

Four Metrallas, Four Stories

Bultaco disease can be virulent. I bought a new M85 Alpina in late 1972, rode it, rebuilt it, parked it, gave it to my best friend's son, got it back, restored it, enjoyed it for twenty years, and just recently, gave it back to him for preservation.

Throughout the 70's I bought and sold numerous Bultacos, usually for pennies on the dollar. Even owned a TSS, which sadly, I failed to keep.

Though I had always had motorcycles, about fifteen years ago I started getting serious about Bultacos. I had lusted after a Metralla for decades. One showed up on ebay. It was in Ontario, I was in Florida, but so what? I communicated with the owner, the bike was essentially a repainted though otherwise original M23 Mk.2. It was a European spec model with low bars, small headlight, and no oil pump. Very nervously I tracked the auction, putting in a last second bid at, what at time, seemed a lot of money. I won it and thus began a lesson in arranging international transport. Eventually the Metralla arrived, safe and sound. Other than a lot of detailing, all it needed was a seat cover. The reproduction on it was pretty poor. Through a series of contacts an NOS cover was found in France.

Around that time Riding Into History (ridingintohistory.org) had established a reputation as the best vintage motorcycle show in the eastern US. I showed the Metralla and was rewarded with a class win and selection as the Peoples Choice out of some 300 bikes.

Following the show, the Metralla became mostly garage art. In the ensuing years I built a BMW café racer, restored a Sammy Miller High Boy framed Sherpa and a Matador Mk. 9, and a few other projects.

Enter ebay again, an M23 El Tigre appeared for sale in south Florida The El Tigre was introduced in 1969, Metralla sales were virtually nil in the US, scramblers were hot, small sport bikes not so much. A handful of Metrallas were modified into scramblers using different tanks and seats, alloy fenders, etc. When they sold, the factory agreed to make the following series. Reportedly less than 200 were produced. Today, these are pretty rare, many people not even knowing them.

The ebay bike was gorgeous, beautifully restored, with all the hard to find special parts that made it a scrambler. It was also overpriced. When the El Tigre failed to sell, I contacted the owner. Bill Hawes is a dedicated Metralla guy, a stalwart of the Facebook Metralla group. We hit it off pretty quickly and the haggling commenced. I must have caught him at a weak moment as I was able to secure the bike at a reasonable price. This one I was able to pick up personally and trailer it back home.

Just to confirm its provenance, I had it judged at the Antique Motorcycle Club of America Bike Week national. It scored 99 points and was awarded a Junior First. A year later I fixed the minor issues and it was judged at 99.75, winning a Senior First. I guess they find it difficult to deal with perfection. An interesting aside, when Bill rebuilt the El Tigre, the gearbox was trashed, he replaced it with a Matador gearset, which works very well, especially having a lower first gear.

I was really happy to have both versions of the Model 23. One day I went on the Hughs Bultaco (bultacoclassic.com) looking for a couple of parts. Out of curiosity, I looked at the bikes listed for sale. There was a M08 Metralla 62 in California for sale. On a whim I called the owner. The bike had been purchased new in Spain by a US airman. He brought it home. Sometime in 1969-70 it stopped running and was parked in his garage. Upon his death in the mid-90's a neighbor bought it for his son. He failed to get it running and it sat. It was really crusty, the exhaust was rotted apart, the chrome bars peeling, rusty swingarm, corroded aluminum, etc. But it was original right down to the European lights and Spanish registration. The owner wanted to see it brought back and made me a very friendly offer so I bought it. A part-time shipper I knew offered me a bargain delivery price if I was in no hurry. It took about three months before he dropped off what he described as a "rust bucket".

It took a year of work, and most of my fingerprints, to bring it back to its former glory, but in the end it is stunning. With the exception of the exhaust and the seat, I was able to save every major part of the bike. The motor turned out to be fine. A screw had backed out of the stator and jammed it. The bore was clean, we honed it and installed new rings, replaced the seals, and buttoned it up. The speedo showed about 3400 kms, the motor proved it right.

I've only taken it to one show, it won Best in Class among the European bikes, surprising in a class dominated by BMWs and judged mainly by BMW people. More importantly, the handful of SMOG-types present really liked it.

This brings us to the fourth (and final?) story. A few years ago at the Dania Beach Vintage Motorcycle Show (daniabeachvintagebikeshow.com) one of the vendors had a Bultaco M203 Metralla GTS. It was very rusty and not for sale. He had bought it new, one of the half dozen or so that made it into the US before the feds shut down two-stroke street bikes. He said he might sell it someday, so I called every few months, always getting the same negative answer.

Cruising through the interweb, one day I came upon a GTS for sale in Spain. I corresponded with the seller and ultimately phoned him. His English and my Spanish were equally useless. He enlisted a neighbor to translate, and the negotiations began. Eventually a deal was struck. There then ensued much ado to get the paperwork done so he could export and I could import the bike. Having accomplished this, there was now the small issue of getting it to Florida. Jim Dillard, a Ducati collector, suggested I use his preferred shipper, Shippio (shippio.com), a British company. After consulting with them and getting quotes, I sucked it up and decided to

pay for air transport rather than chance having a nice bike spend six weeks in a damp ship's hold. Shippio sent a van to Valencia, brought it back to London, packed it into the finest crate I've ever seen and flew it over to JAX, from which we took it home. It was a costly, but incredibly well run, operation.

After removing hundreds of screws, the bike was finally liberated from its crate, undamaged. The bike was decent I guess I would describe it as a very nice, rider level restoration. Not quite as good as I'd hoped, yet certainly not a total disappointment. Given how difficult it is to find a GTS, and the shape of the one I'd been chasing, it was good. I spent a fair bit of time, taking it partially apart, repairing and detailing, and generally tidying it up. Fortunately, the paint, chrome and motor were fine, the wheels were round, and everything worked.

I got the GTS back together last spring and had the idea to display my four Metrallas at the May Riding Into History concours. As far as I know, no one, at least in the US, has previously presented all four variations at the same event. The organizers very kindly set aside a special location where I could place them. It was quite interesting. Many people had never even heard of Bultaco, many others only knew of the dirt bikes, and very few recognized all four models.

I'm currently working on a pair of Pursangs, so there may be A Tale of Two Pursangs in the future. Stay tuned.