

product review

Tomahawk ReTreads

By Gabe Ets-Hokin

Re-treads. What do you think of? I imagine the strewn wreckage of thousands of tires along the shoulder of I-5, the detritus of our modern transportation network. Expensive truck tires are rarely thrown away; instead, new rubber tread is glued to the carcass when the old rubber wears out. Motorcycle tires are much more expensive, per miles traveled, than truck tires, so why not re-use motorcycle tires?

Somebody is already doing it. Desser Tire and Rubber Company has years of experience recapping aircraft tires for commercial aviation. After September 11th, orders for recapped aircraft tires plummeted, so the family-owned company looked for a way to stay profitable without firing workers or moving the plant. They saw a niche for remanufactured motorcycle tires open, so they took advantage of it. Why would a presumably sane rider want recapped tires? To save money, of course! And Desser's "Tomahawk" motorcycle tires are priced to move. At just \$69.95 for a front in the 120/70-17 size, or \$79.95 for a rear in the almost-universal 180/55-17 dimension, the savings over buying new Dunlop or Michelin meats is 50% or more.

I'm a timid person, so the thought of riding on recapped tires on a motorcycle made me a little sweaty. "I don't care!" barked Publisher Halton. "Get those tires put on and test 'em!" So I had the good folks at Subterranean Tires spoon a set on for me.

When you buy Tomahawks, not only do you get to pick a compound, (Touring, Sport or Race/Trackday) you also pick your favorite carcass. Tomahawk purchases used street tires and rebuilds them, but the carcass – where much of a tire's "feel" and handling characteristics reside – is still the same as in its previous life. I went with a BT-56 rear and a BT-010 front for my 2003 Triumph Speed Four.

The tires went on easily enough, and I headed down Geary for my first ride on retreads. The first thing I noticed was that the front was heavy with a tall profile, so when I made a quick lane change, the front of the bike was slow to respond, and then fell quickly into full-lean after the initial input. Whoa! But the tires seemed grippy, resisting skids more than the Metzler Z-6s I had on there before, and some fun on the Sunday Morning Ride in West Marin revealed a tire that stuck as well as anything I've ridden on at a quicker-than-average street pace. I didn't like the front tire's profile or weight, but that's more the fault of the old Bridgestone design than Tomahawk's.

My fun came to an end when I discovered a roofing nail in the middle of my rear tire. I left it in there as a plug; the solid carcass and thick rubber got me home with just a few pounds of air lost. The heavy construction is a plus, especially if you don't like buying tires every 3,000 miles. One rider (appropriately named "mile_eater") reported over 5,000 miles of wear on the Dunlop-carcassed rear Tomahawk on his CBR1000F, and expected 3,000 more.

I noticed a pattern of concentric lines across the rear tire, lines resulting from the way the strips of raw rubber are wound onto the car-



pass before they go on the mold. Pat, owner of Subterranean Cycles, races his Husaberg Supermoto on Tomahawk slicks and showed me the same thing on his tires. Is it something to worry about?

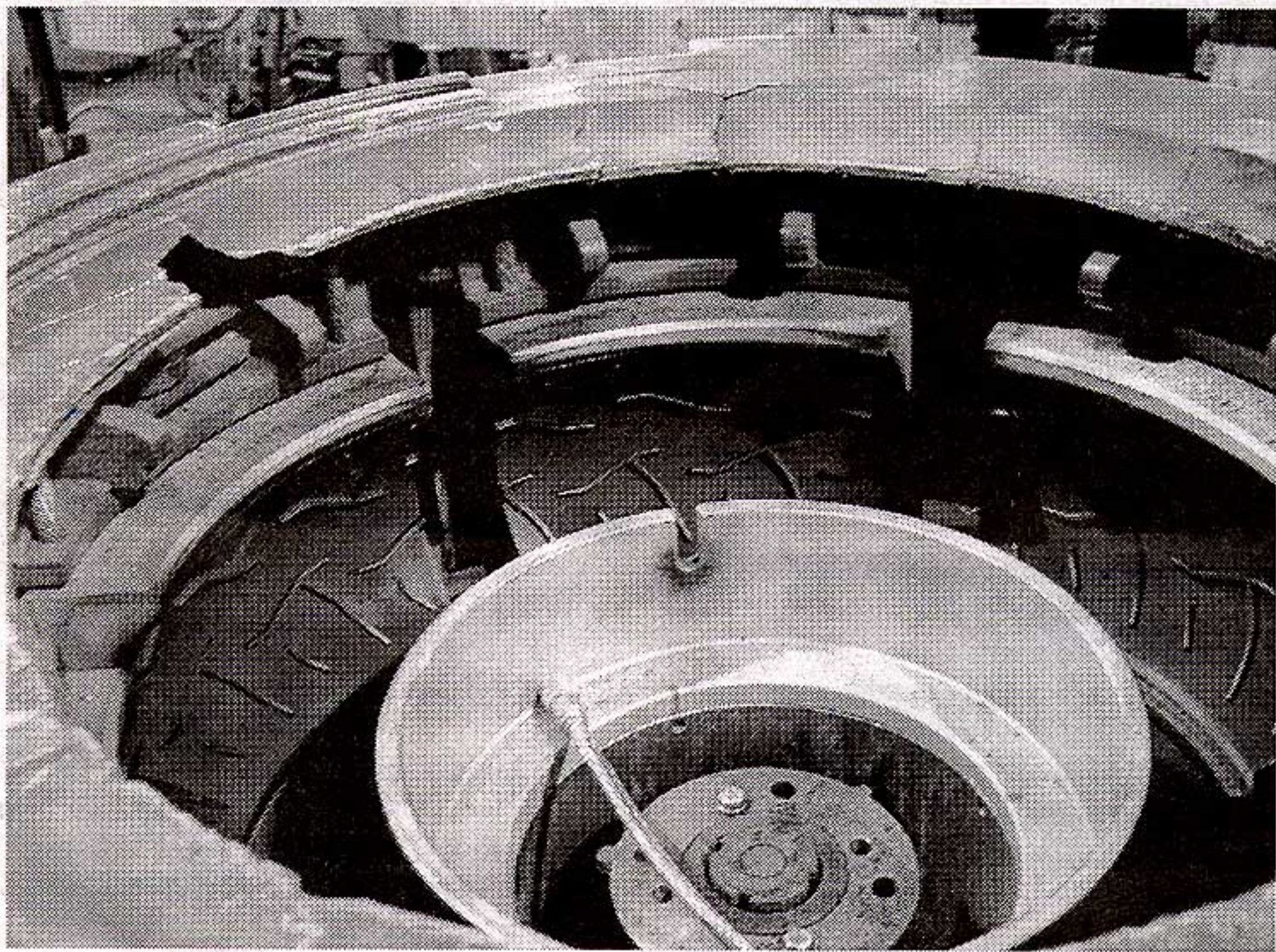
A trip to the Desser factory laid my fears to rest. Steven Chlavin, president of the 80 year-old company, walked me around. He showed me used tires getting inspected for nail holes or cracking, being stripped down to the carcasses, re-wound with new rubber, then molded (or "cured") in the Italian-made tire molds Tomahawk uses. The procedure is called the "European" process, where everything "bead-to-bead" is heated to bond to the carcass. According to Chlavin, it's how a new tire is made.

After the rubber is cured, the tire is removed from the mold and trimmed of excess material, balanced and inspected for visual blem-

ishes or defects. The final step is where the tire is put into a very expensive-looking Laser Shearography machine to look for microscopic gaps or flaws between the layers of rubber or in the carcass – a step the OEM tire manufacturers don't even perform. This obsessive quality control is why Tomahawk has a very small warranty rate – "less than a tenth of one percent", according to Chlavin.

Chlavin let me pick a new set of tires with Michelin Pilot Sport carcasses to try, since I told him I wasn't that impressed with my first set. These were much lighter than the Bridgestone carcasses, with a front weighing in at less than half a pound more than a new Pilot does. The steering felt a bit heavy, but I quickly got used to that and am now happy to report that I am pleased with these Tomahawk tires. They offer good performance and wear characteristics at a bargain price.

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However, I did notice a lot less grip from these tires on wet pavement than other tires I've ridden on. They would spin or slip on paint, manhole covers, Bott's Dots much more easily than I'm used to with other tires. I didn't really have a chance to ride in too much rain, so this is hardly a scientific observation, but I did notice their lack of wet grip. They are OK if you don't really push the envelope during rain-riding, which is something you shouldn't do on the street anyway. There are better rain tires out there for sure, but they probably won't have the life that these do. Everything's a trade-off.

I think they're a good value. You can request any carcass you like, subject to availability, so it's a nice way to save money and still ride on a familiar-feeling tire. I don't know if I'd do a trackday on them, (although a team using Tomahawk race tires took a second place in a six-hour WERA endurance race) but for the kind of riding most riders do most of the time, they're a pretty good deal.

Tomahawk Tires are available at motorcycle dealers and directly from Desser at cycletires.com or by calling (800)321-9717.