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**RIDING LOUISIANA—
OR TRYING TO
EXPLORING CALIFORNIA'S
SHORELINE HIGHWAY**

WHILE YOU WERE **AWAY**

As a gift for one wife's beloved soldier, AFT Customs takes a Suzuki Volusia to a new level of style.

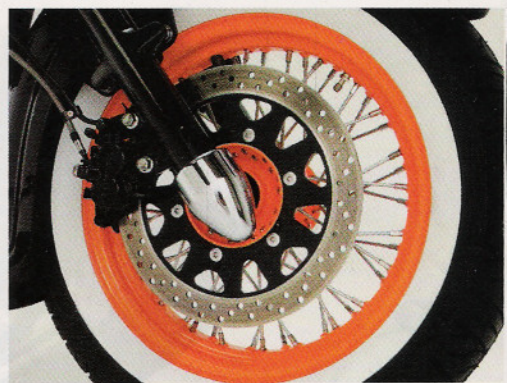
BY MARK
ZIMMERMAN
PHOTOS BY
MIKE CHASE





Anytime I hear about a bike built by AFT Customs, I pay attention, especially when it's based on a model I like and the story behind the build has an interesting twist to it. So when this fine-looking Suzuki belonging to a Naval Reservist, Personnel Specialist 1st Class Ken Salas, of Vallejo, California, popped up on my screen, I couldn't wait to find out what it was all about.

Salas, a school administrator in civilian life, had long wanted to modify his 2003 Suzuki VL 800, but he was just too busy riding to tie it up. Then he was called up for active duty. Since he'd be overseas for a nine-month tour in Kuwait, and the bike would be in dry dock anyway, Ken's lovely wife, Amy, decided to have it customized for him. (Hey, Ken, does Amy have a sister?) Accordingly, the bone-stock Suzuki was delivered to AFT Customs in Martell, California, for a total makeover.



↑ Sometimes stock is "trick." The OEM tank, speedometer and instrument nacelle worked so well there was little need to change them. Then again, sometimes trick is, well, trick. The recessed lights, one-of-a-kind dual exhausts and hall-of-fame-quality pinstriping make this one-of-a-kind Volusia a real standout.

What sent Amy to AFT was the shop's well-deserved reputation: As you may recall, they won the metric division at the 2005 World Championship of Custom Bike Building, and shop owner Jim Giuffra has a penchant for building "affordable, practical customs," customs that attract attention like dollar day at the Mustang Ranch.

The first hurdle Jim and his partner Ron Abel had to overcome with Ken's bike was the lack of readily available custom Volusia parts. As nice a bike as the VL may be, it's not wildly popular with customizers, at least not yet. This was just fine with Jim, as he always prefers to fabricate and polish rather than cover up. As he says, "I'm not really a double-sided-tape kind of guy."

Since the bike wasn't destined to become a radical custom, the decision was made to leave the large (and expensive-to-modify) parts, such as the frame and engine, as they were and concentrate on modifying the bike in ways that accentuate its natural lines and make it stand out from the crowd.

The single biggest project was the installation of the dual exhausts. As



delivered, the stock pipes run down the right-hand side of the bike, and something similar, a two-into-one perhaps, might have looked OK in context with the hot-rod/bagger theme. But "OK" wasn't really the look the guys at AFT wanted. What they wanted was more like, "How the hell did they do that!" So

a dual exhaust system, one on each side, was almost a prerequisite. Master fabricator Abel, an apt name if ever there was one, managed to route the rear pipe through the frame to exit on the left side of the bike, where it was mated to a Drag Specialties Oval Muffler, originally meant for a Harley-Davidson. A mirror-





image pipe runs along the right. If you think routing the exhaust to the left was simply a matter of bending a pipe with the appropriate curves, take another think. In addition to twisting the pipe, Ron had to relocate the electrics and sculpt a header pipe that flowed properly and still snuck past the shock linkage. The mufflers mount directly to the bottom of the hard bags, which were pirated from a Yamaha Road Star; adapting them to the Volusia naturally required custom mounts, which were built in the AFT shop. Realizing that the exhaust might have to come off at some point, AFT designed it with welded-in-place, hidden nuts, which greatly simplified installation and removal.

With the major portions roughed out,

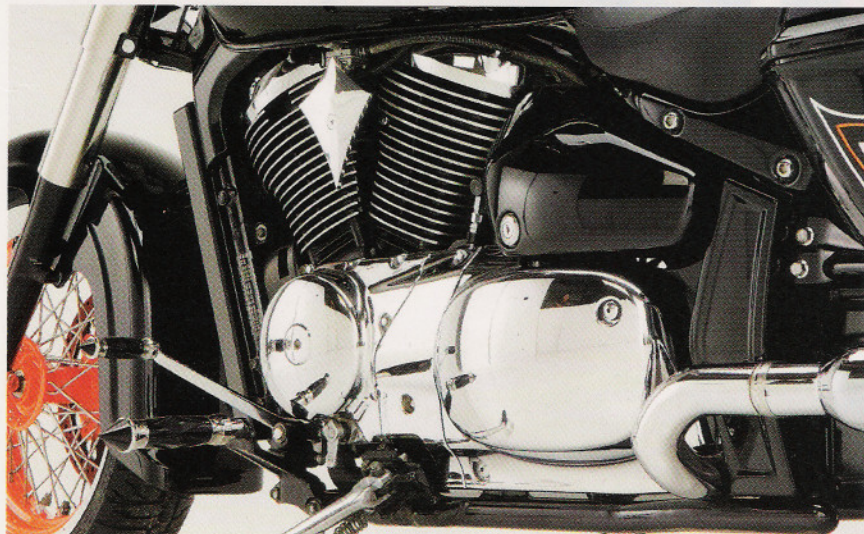
Jim turned his attention to the detail items. The brake and shift levers, as well as the cleavage cover between the cylinders, were fabbed in-house, and while the headlight carries a Headwinds part number, the mounting bracket, which is welded to the triple clamp and also mounts and hides the turn-signal hardware, was built by AFT. Although it may look simple, Jim describes it as a “major deal” to get just right, which in a nutshell describes what this bike is really all about, doesn’t it? The turn signals—front by Pro One and rear by Custom Dynamics—really help minimize any disruption of the bike’s smooth lines. The rear-end treatment, with its faired-in lighting (the minimalist taillight also by CD), reinforces both the VL’s design

and AFT’s philosophy—simple, elegant and practical.

Customs of any sort rarely retain the stock handlebars, but in this instance that’s exactly what they are, the only modifications being the internal routing of the wiring, which then passes through a hole in the triple clamp. To bring some bling to the front end, stainless steel throttle and clutch cables were installed, along with a matching front brake hose. The return-side throttle cable was deleted to make the area as clutter-free as possible.

The stock frame was lowered an inch and a half by shortening the suspension. The fuel tank was left stock; however, the fenders were molded to fill any extraneous holes.

Ken had originally envisioned an orange-on-black paint scheme with a sort of racing-stripe motif. Jim, silver-tongued devil that he is, talked Ken out of the racing stripes and into pinstripes. Scott Hulquist of Riff Raff Customs laid on the gloss-black paint, and Herb Martinez, a member of three different pinstriping halls of fame, applied the delicate ‘50s-style brushwork. The end result is as sweet as it gets. In keeping with the basic black theme, the fork lowers, handlebar risers and most of the small bits and brackets were powdercoated in a matching gloss. The stock rims were disassembled, powdercoated in screaming orange, along with the hubs, and then re-laced. The overall effect, which if done wrong might have made the bike seem clownish, gives it a striking appearance,





and certainly prevents this Volusia from blending into the background.

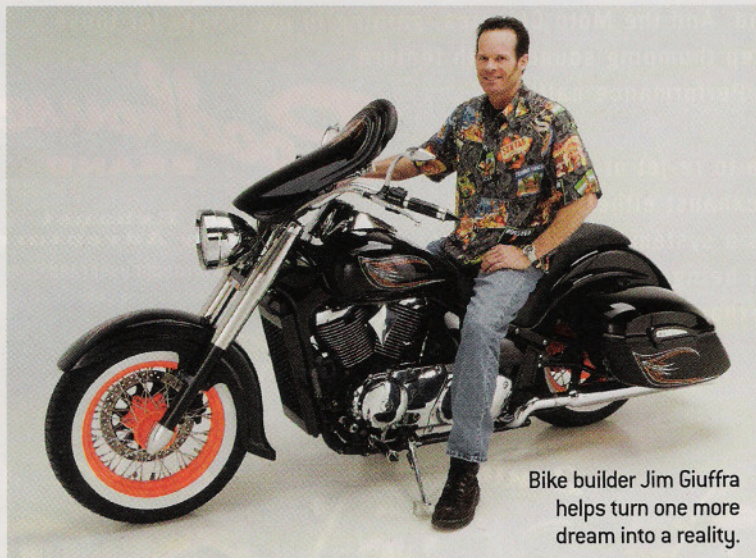
Since this custom was meant to be ridden directly from the show to the store, meaning it also had to serve as practical transportation, Ken requested some sort of windshield and a comfortable place to park his posterior. Corbin

managed to cover both ends of the deal. The Corbin Trim Tab Fairing was painted and striped to match, and the seat installed right out of the box. Finishing touches to the bike also include Cat Eye Customs pegs and grips, stainless steel front brake line and cables, and lower fork bullets from Baron Custom.

At this point in the story, it's customary to wrap things up by saying something nice about the bike, with a pithy quote or two from the owner. Saying something nice about this bike is easy. It's exactly what I'd expect the guys at AFT to produce: an outstanding, sensible custom that most anyone would be proud to call his own. Getting a quote from the owner was a little more difficult.

As I sat down to write this, Specialist 1st Class Salas had yet to see, let alone ride, the bike. In fact, he was still in Kuwait, finishing up his tour and anxiously awaiting his rotation home and a reunion with Amy and their 22-month-old son John. The bike, having been finished and delivered, was sitting quietly in his garage, awaiting his return.

Fortuitously, Ken, who spent more than 10 years on active duty and the last eight in the reserve, made it home just as I was finishing up this story. He spent the first few days getting reacquainted with his family and settling back in to civilian life, and then he did the predictable thing and took his newly refurbished Volusia for a ride. Actually he took it on a poker run, one sponsored by a local HOG chapter. He told me that while he was extremely happy with the way his bike looked and worked, it was the H-D riders who were floored by it, which I suppose is one of the highest compliments that can be paid to the owner of any metric custom. He also reported that he didn't have much of a poker hand, but scored himself a nice Harley sweatshirt as a door prize. He didn't mention the color, but I'll bet it was black. He also added that he'd be mustering out again soon and looked forward to spending more time with his family and his one-of-a-kind Suzuki bagger. **MM**



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