

True Life Bonehead Experiences, or How I Got to Where I am Today!: Part I by Bill Burke

Question: Bill, how did you get the experience that has allowed you to become a trainer?

Answer: I made a lot of bonehead mistakes! (But, fortunately, I learned a lot from them!)

Without the benefit of proper training, unfortunately, some of us had to learn the hard way. Even with the training from Boy Scouts, Army and on, I would push the envelope of my youth and immaturity and end up in some very dangerous and embarrassing situations where someone had to help me out, or it took days for me to get back home.



Experience #1--at least the first one that comes to my feeble mind anyway! Introduction to the Hi-Lift jack or, is the real name for that thing "swamp-jack?"

I was around 14 years old and I was helping my friend and his dad build a hunting half-track/swamp buggy. These are not the ones you see racing on ESPN. They were big contraptions that used airplane tires on the front steering axle and rubber treads like a bulldozer for the drive train. This one stood about 10 feet tall and could hold 4 or 5 "hunters," plus the driver. The power train was a Cadillac 500 engine coupled to the auto trans with a truck 4- speed bolted on for various reductions. This particular "track" could get up to 50 mph in the Everglades as long as you didn't hit a "gator hole" and sink it!

Anyway, I was allowed to drive it, since I put so much effort into building it, from the launching ramp to the camp site. Of course, I hit a gator-hole and blundered on in until the water was at my throat. In a panic, I gave it gas and did a wheel stand. Three of the hunters were immediately ejected! "Can you say fish bait?" When I finally stopped the thing, or it actually stopped itself with the tangled track that came loose, my friend's dad looked at me sternly and said, "Now, you'll have to fix it right and proper while we drink beer and fish for bass!"

So my friend and I jumped in to the neck-deep swamp and spent the next few hours getting the track back on and tightened. We used, extensively, a Hi-Lift jack, a very big hammer, and lots of custom wrenches cut with a torch to fit the big nuts for the torsion rods of the idler axles. Dinner was great that night-- something about cornmeal-covered large-mouth bass fried up with greens in the 'glades makes the day's travails seem worth it.

Of course, now I look back on it fondly! Ah, experience...

There are lots of things--stimuli--that build up the life of experience-gathering brain cells, and sometimes we get a chance for a "do-over." In my rock and mountain climbing days, we always talked about the "geologic" event--that time when the rock moved with you on it, watching the avalanche on the other side of the valley, seeing lightning strike the top of the alpine cirque, sending boulders tumbling down--you get my point.

Experience #3,897: The geologic event of my 4-wheeling days, or "the crumble."

Old mining roads in the Colorado high country lead to some awesome views and even some great challenging routes. They also lead to some VERY narrow ledge roads. You know, the ones where the passenger states, "Oh my, this is a great time for me to get some photos!" I had a CJ-5 at the time. I just finished building it for the season--304 bored .030 over, dual plane intake, Mallory dual point ignition, roller rockers, Holly 4bbl with the "off road" kit for the floats and seats, 4.27 gears, Detroit front and rear, 33 Yoko Mud Diggers, dyno tested 337HP at the wheel. Cool Boy-Toy!!

All that didn't help when the ledge road I was driving on decided to avalanche. The edge of the road crumbled. About four feet started to slide away. I felt the Jeep tip off the edge. I couldn't drive it straight down. WAY too far. So I gassed it and tried to get it to grab and pull onto the road ahead. The Detroits walked me sideways further as the rig started its slow motion slide off the edge. I had the presence of mind to turn the key off and jump out onto the road bed. I dusted myself off and watched through very teary eyes as my pride and joy rolled about 500 feet. It was a really bad nightmare in slow motion. It had a full to frame cage and, if I had stayed in the harness and seat, I would have been bruised a bit, but the cage and body were the only thing intact. Engine and trans over there, front clip over here, axles somewhere else. The next day I went back to part it out and load it up into my friends' rigs to get it out of the woods and someone had stolen my winch! Salt in the wound.

The reason I stated my first thought was to turn downhill and ride it out was because that works in most situations. On shallower hills, I have used that when the rig slides off the edge. Just turn downhill, power it up, and take the ride. I can honestly say that it is easier to drive, winch a whole rig back up to the road, then to try to figure out what to do with the parts scattered about the valley floor.

My second thought was to bail! I acted quickly, unhooked my safety belt and jumped out in a safe manner. Thank goodness I did not have a passenger! It was an open vehicle with no doors. Had I been in a hard top with hard-windowed doors, the choice to jump COULD have been fatal. Getting caught in the doorway as the rig rolled comes to mind.

Each situation warrants a clear head, quick action and definite follow-through. Always thinking, concentration and ability go hand-in-hand with good habits of off-highway driving. Keep the libations for around the campfire where the most that can happen is you will fall out of the chair, hopefully not into the fire!!

Experience #46: Deep water and oil do not mix; or, what hidden stream?

My friend had just picked me up in his 2-week-old brand new 1970 CJ-5, bone stock Florida Jeep. We were riding around some pine knolls near Loxahatchee on the eastern edge of the Glades. The swamp was about two feet deep in this area and we were following an old skidder trail. When I felt the front end drop a couple of feet, I couldn't stop the Jeep quick enough. The next thing I knew, water was flowing over our laps and the Jeep stalled. Bonehead move!!

I tried to start the engine. It made a solid noise and wouldn't turn over anymore. (I now know it is called hydrostatic lock.) Two kids in the glades, stuck Jeep, you tell me! I didn't know who else to call, so I called my Scoutmaster who owned a Land Rover. (This is where I got hooked on Land Rovers.)

He had put special wheels on the Rover that allowed dual tires on front and rear axles. The 9.00X16 military tires all around with the outside fronts of 7.50X16 really made the old Series II Landy unstoppable. He drove right through the underground stream and parked next to the Jeep to let me get into it. We hooked up a strap with which he proceeded to pull the dead Jeep out to the road and dry land.

This is where I learned how to blow water out of an engine. I was the one looking down the spark plug holes to see if any water came out. Once again, mud got in my face, only with 150 pounds of compression blowing it!

We had pulled all the spark plugs out, disconnected the coil wire and cranked the engine over after checking the oil levels and air filter housing. The water blew out the open holes and we then squirted some WD-40 in the cylinders, cranked the engine over again to help dry the compression area, installed the plugs, hooked the coil back up and the engine coughed to a start. It ran rough for a while, but we actually drove it home. Once back at the home front, we did a full service on the lubrication, wheel bearings, etc. The rig is probably still running today. If only the new owner knew the history!!

Point is, that you, my client, student, reader get to learn a lot about proper technique, field maintenance, and gain valuable experience **WITHOUT** making dangerous, bonehead, stupid mistakes. **Learn from my mistakes and experience.** Believe me, in my 35+ years of back country adventures I goofed a few times. I am not afraid or too egotistical to share those major blunders with you. After all, it is life's unexpected lessons that help build our character and mold us into who we are. "If it doesn't kill me, it'll make me a better person!" **WHATEVER!!!**

I'll have a few more learning experiences next month. See you on the trail!

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