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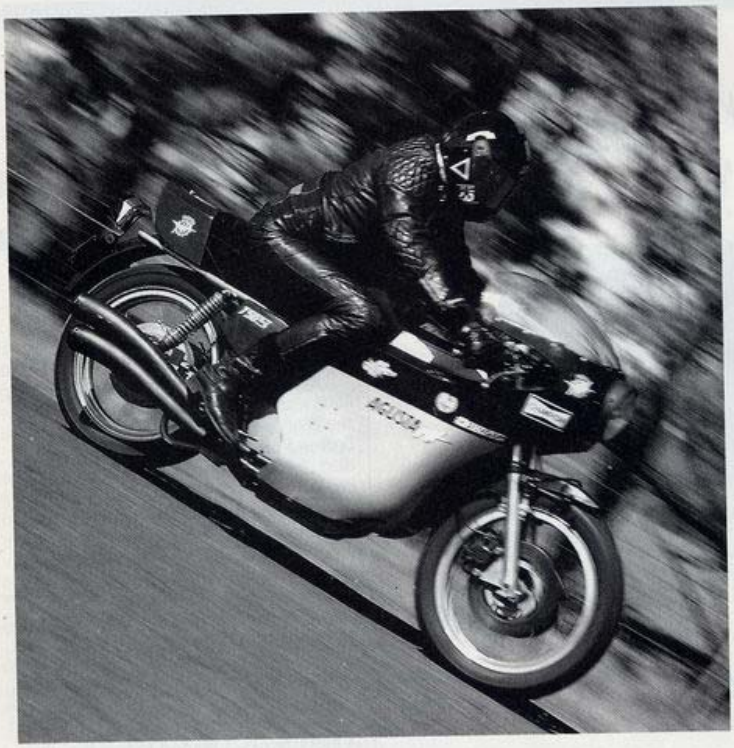
SOLID STEEL MEMORIES

ALL ABOUT TOURING EUROPE



COME FLYING WITH AGUSTA

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AMERICA THE BEAUTIFUL

There are many rare motorcycles around (odd as that may sound; motorcycles have often been made in very limited editions) but one of the rarest in this country is the MV Agusta America. Peter Thoeming rode one and Andrew Horton took the pictures.

The inimitable Phil Read, MBE probably puts it best. "The aura and desirability generated by the mighty four-cylinder MV Agusta roadsters is not difficult to understand when one considers their history;" says the ever humble Read. "Manufactured by nobility of considerable fame and developed from the most famous racing motorcycles in the world, which in turn were ridden by the cream of rider talent — Graham, Lomas, Hartle, Surtees, Hocking, Hailwood, Agostini and myself."

I'm not entirely sure whose side Read is on, actually, when he refers to the "simplistic design" of the bikes in his introduction to the Osprey Agusta book. "An MV four demands much from the rider at high speed," he goes on, "you are never really sure what they will do next, a tango or a waltz . . . (and) . . . great satisfaction is derived from just being able to start an MV . . ." Thanks, Phil, just what I wanted to know before I ride my very first one.

Agusta bales out

But let's get a little historical before we actually ride this beast. The story of the mechanical obsession that infects the Agusta clan to this day starts in 1907, when Giovanni Agusta decided to build his own aircraft. Since this was less than four years after the Wright brothers finally achieved lift-off, it was probably a great deal easier to build your own than to buy one.

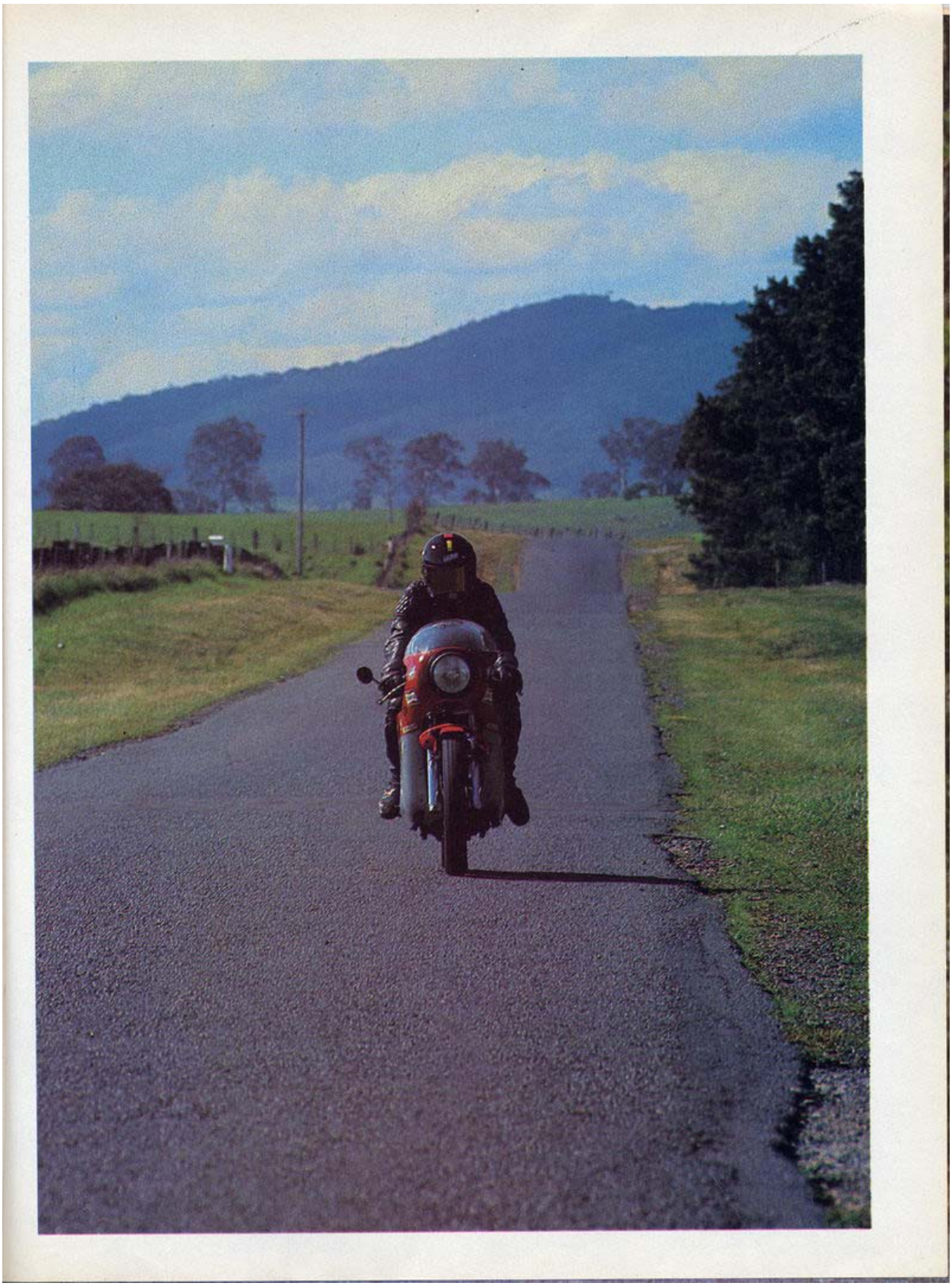
Building the very racy-looking biplane, all raked struts and straight frame members (good design criteria for motorcycles, too), made Agusta one of Italy's aviation pioneers. He flew his new aircraft and immediately developed an improved version; he also designed a parachute that would lower the entire plane safely to the ground in case of engine failure. A prudent man, as well as an adventurous one.

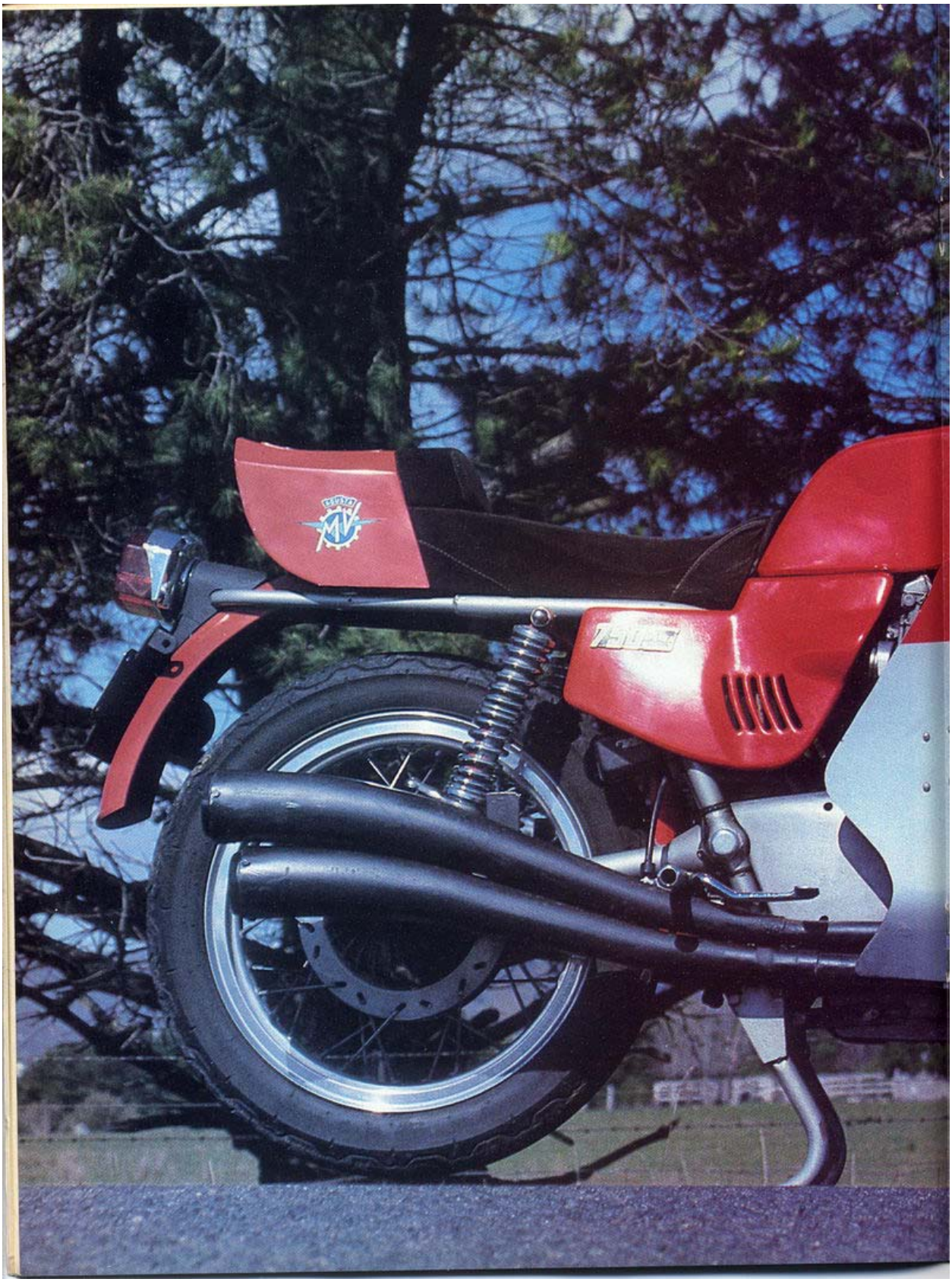
After serving in the Abyssinian campaign, where Italy garnered the dubious honour of being the first country to use aircraft in the cause of war, Giovanni Agusta returned to Italy and, in 1920, formed Construzioni Aeronautiche Giovanni Agusta. This company was intended to construct, repair and overhaul aircraft and had factories in Benghazi and Tripoli, in North Africa.

On the founder's untimely death at 48, his eldest son Domenico took over the company which was now located in Gallarate, just outside Milan. This was in 1927, in the midst of a grim economic time for Italy, but Domenico ran Agusta so successfully that he remained in charge until his own death in 1971.

Like BMW just across the Alps, Agusta ▶

ABOVE LEFT: The bike is very stable at speed. RIGHT: Here's a shape you won't often see coming up behind you.






MV AGUSTA
AMERICA
BIKE
AUSTRALIA
CHAMPION
DUNLOP
AGUSTA MV



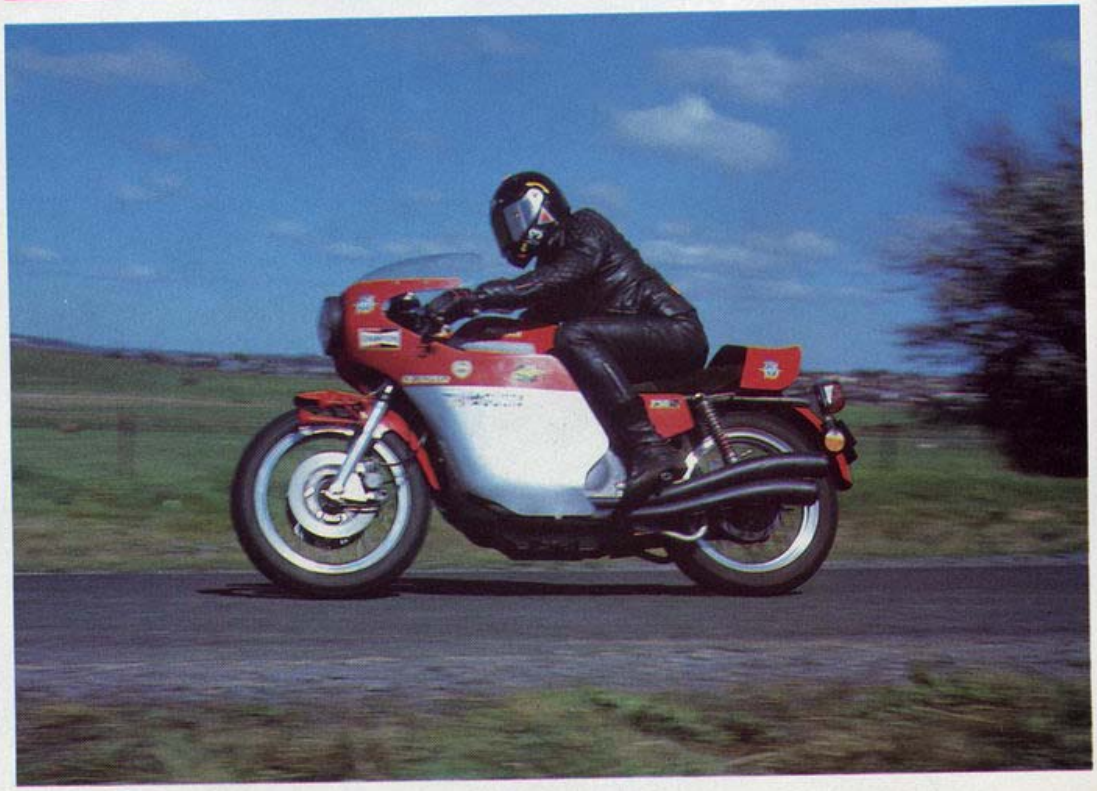
▶ AMERICA THE BEAUTIFUL

was heavily involved in military aviation during the Second World War, and both firms found themselves in serious difficultues when it ended because they were now prevented by the Allies from making aviation products. Unlike the Bavarians, however, the Italians at Gallarate had no history of motorcycle manufacture to fall back on.

All the more credit, then, to Domenico Agusta for seeing the potential for the future of his company in motorcycles. He decided that the factory was well-equipped to make something like a lightweight bike, and foresaw that there would be a great need for cheap transport in post-war Italy.

There is a romantic story making the rounds that the bikes were the hobby of a rich Italian Count, but several commentators have pointed out that this simply wasn't so. They were a way of keeping

LEFT: The tank sticker speaks for itself.
BELOW: Short legs would be an advantage when riding the America; the pegs are quite high.



the firm alive, of making profits, and the race successes were seen simply as good advertising. But nobody could have seen much racing potential in the first prototype built by Meccanica Verghera (MV) Agusta.

In 1954 it rolled for the first time, a two-stroke single 98cm³ capacity with a two-speed garbox, and it was perfect for cheap transport. The factory gates stayed open, and the bikes even managed to finance the design and construction of a couple of aircraft, once that was allowed again in 1949. The planes weren't much of a success, but when Agusta signed a licence-building agreement with America's Bell Helicopters the firm's future was assured.

Choppers slay bikes

It would be nice to think that our bike's name commemorated this very astute link between the Italian company and America, but that's not so. In fact, it was helicopters that finally killed MV Agusta motorcycles.

By the early 1970s, with Count Domenico dead and the firm now more than half-owned by the Italian government which had bought in because of MV's importance as a defence contractor, it was helicopter development that was the important activity at Agusta. The high cost of developing the A109 and A129 took resources away from the motorcycle division, and the success of the helicopters finally spelt its death. There simply wasn't the time to make bikes, or the profit to make it worthwhile.

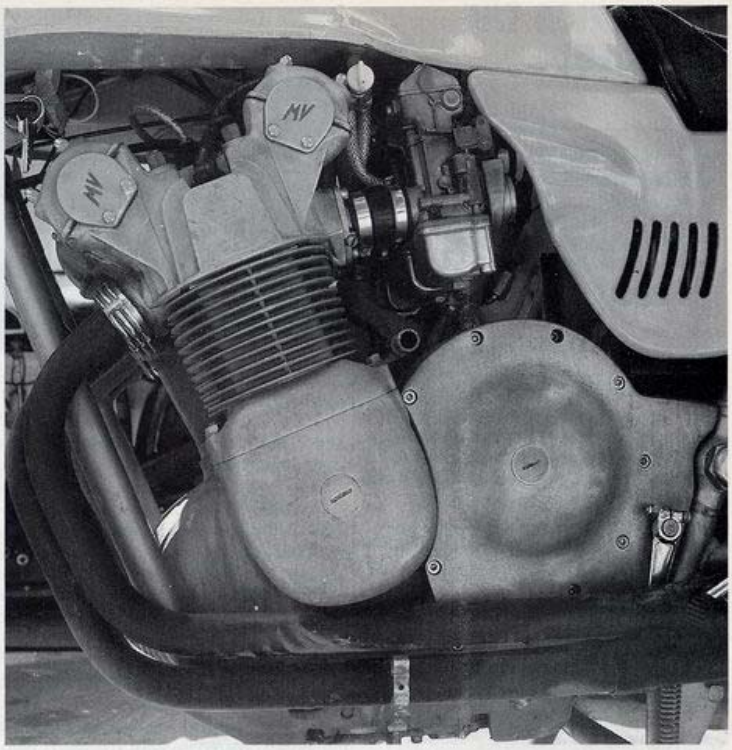
A great marque was finally killed by success later in that decade.

But if the America doesn't owe its name to the factory's highly profitable occupation of building American-designed helicopters, where does the name come from? Well, there is an indirect link with the helicopter business.

Chris Garville's Commerce Overseas Corporation in New York had a long association with MV helicopters when he met Jim Cotherman in the early '70s. Cotherman owned an MV dealership, and it was natural that COC should begin to bring in limited number of the bikes as a sideline to the chopper operation. In the autumn of 1974, armed with a list of changes they wanted made to the 750S and GT models they'd been importing, they visited the factory at Gallarate.

They spoke to the livewire Fredmano Spairani, and 50 days later the first prototype of the America was fired up.

Unfortunately Garville and Cotherman had overestimated the potential sales of the upgraded 750 by what turned out to be a factor of five or so, and the bike which was originally intended to be sold exclusively in the USA ended up being dumped all over the world at bargain prices — although a bargain price for an America was still a fortune for any other bike.



Despite being hidden by the fairing, the engine was sculpted as carefully as the body work.

Steve Hazleton, from whom we borrowed our test bike, estimates that a new America cost about as much as two Holden Kingswoods in Australia where WH Lowe had taken over importation from Bob Jane. In the USA in early 1975, landed price of an America was $6000; add all sorts of transport costs and local taxes and you had a very expensive motorcycle — certainly the dearest available in the country at the time. Perhaps this was one reason the America didn't sell.

America in closeup

Gallarate should have listened to Sigmund Freud, who said "America is a mistake, a giant mistake!" It's true he was talking about the country, not the bike, but the sentiment is still appropriate. But looking at the bike it's difficult to know just where Agusta went wrong.

The America was (and indeed still is) stunningly good-looking, the essence of cafe-racer chic. With an engine taken out to 789.7cm³, achieved by boring out the 750 Sport's barrels by an extra 2mm, and improved by a new combustion chamber shape, the bike offered a claimed top speed of nearly 220km/h. Maximum power of 75bhp at the crank was available at 8500rpm, while maximum torque of 6.62kgm arrived a thousand revs earlier. Not the most rideable combination, but not bad either. In fact our test bike seemed to come on song quite early, possibly as a result of a bit of tuning for rideability.

The America weighs 235kg, not light for a 750 sports bike. It doesn't look light either, when you're about to clamber aboard. In fact it almost resembles a Laverda Mirage in close-up, and I don't have a great deal of time for Mirages at all. So it was with some trepidation that I climbed aboard for the first time. Our bike had the "quiet" pipes, the matt black ones which allegedly registered only 85dB — although it seemed considerably louder.

Tottering around the back streets of Goulburn aboard a $35,000 motorcycle is not exactly conducive to peace of mind, and it took me quite a while to get used to the feel of the big — and it is big — MV. But by the time we'd finished the photo session, just outside town, I was familiar enough with what turned out to be an acceptably sweet handler at reasonably low speeds to be looking forward to a bit of a run at some real velocity.

The rather bumpy and illogically bent back roads of Goulburn are not ideal for high-speed runs on exotic motorcycles, but the America turned out to be pretty good. The bike's slight ponderousness turns into stability at speed, and its resistance to turn- ▶