

ALPINE!

Traditional finale of the Australian Rally Championship this year's Enka Fill-sponsored Alpine Rally hosted a three-way battle for honors between Dinta Officer, Ed Mulligan and Greg Carr. Graeme Sedgwick reports on the action.



On Sunday, 25 November 1984, after 739 kilometres of hot, dusty rallying, two starter motors, a differential replacement and a total of 36 Dunlop rally tyres, David and Kate Officer created Australian rallysport history when they became the first husband and wife combination to win Australian Rally Championship since its inception in 1968.

David Officer's winning drive in the Enka Fill Alpine Rally, the final round of the 1984 Australian Rally Championships, was a fitting result for the young Victorian who last year won his State's Rally Championship, and since then has expended virtually every single ounce of his time, money and energy towards the task of winning this Australian championship.

It is a daunting challenge when one recognises the disproportionate point-scoring system that has been designed to favor the new Production Rally Car category over the Group G chargers the majority of competitors are still campaigning.

Add to these circumstances the fact that

the Australian Rally Championship being able to be won by any of three teams and you can start and appreciate the degree of triumph achieved by David Officer's winning of the Enka Fill Alpine Rally and thus the championship.

In retrospect, and in view of the way CAMS are trying to stimulate the future direction of rallying, Sydneysiders Ed Mulligan and Geoff Jones would have been the most desirable winners of the Alpine, via their winning of their category, and thus the national championship due to their successful campaigning of a PRC RX-7 Mazda.

However, favorites to actually win the Alpine and the championship, were undoubtedly Greg Carr and his co-driver Fred Gocentas as they were in the most powerful and best prepared Group G rally car.

And if they had been able to win, and if Mulligan had not been able to do better than second in the Production Rally Car category, or if they had of been able to win and Officer finish second, on a count back

they still could have been Australian Rally Champions. However their luck was not to be for the Fiat 131 Arbarth decided to run a bearing on the second special stage of Sunday's competition.

In short David Officer's winning of the championship was proof of the need to be consistent, and reliable throughout the season.

Traditionally centered around north eastern Victoria's picturesque Alpine township of Bright, event organisers, the Light Car Club of Australia, had elected to marginally shorten the overall length of the Enka Fill Alpine's competition, and concentrate its competition around Bright. Overall a decision that probably encouraged even more spectators to the event and certainly helped reduce the competition cost for competitors.

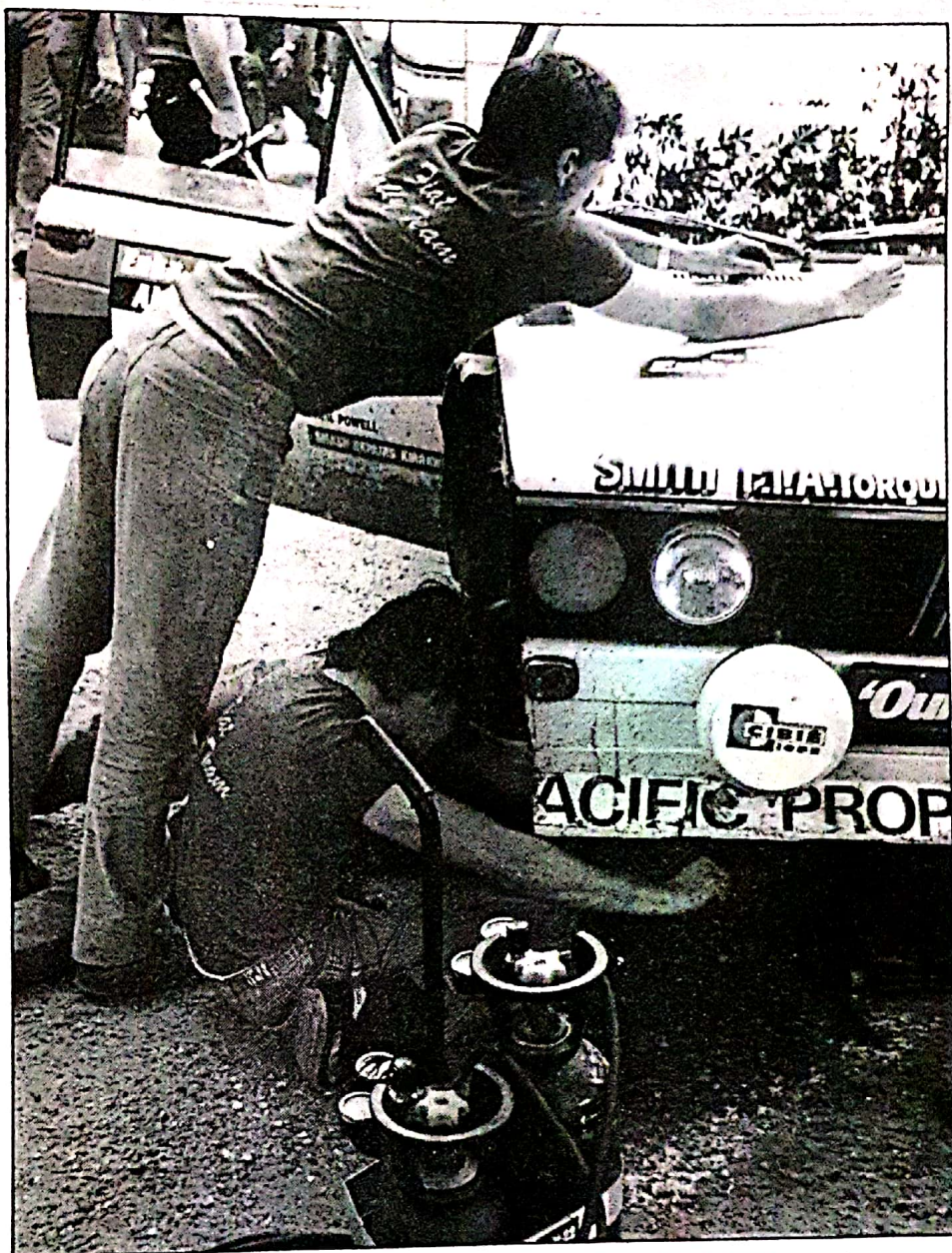
Keeping with tradition, on Saturday morning division one commenced with a blast around the fabulous Bright Dirt Circuit, much to the vocal excitement of thousands of spectators, tightly bunched around the kidney shaped circuit.

However the heavily watered dirt surfaced track, proved to be a slowing factor for the first 10 cars around the circuit, and it was Jim Kennedy, followed by Victorian Rally Champion Peter Thompson and South Australian Barry Lowe who were able to record the fastest times respectively as the circuit dried out.

Consisting of 150 kilometres in total and 58 kilometres of special stage rallying, division one then headed from Bright onto the Ovens Plantations, where Greg Carr snatched best time, from Hugh Bell who was literally flying in his third competitive outing for his RX-7 Mazda. Fury was also quick to get into top gear and he was only marginally slower than the devil-possessed Hugh Bell.

Special stage three, headed cars then up into Stanley plantation, famous for its winding, ball bearing surfaced roads that encouraged high speed driving and present some of the most courageous driving skills a rally driver can hope to deal with. Many crews ran out of road, George Fury being the most unfortunate when he misjudged a tricky right-hander which left him struggling to hold Jamie Drummond's powerful 120 Datsun on the road, and caused him to buff a tree which crumpled the front left-hand guard and caused them the frustration of having to winch themselves free. South Australian Barry Lowe suffered a similar fate further on in the same division when he too over-cooked things and cannoned off into a fence, distorting a front bumper, and breaking driving lights. Astonishingly, Hugh Bell managed to control his angry driving style to clearly win the stage.

A rather deep water crossing followed, and it claimed Geoff Portman, Hugh Bell, and numerous others who failed to slow for the presumed shallow water crossing. This allowed Greg Carr to snatch back valuable



time, and gave David Officer a chance to get up into the action. Peter Thompson was also able to score well in this section, his brother Doug having warned him about the nature of the crossing, thus removing the chance of an embarrassing moment.

Into Beechworth from Stanley plantation for a service and lunch break and it was evident that many crews were throwing caution to the wind, rather than driving to maintain their cars condition and reliability for the long competition of Sunday.

The most appalling casualty of this hectic rallying pace were Hugh Bell and Steve Ellis, who destroyed their Pedders-sponsored Mazda RX-7 when they passed the timing marker board for the end of special stage nine — the last competitive immediately prior to the divisions end — and spun off into a bank, tearing the transmission and rear bodywork apart.

Greg Carr and Fred Gocentas were equally unlucky when, early in the division, they misinterpreted the route instructions and hit a rather deep gutter at enormous speed bouncing the Fiat into the air and



rolling it onto its right-hand side. The error cost the pair valuable time but they righted the Fiat and continued on with a rather deranged front steering and suspension. In retrospect it cost them dearly for it enabled Officer to snatch the lead and again the advantage of a dust free run into the evening stages of the rally.

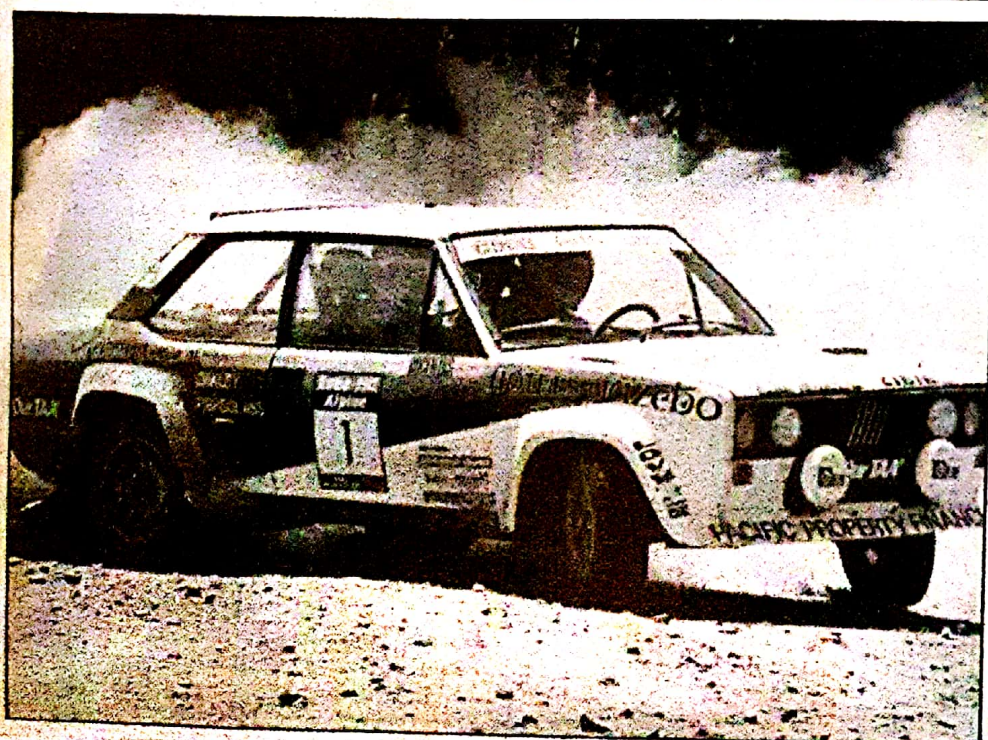
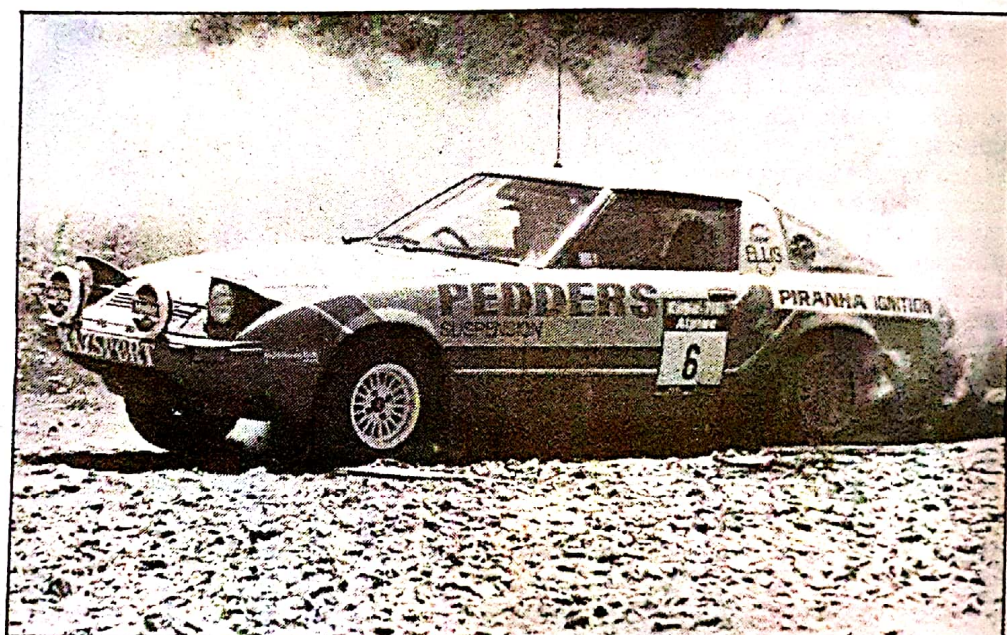
Portman was yet another suffering from problems at this early stage but despite being well up in the leading pack as he pulled into Beechworth he needed to have a second rear axle replaced much to the team's disappointment.

George Fury arrived at Beechworth in a rather battered state after his excursion earlier in the division, and soon had Jamie Drummond, and his team hard at work remodelling the car's front and replacing a head light. However the biggest disappointment was that of Gregg Hansford, who had come all the way from

Queensland with a band of enthusiastic followers, and had managed to get his noisy Mazda RX-7 through scrutineering, only to have an axle break forcing the team to pull out at Beechworth.

Division two returned to Stanley plantation for another 189 kilometres of which 100 were competitive. But this time the difficulty was not so much the twisting roads of Stanley but an ever increasing concentration of fine dust, which smothered your perspiring body and hampered visibility to a horrifying degree.

Determined to reduce the advantage Officer had gained through his misfortunes Carr pressed on all afternoon, slowly pegging his lead back, whilst Fury with equal amounts of determination was not going to give up either. Meanwhile down in the mid-field, the Production Rally Cars of Mulligan, Middleton and Adams, were having a scrap of incredible dimensions with Middleton just holding off Adams who



was battling hard to come to grips with his new Pulsar ET Turbo on the loose forestry surfaces.

As the rally headed south re-entering Ovens plantation enroute to Bright and the end of division meal break Fury had managed to win four of the division's stages whilst Officer managed to hold his overall event lead from Portman, then Carr followed by Fury, Barry Lowe, Murry Coote and Peter Thompson.

As the cars filed into Bright's Sports Ground for the meal break and service it was evident that the event was still wide open, but even Ed Mulligan, potentially best positioned to win the championship, was having a hard time of the dust, heat and competition.

Casualties of division two were, Ian Hill whose ex-Ford Motor Company BDA Escort decided to blow its differential, and Clive Slater, whose Toyota Corolla expired.

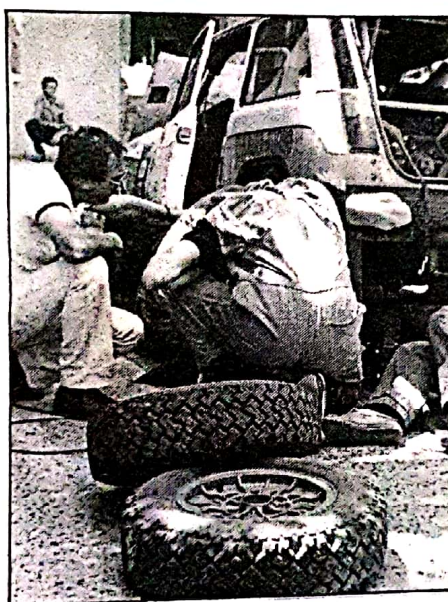
Greg Carr's service crew had managed to find the right-hand mud guard the Fiat lost in its roll over, and were fitting it. David Officer meanwhile was debating whether he



should change a badly worn differential, and Peter Thompson and George Fury decided to bundle themselves into a service van and have a shower and something to eat.

Just on dusk division three commenced: a total of 113 kilometres of which 83 were competitive, the concentration of the division being in and around the notorious Two Mile Creek plantations.

Officer immediately had the advantage with a dust free run at the front of the field with the night chargers of Carr, Fury and Portman right behind him. Yet luck was not to hold, Portman broke another rear axle in his Bluebird during the Tower Hill Special Stage, and so decided to toss it in. Carr was really battling the dust and just could not reduce the gap significantly, while Fury was quickest in the night, winning five out of the seven evening stages and moving into third place overall at the end of division



back in Bright behind Carr, with Officer still holding the lead by just nine seconds.

Sunday morning dawned a magnificent day, and Alpine competitors faced the task of 285 kilometres — of which 150 were to be competitive — to decide the Australian Rally Champion for 1984.

The previous nights competition had done nothing to widen the gaps, rather it had reduced the gaps between all major contenders. Mulligan was placed third behind David Adams, who was second behind Jim Middleton with only seconds being the difference between third and first. Meanwhile in the national classified and outright contenders class, outright placings were Officer, Carr, Fury, Barry Lowe, Murry Coote and Peter Thompson.

Once again the day's proceeding commenced with a blast around Bright's dirt circuit, with Fury taking the points for fastest followed by Officer and then Carr. The rally then departed Bright for the Ovens plantation again, and probably some of the most incredible rally spectating you could possibly imagine.

Yet all was not that cheerful, and Greg Carr's Fiat ran its engine bearings, mid-way through special stage two. Needless to say the disappointment of the pair could hardly be described, for they had certainly every chance of taking the lead back from Officer, in their much more powerful Fiat.

The rally then headed off into the climbing and roller coaster roads of the Merriang plantations just immediately south of Myrtleford, and in this section Peter Thompson speared off the road bringing to an end another fruitless attempt by him to complete an Alpine Rally. Meanwhile Officer misjudged a corner and stalled his Mitsubishi, having difficulty in restarting it again. Fury could feel the chance of victory close at hand and was driving like a man possessed, reducing the gap with every kilometre.

Into Myrtleford for lunch and service and it was clear that even though Carr was out Officer was still being placed under an enormous amount of pressure by Fury, who in contrast to the rather battered Officer looked rather cool and calm in the middle of the challenge.

With another set of tyres fitted, and the encouragement of the band of friends following David Officer and his wife, the pair set off in the final run back through Braithwaites plantation, with Fury hot on their heels. For Fury the rally was not long enough and despite some really desperate high speed driving antics he could not bridge the gap to Officer who managed to hold onto a 57 second winning margin.

And thus the Australian Rally Championship ended with the crown going to the Officers. The Production Rally Car category was won by Jim Middleton ahead of a rather blitzed Edward Mulligan, who had been unable to hold off a six car challenge for the class, as opposed to the battle against 50 or more that David Officer had to fight against and win.

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