACA. I listened intently as he talked about his experience. He recommended upgrading from the standard Surly Continental tires to Schwalbe Marathon Plus tires. He also highly recommended navigating using a Garmin GPS device. The Monday after the rally, I ordered a new Garmin device and Schwalbe tires. I was one hundred percent focused on preparing myself for the ride in the weeks leading up to my departure. I became obsessed with completing the Southern Tier bike ride.

During this preparation time, I was also looking for a new job. But deep down, I knew I did not want to go back to work yet. I contacted a few friends who were networking on my behalf. I told them my professional goals had not changed, just my timing. I told them I would reconnect and continue my job search when I returned to New Jersey in December. A couple of friends gave me hope that I would have job opportunities waiting for me upon my return. I needed to believe that so I could focus my efforts on the ride. For the three months I rode the Southern Tier, I kept an extremely positive attitude, which helped me navigate the tough times on the road.

Just as I had thought, I was one of the last in the group, lagging. I felt okay but struggled to find a rhythm. About twenty miles east of San Diego, I entered Mission Trails Regional Park on the Father Junipero Serra Trail. The bustling San Diego scene was now behind me. Turning into the park, I soaked up the clear blue sky, the surrounding mountains, and the slight haze. I felt as if I was leaving one dimension and entering another as I departed the hustle and bustle of San Diego and pedaled into the often-hiked wilderness surrounding the popular Cowles Mountain.

Just a few weeks earlier, I had been experiencing sorrow and sadness. Now here I was incredibly appreciative that somehow I'd made it to this point.

One of my fellow cyclists had difficulty climbing the hills leading out of San Diego. I stayed with him to make sure he was okay. We would cycle a couple of miles and then stop to rest. We repeated this pattern for several miles. At the crest of one of the most challenging climbs, I stopped at the Casino Inn Bar & Grill on Alpine Boulevard, a neighborhood watering hole in east San Diego County, to rest, rehydrate, and refuel. Stopping at cafes, bars, and convenience stores became routine over the next nine weeks.

Dan, Doug, Tom, Travis, and I initially rode to the wrong campground about four miles off-route. It was late afternoon, sunny and hot, the end of a long day. Exhausted and unable to contact others in the group, we were frustrated, not knowing where to go. It took us about an hour to figure out where we'd made the wrong turn, but we eventually arrived at the proper destination, the Alpine campsite.

The first full day on the saddle was now behind us. We had ridden forty-three miles and climbed 3,500 feet. My body felt surprisingly good, and Tank had performed like a charm. The campsite was tranquil. The trees supplied much-needed shade, allowing us to escape the ninety-degree temperature and the sun that beat down all day. We ate dinner and gathered around the picnic table to discuss the next day's ride. Pasta, bread, salad, and a pastry dessert were on the menu.

Cooking and cleaning duty rotated. It reminded me of kitchen patrol (KP) duty when I was in the military. It was not my night to cook, but I helped clean the pots and pans. I put leftover food in the park bathroom to secure it from critters. The sun still peeked through the eucalyptus trees but was going down quickly. We all used our headlamps to conduct our map meeting, which would become a nightly ritual. During map meetings, the entire group gets together for thirty minutes to review the route, available services, weather conditions, and accommodations for the following day and night.

My friend Jeff came to mind. In 2017 he had captured details of his hike on the Appalachian Trail with daily posts. I imagined other friends of mine were feeling the same way about my ride that I had felt when

following Jeff's hike the year before. I wanted to share my experience in a way that gave others a sense that they were riding with me. I settled into my Big Agnes tent and wrote my first of many daily Facebook posts. I had not been on Facebook prior to this ride, but I was persuaded to open an account by my wife and kids. I wrote from the heart and did not overthink anything. For about five minutes on most nights, tonight being the first, I shared stories, feelings, observations, and pictures. I called Kelley. "Hi, it was a fairly good day. I am tired but feeling okay. We're staying at the Alpine campground tonight. I'm starting to get a lot of Facebook friend requests. Love you, I'm calling it a night." With that, I closed out day one on the saddle.

September 19 – Alpine to Jacumba Hot Springs (44 miles)

I woke up rested, feeling good, ready to go, and prepared for the day ahead. I took down my tent, packed my gear, and loaded Tank. Steam was rising into the morning air from a large pot of water on a small camp stove. The first order of business every morning: coffee! It was a must. The rotating cook, usually the first to wake up, lit two backpacking stoves. One was to prepare hot water for coffee and oatmeal. The second pot of hot water was combined with chlorine tablets to clean utensils at the end of each meal. For breakfast, we normally ate cereal, oatmeal, breakfast bars, yogurt, and fruit. We made sandwiches for the road for lunch, and some of us carried "pogey bait" (sweets and candy). After breakfast, I performed ABC morning preventive maintenance checks (Tire Air Pressure, Brakes, Tighten Bolts, and Clean Drivetrain) and then hopped on the saddle. Generally, it took ninety minutes from the time I woke up until departure.

The whole group started riding each morning between seven and eight-thirty. We wanted to ride many miles before the temperature rose. On this day, day two, the temperature hit 106 degrees. The sun beat down all day. Riding the California hills east of San Diego was particularly challenging. Thankfully, there were very few cars on the road.

We began riding through small towns. I stopped at a little convenience store in Pine Valley, California (population 1,500). I reapplied sunscreen and filled eight water bottles (five attached to my bike, two inside my right rear pannier, and one attached by a bungee cord to the rear bike rack) and my CamelBak hydration pack.

About twenty miles west of Jacumba Hot Springs, our destination for the night, I stopped at a vantage point on Old Highway 80 and State Route 94 in clear view of the wall separating Mexico from the United States near the Baja California Peninsula. I had read about and listened to the constant back-and-forth between both sides on the topic. Do we build the wall, or don't we? People were passionate about the issue. The loudest voices launched invective attacks, and news had become so toxic. I did not know what to believe. I wanted to see the wall up close, educate myself, and form my own opinion.

State Route 94 leading to Jacumba was narrow, one lane each way. Downtown Jacumba Hot Springs offers little more than the Jacumba Hot Springs Resort and Spa, our lodging for the night. I imagined riding up to a magnificent resort entrance where we would be met by an employee who would pamper the group during our short stay. The opposite happened. It took me a few minutes after entering Jacumba to find the resort. The nondescript brown stucco building and small gravel parking lot blended in with barren farmland and a few dilapidated buildings surrounding the area.

A car filling up at a gas station and a handful of parked cars in the gravel lot were the only signs Jacumba was not a ghost town. It was too early in the journey for me to completely grasp what a unique experience it was for me to ride through small rural communities in the western part of the country.

Dan led the pack for the first few days. He generally arrived at camp two hours before I did. When I arrived at the Jacumba Resort, Dan was swimming in the pool, enjoying time off the saddle. I wondered if Dan's strategy would remain the same all the way to Florida, if he would lead the way and set the pace each day. There was no time limit, no rules, and

we did not have to ride together. Everyone naturally rode at a different pace, depending on skill level, strength, personal motivation, and desire. Some rode in pairs. Others met up at a rendezvous point to eat lunch, but everyone arrived at the destination before dinner was served, typically between five-thirty and six. I rode on my own and at my own pace 90 percent of the time. That way, I could take pictures, talk to the locals, take it all in. I focused on one day at a time, thinking about the next milestone and completing each ten-mile segment.

I drew the lucky straw—no roommate in Jacumba—which meant I did not have to contend with snoring. There were typically two to a room each night we stayed at a motel, to keep costs down. The \$4,900 fee covered food (except pogeey bait) and lodging expenses (campsites, churches, motels). The rotating daily cook carried the group credit card to buy food and handle the organization of food delivery to the next destination. It was hard to feed eleven hungry souls with a \$125 daily budget, but we managed. Shopping at Dollar General and Walmart, which we often did, increased our purchasing power with the small stipend distributed for each day.

After settling into my motel room, I left the group and walked across the street about a quarter mile further south to see the wall up close. The brown desert-floor path that led me to the wall was full of tumbleweeds. To my left, I saw a baseball field overgrown with weeds. On my right were several ranch homes, little more than shanties, lining the path leading to the wall. I did not see a lot of human activity. A couple of children and adults were outside one home in front of a large rusted pickup truck. A desolate wilderness surrounded me. About fifty yards from the wall, I entered an area that was fenced off, but I did not think I was trespassing. “Well, here I am,” I said aloud, but to one in particular. I reached out and touched the wall. I saw brown mountains and a few tiny houses nestled in the hills about one hundred yards from the border on the Mexican side.

The newer section of the wall was about fifteen or twenty feet high. The older section was much lower and needed an extreme makeover.

The older part appeared to me to be made from leftover scrap metal. I wondered if the project was underfunded, so people used their creativity to complete the task. The older area appeared easy to mount, but the newer section would be challenging to scale. A small metal sign attached to a ten-foot-tall metal pole sticking up from the brown desert floor communicated vital information, an unmistakable message for the intended audience to heed government advice: “Warning—International Border—Unlawful to enter except at ports of entry!” The sign struck me as necessary but not practical. I assumed many people trying to enter the United States in Jacumba Hot Springs were doing so because they did not want to enter at the ports of entry. Plus, the nearest ports were in Tecate and Calexico, forty miles from Jacumba.

I am struck by the negligible impact that seeing and touching the border wall had on changing my perspective. To me, it is simple, not complicated, and does not have to be so political—just like vetting who can enter the White House, which is a good idea. The same logic applies to entering the United States.

The group of eleven were getting to know each other, starting to form personal connections. The faster cyclists hung together. The folks who had previously completed cross-country rides and already understood what to expect led the way. I was one of four on their virgin journey. I was still trying to figure things out, not wanting to overdo anything until I was comfortable knowing what to expect riding a significant number of miles on consecutive days. Back at the resort, I called Kelley, let her know I was doing well, had survived day two, and was on my way to finding my groove.

September 20 – Jacumba Hot Springs to Brawley (57 miles)

This day started with anticipation—I would finally ride through the California desert! I once saw a picture of a cyclist riding alone in the Imperial Sand Dunes, the sun beating down, nothing in view as far as the eye could see. This picture was etched in my mind. I envisioned swapping places with that person.

I was chasing a dream. However, I still had questions that I hoped this bike trip would help to answer. Was this ride an attempt to fill a void in my life? Was this ride my answer to regaining my self-confidence? Or maybe I just like adventures. In any case, I was about to enter the desert on a bike! I was excited beyond belief.

We started the day riding on Interstate 8. It was my first time riding on an interstate. I had an adrenaline rush before descending through Devils Canyon and the In-Ko-Pah Gorge on a seven-mile, 6 percent grade down to the desert floor. I paused and looked out over the vast landscape. I could see the blue sky in the distance protruding above the eye-level cloud cover. There was no wind at the top of the mountain. However, I expected to meet wind gusts as I picked up speed and descended, twisting back and forth through switchbacks to the valley below. I was on top of the world, looking down into the canyons. I saw jagged mountains. Directly to my right, on the ground, lay a lonely mattress. It appeared that someone had dumped it there or that it fell off the back of a passing vehicle. It was incongruent with the picturesque landscape before me. Looking at that mattress, I had a sinking feeling something would fall off my bike and cause me to crash, making me unable to continue. The mattress sighting was peculiar, completely unexpected, and out of place. I took a deep breath and started the descent.

I applied brakes for the next twenty minutes, never exceeding thirty-eight miles per hour. It took time for me to adjust to riding a bike that weighed close to ninety pounds. I did not know if the panniers would remain attached to the racks at such high speeds. I was completely focused on the task at hand, my mind locked in on speed and safety. I wanted to accelerate and let my adrenaline take over, but I also did not want to die. If I tumbled over, the result would not be good for me or my bike.

“I made it safely,” I thought, as I slowed down at the bottom of the mountain. I wondered if Doug, about thirty minutes ahead of me, had exceeded fifty miles per hour, a speed he’d exceeded on prior cycling tours.

Cycling on the interstate in the western part of the country is not uncommon. I could not imagine riding on the shoulder of Interstate 80, 287, or 95 in New Jersey. That would not be safe. I experienced less traffic and found the road shoulders much broader on western interstate highways. After completing the descent, weaving in and out of the canyons, I saw an exit for Calexico. About one quarter mile further, I saw a large sign for the Yuha Desert (part of the Sonoran Desert).

I stopped to take in my surroundings. I thought about the poor souls who rode the Southern Tier route east to west. Climbing the mountain we had just descended would be extremely challenging. Windmills by the dozen dotted the desert floor. I was curious about how much electricity the windmills produced.

To the north, I saw the Coyote Mountain range. It was difficult to estimate distance—so much vastness. What appeared to be a couple of miles away was actually ten or fifteen miles, if not more. I thought about rain causing flash floods, overwhelming the desert wadis (dry channels that can fill up and flood an area without warning during the rainy season).

Cloud cover filled the sky. Rain was not in the forecast, but desert weather can be very unpredictable. I thought about what actions I would take if a flash flood threatened the area. In the distance, looking east, I saw a bridge over a wadi. As I approached, I realized the bridge was under construction. With all the technological advances, I could not believe my GPS device had not informed me about the bridge construction! I had a destination to get to—obstacle or no obstacle, I had to find a way around. I was stuck on Evan Hewes Highway with the Coyote Mountains to the north and the Yuha Desert to the south, an impassable bridge in front, and a wadi underneath me. In the distance, the skies looked threatening. The wispy clouds turned into menacing rain clouds the further east I gazed.

Three other group members, Travis, Deb, and Gary, arrived at the bridge minutes after I did. I surveyed the situation, assessed that the construction zone was only thirty to forty feet long, and decided the

best course of action was to continue through the bridge rather than underneath. So that is what we did. Shortly after crossing, I received a text from my hometown friend Gino, who was following me on the Garmin tracker app. He asked where I was. I told him I was in the middle of the California desert, surrounded by wilderness, riding on a road that seemed to go on forever!

Gino and his wife Angela hosted a small gathering of friends in Mendham the night before I left for San Diego. They, along with my family and a few friends, were interested in my journey. I had agreed to send updates as much as I could. I did not know if I could get into a routine of posting frequent updates on my ride. Being active on social media is not typical behavior for me. However, it did not take me long to pivot. I made a point of sharing my thoughts most every night before bed. My nightly Facebook posts became my way of staying connected with family and friends, closing a daily chapter, and preparing myself mentally for the next day's adventure.

The worst stretch of pavement during the 3,100-mile trip was on the Evan Hewes Highway. The pavement surface on this extended stretch of road left something to be desired. The road was torn up, and pebbles were kicked up as I rode. I could not help but think that if I were Evan Hewes, I would demand that my name be removed and not associated with the road. There was a rumble strip every ten feet for the twelve-mile stretch between Calexico and El Centro, California. The vibration and audible rumbling were transmitted through the bike and up my body. I was concerned about my tires blowing, spokes breaking, screws loosening, and even a rack falling off. I worried about whether these types of roads would be the norm for the rest of the trip to Florida. I hoped not.

From the construction zone to El Centro, I rode with the youngest member of our group, Travis. He rode with a BOB (beast of burden) trailer connected to his bike. Travis was one of two in the group who carried their gear in a BOB. All others rode with panniers. In my view, riding with a BOB has one main benefit: unpacking and packing is easier

because there is only one place to put gear, rather than four. I suppose there is some logic to that way of thinking. But if I did it again, I would still ride with panniers.

It was essential to stay hydrated, especially in the desert where resources were scarce and there was a snowball's chance in hell of finding a potable water supply. Heat exhaustion was a concern for everyone. Shortly after leaving the construction zone, Travis told me he was down to his last bit of drinking water. I gave him one of the extra water bottles I kept stashed away in a pannier. At the time, several more miles remained before we entered El Centro. I was happy to help.

El Centro looked like a speck in the distance at first, but as I got closer, I could make out the built-up area's urban footprint, surrounded by vast open land. El Centro is the largest city in the Imperial Valley and the county seat of Imperial County, California, a sprawling area. Growing industries including retail, professional services, health care, leisure, and hospitality are adding jobs to the primary agricultural sector.²

Even though I generously applied sunscreen every day, my arms and legs had become darker than I could ever remember. Dust and dirt coated my suntanned skin. My lips were chapped and blistered from the sun and wind. I became sun blind when I took my sunglasses off to wipe sweat from my eyes, and I dealt with temporarily impaired vision while adapting from dim light to sunlight. My five-hundred-dollar Oakley prescription sunglasses were a godsend, ranking as one of the essential items in my possession. I placed my iPhone inside my handlebar bag because the temperature was too hot for it to remain exposed to sunlight. The hot sun beating down unfiltered directly on the paved dark black asphalt road made for a truly memorable desert cycling experience and an alternate way to obtain the perfect suntan without using reflective tanning blankets.

After I refilled my water supply at a convenience store at the intersection of Main Street and Old Highway 111 in El Centro, I rode

2 www.cityofelcentro.org

north for the last twenty miles to the Gateway Church in Brawley, our destination for the night. The ride was nerve-racking due to the narrow shoulders. Numerous trucks passed, and a lot of debris (small pieces of wood, tiny pieces of metal) littered the road. I was thankful when I arrived safely at the church after a stressful twenty-mile ride through the Imperial Valley, ever mindful of the large volume of rush hour traffic speeding in both directions. I stocked up on drinks and pogy bait at a Walmart across the street from the church. The group talked about the next day's ride at our map meeting, which was expected to be the most challenging to date. I was excited, anticipating the passage through the Imperial Sand Dunes, a day I had looked forward to since I first began researching this trip. There was a good chance the only store between Brawley and Palo Verde, our destination, was closed, which caused anxiety for some group members, including me. We expected the temperature to reach 106 degrees again the next day.

The group decided to get an early start to rack up miles before the heat pounded down on top of us. Sprawled out on the floor of the church's social room, I put in my earplugs, an essential piece of equipment, and fell asleep. I strategically placed my air mattress and sleeping bag on the opposite side of the room from the loudest snorers. Two cyclists snored as loud as Adam Sandler did in the 2000 *Little Nicky* movie when he falls asleep on the rocks overlooking a city. It was much easier to create separation when sleeping outside at a campground. Inside a confined area, noise is magnified tenfold, while outside, the noise dissipates, so the snoring is much more tolerable.

September 21 – Brawley to Palo Verde (71 miles)

We were up and ready to go at six-thirty the next morning. I had been looking forward to this day for a long, long time. As I approached the sand dunes from the west, I could see the landscape change in front of me. The lush green agricultural farmland gave way to pure white sand

for as far as the eye could see. I stopped when I saw the warning sign, “Possible drifting sand next seven miles, drive with caution.”

The Imperial Dunes reminded me of the white sand of Panama City Beach, Florida, and that of the White Sands National Park in New Mexico, on the list of the world’s greatest natural wonders.³ I had visited these two places years before. Now, I felt like I’d landed on Mars, with the mountains of white sand on all sides and one pedal rotation away from entering a different civilization. The barren area, where little rain falls annually and dunes reach heights of three hundred feet above the desert floor, is a sought-after destination for all-terrain vehicle riding enthusiasts.⁴ I flashed back to the picture of the cyclist riding in the Imperial Sand Dunes and realized I had fulfilled a dream. I was content and satisfied. But I also started to run low on water. I saw a sign for a ranger station and rode up a small hill about a quarter mile off-route to search for water.

Hope turned to distress when I realized the station was closed. I opened the door to the men’s bathroom and glanced at a bare room with a single squat toilet toward the back. I drank the little water I had left in one of my water bottles. I then resorted to drinking the remnants of water that had spilled into the bottom of the right rear pannier. I was nervous, not knowing if the Glamis Beach Store, about twenty miles further east, was open.

Doug led the way when we left the church in Brawley. This was Doug’s second cross- country bike ride. His first was in 1976, when he joined the first group to ride the famous TransAmerica Bicycle Trail from Yorktown, Virginia, to Astoria, Oregon. Here he was, forty years later, in retirement after a long and successful career as a mechanical engineer, riding coast to coast a second time. He sent everyone a text message: “Glamis store is open!” It was great news and the single best text message

3 nps.gov

4 www.blm.gov/visit/imperial-sand-dunes

I received the entire trip. I was so relieved when I saw that message. It was 105 degrees, and I was out of water when the text came through.

We all took a break in the shade at the Glamis store. Gary and his wife Deb, exhausted from the brutal riding conditions, hitched a ride in the cab of a pickup truck for the remaining forty miles to the Palo Verde campground. Due to the never-ending road vibration on the Evan Hewes Highway, Gary's rear bike rack screws had come loose, resulting in one of his panniers being compromised. Shortly after leaving the Glamis store, Joel fell off his bike after experiencing heat exhaustion. Another Good Samaritan transported Joel and his bike to the campsite in Palo Verde in the back of his pickup truck.

Fifteen miles east of Glamis, Klaus, Travis, and I met border patrol agents at a border station on State Route 78, smack-dab in the middle of the Midway and Chocolate Mountain ranges. The border agents were all very agreeable, but they meant business. They did not allow me to take a picture with them in it. We told them about our struggles since leaving San Diego, especially the difficulty of riding in such extreme heat. One of the agents shared a story of another agent who had recently tracked down drug smugglers in the surrounding hills, an undertaking that was complicated by the extreme heat and unforgiving rugged hiking conditions. After speaking with the agents, we sat in the shade underneath a sizeable portable tent away from the direct sun and watched them perform their duties. Cars and trucks stopped at the checkpoint. A dog circled the vehicles, searching and sniffing. A border agent placed a device underneath each vehicle to detect illicit drugs. Each encounter lasted two or three minutes.

Klaus, from Germany, decided he could not continue cycling to the campsite in Palo Verde, for safety reasons. He told us he was not accustomed to riding in such extreme heat. Klaus cycled without shoe cleats and rode with very thick bike tires. This combination had given rise to the challenges he faced, causing him to have to work harder than he should have, especially in those brutal riding conditions—not ideal equipment for such a long tour. The patrol agent asked someone

driving a truck with a cab if he would transport Klaus to the campsite. A Vietnam veteran graciously agreed to help. He was on his way to watch his grandson play a high school football game in Palo Verde on this day, Friday, September 21.

Everyone eventually arrived safely at the campsite in Palo Verde after a difficult day on the saddle. Our host, the campsite manager, made lasagna for dinner and served cherry pie for dessert. Both were exceptionally good and hit the spot. I slept on the ground that was cushioned with soft sandy soil, and the canopy of palo verde trees supplied much-needed shade. During the map meeting, a discussion ensued about the challenges we endured riding in such extreme heat. A few expressed frustrations about the riding conditions; three members, Gary, Deb, and Klaus, did not feel safe continuing. They planned to rent a van and drive to El Paso, Texas, at which point they would join the group to continue the journey to Florida. We supported their decision, wished them well, and hoped to see them again.

The enthusiasm, positive energy, and heartfelt stories we all shared at the nightly map meetings about people we met and places we saw started to wane. I began to sense friction between individual members of the group. Some projected their insecurities onto others, consciously or not, taking out their frustrations. I started to hear people complain about food choices and sleeping accommodations, and little whispers pitting one against another. I did not pick up any significant issues, just apparent annoyances expressed by some. I made a mental note but kept my focus on the big picture: St. Augustine, Florida.

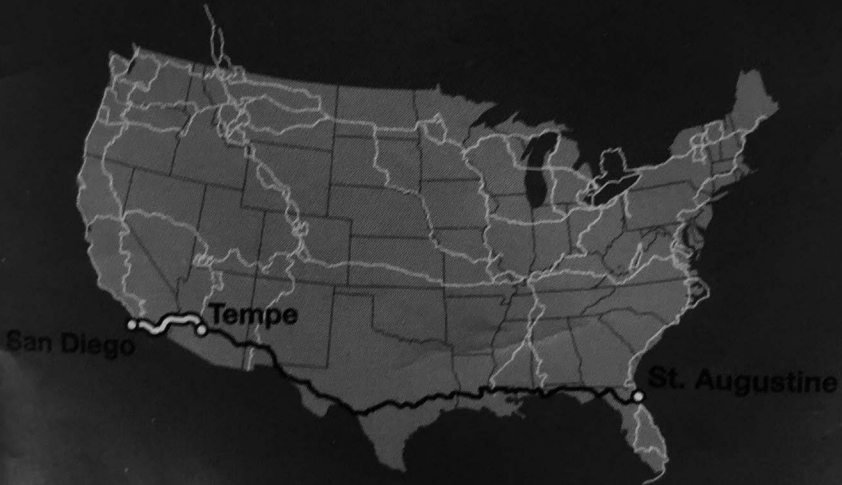
I knew there would be challenges along the way. Many would be out of our control. But what *was* in our power was how we reacted to each challenge. When things got tough, my positive attitude and cooperation were my best contribution to the team—carrying the heavy and bulky bag of utensils highlighted and revealed my desire to be a team player. What I lacked in long-distance cycling knowledge and experience I made up for in my willingness to carry a heavier load. However, only four days after leaving San Diego we were dealing with team conflict. I wanted

to set a positive example of how to deal with adversity. I listened to and acknowledged the concerns expressed. I shared my hope that we would see each other again in El Paso and then refocused the team back to the next day's ride. There was nothing we could do about the weather. How we responded to it was a different story. That was my focus. As it turned out, the ride from Brawley to Palo Verde would be the last time the entire eleven-person group rode together.

Doug, Deb, and Gary mentioned that the ride to Palo Verde was one of the most difficult they had ever endured. I thought it was tough, too, for sure, but it was also an enjoyable day on the saddle. I was sleeping well, and this night would be no different. I called Kelley and shared the highlights of my day with her. Typically, our conversations lasted about ten minutes. I always asked how the kids were doing. She shared any updates. My son Brian's eighth-grade football season was underway. My eldest daughter, Tara, out of college for four years, worked at Boston University. And my middle daughter, Jaclyn, a recent college graduate, had started working. I was content being on the road, away from home. I knew my wife had everything under control.

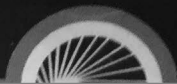
SECTION 1

San Diego, CA to Tempe, AZ
417.5 Miles



- Route Map and Guide
- Bi-Directional

- Services for Cyclists
- Waterproof Paper





Sept. 17, 2018 – Dog Beach, Pacific Ocean-San Diego



Sept. 17, 2018 – Dog Beach, Deb and Gary foreground, Joel and Joyce background



Sept. 18, 2018 – Alpine campsite, Alpine, California



Sept. 19, 2018 – The Wall, Jacumba Hot Springs, California



Sept. 21, 2018 – Imperial Sand Dunes, California



*Sept. 21, 2018
Good Samaritan at border
station, Brawley, California*



Sept. 22, 2018 – California and Arizona Border, Ehrenberg, Arizona



Sept. 23, 2018 – Dan and Larry, preparing to leave Quartzsite, Arizona



*Sept. 25, 2018
Tom riding on the
Arizona Canal Bike Path,
Phoenix, Arizona*

*Sept. 26, 2018
Pat Tillman Statue inside
ASU Sun Devils Stadium,
Tempe, Arizona*

