



Targa Triumph

Targa Newfoundland Rally 9-14 September 2007



Pic: Gregg Salmon

Words by Dyrk Bolger.



Photo by Rachel Nelson

Terry and Dyrk check their notes. Andy looks on.

For those not familiar with the Targa Newfoundland rally, think of it as a 2,200km puzzle, capturing a chunk of Newfoundland's incredible Eastern oceanic landscape, run over six days.

There are up to eight special stages per day, on unpredictable "paved" roads closed to the public, with speed limits increased to 200kmh. The roads are up and down steep hills, gravel is often present, and jumps occur when you least expect them. There are some unbelievably tight corners, with special stages interweaving through towns. Occasionally rally cars brush against, or collide into, quaint brightly-painted houses, positioned precariously close to the rally action. There are also high-speed meandering stages, along cliff edges that overlook the ocean.

Our Targa adventure started in February 2006, when I imported a 1963 Austin Cooper S from Michigan, USA. The body was excellent, and I put the car in storage until a decision was made to restore it. In November I mentioned the possibility of doing the Targa Newfoundland Rally to a fellow Mini racing buddy, Terry Milnes. Before we knew it, we had entered the event!

The 1963 Cooper S, now known as "Molly", was selected, and preparation began in earnest in January 2007. There was not a lot of time to build a rally car from scratch. We



Photo by Gregg Salmon

Being left-hand-drive, Dyrk is the peddler and Terry calls the notes.

managed, thanks to the dedication and help from a few special people - Karl Burke, who drove 200-plus miles on several occasions to help; Jason Stevenson (my neighbour), who spent many hours machining parts and bench-flowing manifolds; Dario Palleva, who helped with the design and installation of the rollcage; and Wade Koll, who also gave his time to help with the car.

The Mini was entered in the Classic Modified section. Although mostly standard, there were a few improvements - 1360cc Cooper S engine with Russell Engineering cylinder head, camshaft, and pistons; 123-ignition electronic distributor; straight-cut four-synchro gearbox with LSD; four-pot brake callipers, and vented rotors with steel braided lines; Classic Motor Works (my business) 10"x6" three-piece alloy race wheels; Yokohama A032R tyres; fully-adjustable suspension with custom front and rear sway bars; six-point chrome-moly rollcage; reinforced front and rear sub-frames; ATL fuel cell; heated front windscreen; BRANTZ rally computer; and SPARCO race seats. See, mostly standard.

To give some perspective of the logistics of our entry; Terry and I are located in Manitoba, central Canada, our support crew are Andy and Rachel Nelson from Richmond on the west coast (about 3,600 km from us), and Rick and Elaine Higgs also from the west coast, while the Targa event is 3,700 km east of us - off the coast of Canada, via a fourteen-hour ferry ride to the island Province of Newfoundland.

Add to this my technical engine assistance comes from my good friend and mentor Graham Russell in Sydney, Australia, and you can see some of the problems we faced, with only eight months to build and test the car.

Terry was adamant that we both take the rally school training offered. I am very thankful for that, as the training was instrumental to our success. Without the training, I believe we would have been flying blind for at least the first two days. We registered for two training schools. One session in June at the Mosport racetrack near Toronto, Ontario (2,000 km away), and one as a refresher, just before the Targa event, in Newfoundland.



Photo by Rachel Nelson

Coordinating the next Service stop location.



Photo by Greg Martin

Future Newfoundland model poses with rally cars.



Photo by Rachel Nelson

Terry (L) and Dyrk with Molly after the event.



Photo by Gregg Salmon

Just moments before Molly grazed the crashed BMW. Note dejected BMW crew member.

Our first goal was to prepare the car enough to use at the rally school in June. We installed a spare engine, which was stock, except for a polished head and mild rally cam. We then had a vehicle safety done and registered the car for public roads (a requirement for Targa Newfoundland). The training at Mosport proved to be an excellent testing opportunity for the car.

We then had to fit the prime rally engine, roll cage, heated windscreen, and on-board camera. The reliability and performance of the engine was one of the keys to our success, thanks to Graham Russell.

Four days before leaving for Targa we tested the rally car at our local racetrack in Gimli, Manitoba. There wasn't much time to address issues that might pop up. As it turned out, we had issues with carburation and handling. The handling was resolved during Targa. Carburation adjustments were made by installing better needles to improve mixture, but we were not able to resolve the problem of "flat running" on hard cornering.

Leaving home on 30 August, we took a week to reach Newfoundland, travelling via the northern United States to take advantage of better highways and cheaper fuel. However, it is an extra 500 km, bringing the total one-way to 4,200 km.

Friday 7 September was spent at the rally school, located in what used to be the only US Naval Base in Canada (no longer active). Here we reinforced what we learned in the previous training session at Mosport, and then got a feel for what the Newfoundland roads might be like.



Photo by Terry Milnes

Our fantastic support crew after the event. L to R: Rick Higgs, Andy Nelson, Elaine Higgs and Rachel Nelson. Thanks folks!



Ever wondered where Newfoundland is?



After the training we stopped to pick up some "Hero" cards, made up at the last minute by a local print shop in Placentia. Hero cards display a picture of your car, with technical details and sponsor information on the back. Thousands of kids look forward each year to getting cards and autographs from rally participants, and we felt terrible to see the disappointment on those kids' faces when we run out of Hero cards!

The following day we met up with our support crew, and our other team members and their crews. We were part of a three-car team called "Brick N' Brute Racing": Dick Paterson (Ontario Canada) Tony Mattson (who flew in from New Zealand) in a 1959 Austin Mini named "Betty", Michael Salter (Ontario Canada) and Michael Oritt (USA) in a 1953 Healey 100-4 called "Twelve", and Terry and I in the 1963 Austin Mini named "Molly".

On Sunday 9 September we got a good taste of what the Targa Rally is all about. It was Prologue Day, and the first mandatory item on the agenda was a breathalyzer test. We passed the test and Terry clutched the "GO" sticker, a different one is applied to the inside of the windscreen each day – without it we cannot participate.

Molly was lined up at the official start, the flag dropped - and we were lost within the first 30 seconds of the transit stage! We forgot to zero the rally computer! It is a good thing this day was not counted in the score for the rally. We fumbled a bit through the rest of the prologue, and were not really happy with our performance. On a positive note, Molly was running well.

The rally proper began the following day. Each car is given a base time, which they need to beat in order to qualify for a Silver Plate finish. This speed can be exceeded and teams that improve their base time by 35% or more get to clean the stage with no penalty points.

Our goals were to take it one stage at a time, last each day, try to minimize mistakes, don't take any risks by over-driving, and get to the finish.

The first leg took us through roads where we'd had the final rally training, and we expected to do well. We were flabbergasted! We could not clean the first two "familiar" stages. The latter four stages we did better than expected and finished the day in 21st position overall, out of 57 in the full Targa competition.



Photo by Terry Milnes

Each night our service crew took over, to have Molly ready for the next day's adventure.



Photo by Gregg Salmon

Molly at full-tilt.

Leg 2 included a long, high-speed run out to Leading Tickles, and I thought there was no way our tiny Mini could meet the base times set. We ran as fast and hard as we safely could, and beat the time by 37 seconds. The run back was a bit shorter and the pressure was on. We managed to beat the time by 25 seconds, passing a Subaru that had a 30-second lead on us. We finished the day unbelievably well in 5th place overall.

Leg 3 was the only day that it really rained, and there were eight stages covering the Kittiwake Coast. Water is a great equalizer for the Mini, and we managed to maintain fifth place, with twenty seconds separating the top six places.

Leg 4 was probably our best day, and the most exciting. Our high placing in the standings resulted in Molly starting near the back of the pack (faster cars start later). This caused some concern as we now had to drive through "used" stages with rock and gravel kicked up on the road by previous competitors. On several occasions the red and yellow warning tape and directional signs were knocked down or blown over.

There were eight stages covering the Burin Peninsula. We recovered from a wrong turn on one of the complex town stages, and lightly grazed a BMW that had just collided into a house. At the end of the day we were 2nd overall, with only ten seconds between 2nd and 5th. A fantastic result!



Photo by Garth Gullekson, Darlington Mediaworks

Molly in typical Newfoundland scenery.

What a week! There wasn't supposed to be any pressure. We did not expect to be so high in the standings and it would have been a shame to let it all crumble now. Only one significant mistake or major breakdown would have put us out of contention.

Oh well, steady as she goes; one stage at a time; driver was calm; navigator was calm; Molly was well maintained and continued to be strong; crew was dependable and always there when we needed them.

Leg 5 had seven stages, covering the Northern Avalon Peninsula. We finished an astounding 3rd place overall! We couldn't really ask for more than that. Way beyond our expectations!

We were initially recorded as finishing 4th overall. The top four cars were impounded to verify compliance with regulations and, due to discrepancies, the 2nd-place car was relegated significantly in the standings, elevating us to 3rd overall. We were also awarded with First in Class, First in Category, and Third in Division, as well as the Baldhead Award for best novice crew (highest-placed in the event's history), and received our Silver Targa plate.

Teamwork was the major contributor to our success. Each evening, Molly was turned over to our support crew who went over the entire car for loose nuts and bolts, making necessary adjustments when required.



Photo by Rachel Nelson

Michael Salter and Michael Oritt in "Twelve".



Photo by Jodi Bolger

Terry (L) and Dyrk with their trophies.

Molly stood up very well, with the only three mechanical problems – being a broken stabilizer bracket (one of four stabilizers on the car), a bad rear wheel bearing, and a clutch disengagement issue.

Molly would not have been ready without tremendous sponsor support. Atpac Transportation provided funding to help build Molly; Pete Kroeker at DMK Custom provided the time and expertise to skilfully apply that beautiful Pepper White / Surf Blue paint; Jim Krause of Turbo Automotive and Ken at Ken's Kustom Automotive Machine provided key support for Molly's engine build needs; Graham Russell for providing parts and advice for the engine; The kind folk at Tirecraft in Winnipeg, Terry McBurney and Bob Crawford, were always available to support our tyre management needs.

This was a fantastic experience for motor sport, with beautiful scenery, friendly people, a taste of culture, camaraderie, new friends, and the true "team spirit".

What about the other members of "Brick N' Brute Racing"?

Betty ('59 Mini) suffered from a water shortage and seized her engine two days into the event. After some hard slogging Betty's crew managed to install Molly's spare engine to finish the rally.

Twelve ('53 Healey) had a number of setbacks. Off the road knocking over a couple of trees, head gasket issues, and a broken axle, but still managing to cross the finish line at the end.



Photo by Rachel Nelson

Dick Paterson & Tony Mattson in "Betty".