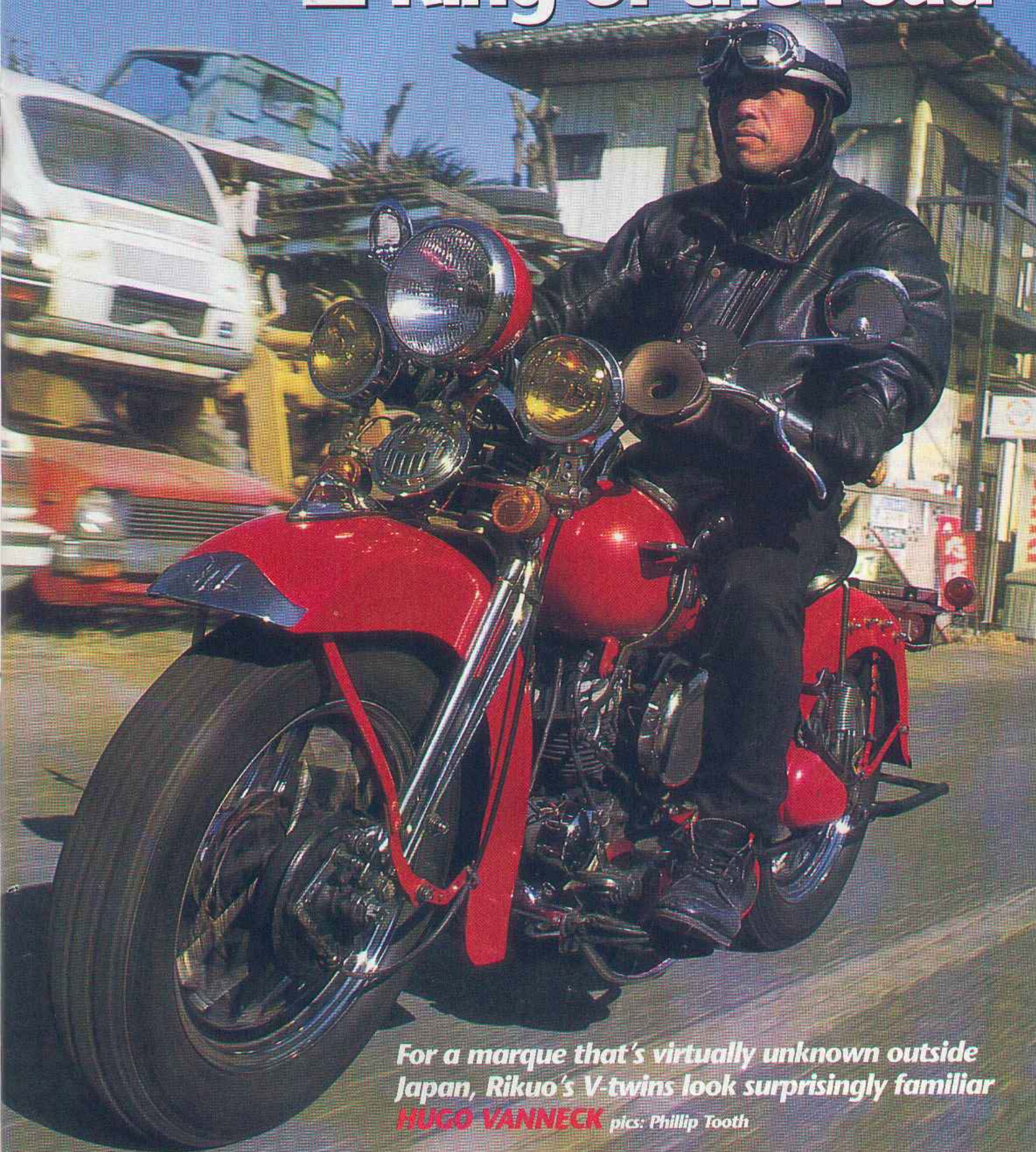


Japan's

King of the road

RIKUO V-TWINS



For a marque that's virtually unknown outside Japan, Rikuo's V-twins look surprisingly familiar

HUGO VANNECK pics: Phillip Tooth

KIKUO SUGIYAMA'S OBSESSION IS familiar to motorcycle enthusiasts the world over — an intense devotion to the preservation of a single marque. His particular weakness is Rikuo, the first motorcycle to be completely manufactured in a Japanese factory. A motorcycle that you'd lose in a row of Harley-Davidsons, because that's what most Rikuos are — Harleys made in Japan.

Harley-Davidsons were first shipped to Japan during WWI for military use. Not until 1924 were Milwaukee made models available to a wider public in Japan, but sales soon overtook those of bitter rival Indian.

In 1929 the collapse of the yen meant that Harleys doubled in price, making them impossibly expensive in Japan. So the importer, Sankyo Seiyaku, approached the American factory about the possibility of manufacturing Harleys under licence.

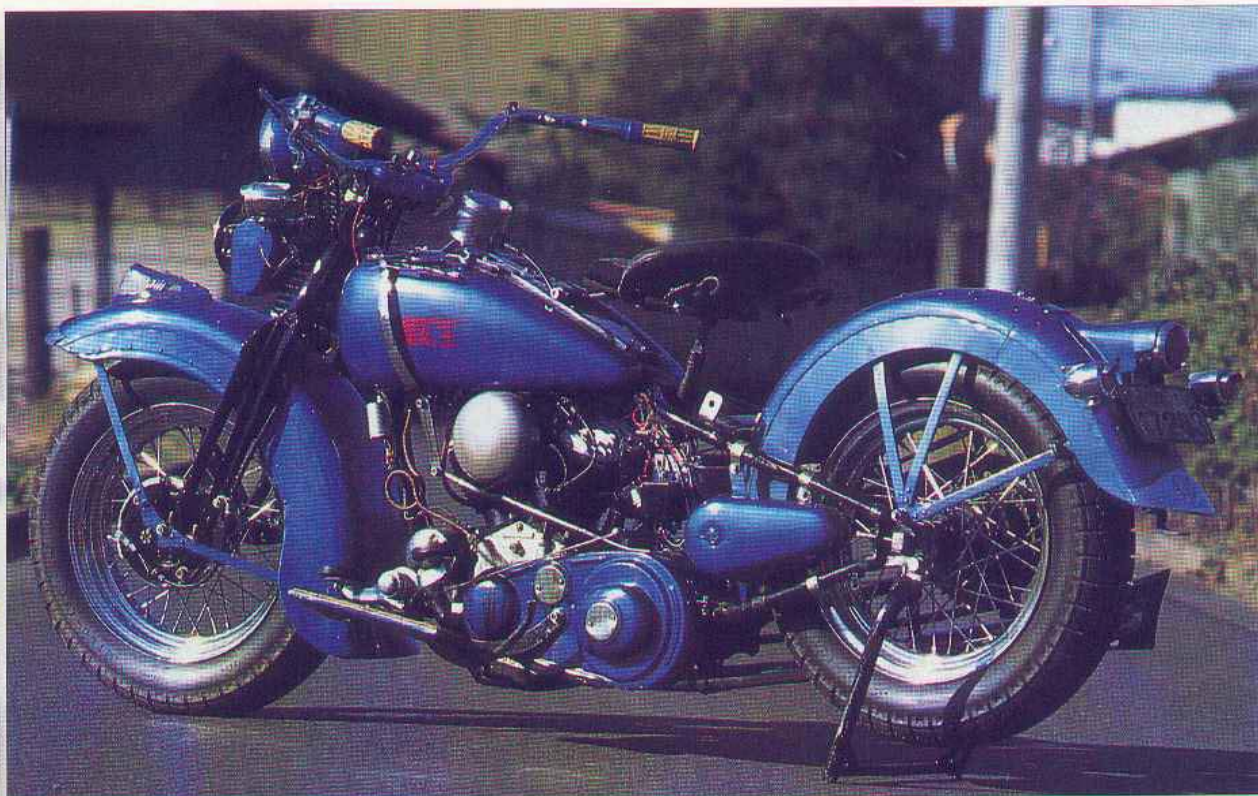
To cut import costs immediately, machines were shipped in pieces and assembled in Japan. These Harleys can be identified by the Japanese character for Sun — the Ni of Nippon — which prefixes the numbers stamped on the crankcase, frame and various cycle and engine parts. By 1931 a licensing agreement and a licence fee of \$75,000 were agreed, and in 1932 the drawings and manufacturing machinery for the 1200cc Harley VL side-valve were shipped to Japan from America. Next year the first motorcycle factory manufacturing complete machines in Japan started production at Shinagawa in Tokyo.

Relations between Harley-Davidson and Sankyo Nainenki, the Sankyo Seiyaku subsidiary manufacturing the machines, had deteriorated badly by 1935. The source of friction was Harley-Davidson's new 61cu in (988cc) overhead valve engine. The Japanese thought that the ohv twin was vastly inferior to the side-valve. Harley-Davidson was also demanding higher licence fees for the new design. The honeymoon was over, and here was the argument that would lead to divorce.

Production under licence ceased in 1935, and the Rikuo was born. Rikuo means Road King and was a name chosen by the president of Sankyo Seigaku, who took it from *King of the Road*, the university song at his old college, Waseda University. American-made Harley-Davidsons were still imported, but increases in import duty put an end to sales shortly before the Japan and the USA joined WWII in 1941. Many pre-war Rikuos are load hauling Servi-Car type three wheelers and sidecar outfits. All the 750 and 1200 V-twins have reverse gear as part of their specification. Motorcycle manufacture stopped when production was turned over to military



Rikuo is a copy of the Harley 45. Engine parts are interchangeable, but the Japanese bike has a different big end bearing and cylinder walls are paper thin



▲ Kikuo Sugiyama owns nine running Rikuos including this 1200cc side-valve. Hand gearchange and foot clutch were standard until 1956

vehicles and armaments during WWII.

Rikuo motorcycles were on sale again in 1947, but life was tough in post-war Japan. Getting enough food to eat, rather than riding a gas-guzzling motorcycle, was the aim of most people.

Showa Aircraft took over the Rikuo name in 1950. With the war over, Showa had a skilled workforce with nothing to do, so the company bought Sankyo Nainenki and changed its name to Rikuo Motorcycles. New models included BSA and BMW single lookalikes. Rikuo Motorcycles folded in 1958, although new machines were assembled from parts in stock until 1960.

Kikuo Sugiyama, who grew up on the Izu peninsula, first saw a Rikuo at the age of 10, although it was to be almost 20 years before he found out that this was the make of machine. The Rikuo was owned by the father of a boy at junior school who was a year older than Kikuo. He used to envy him riding to and from school on the back of a big motorcycle. At senior school the older boy gave Sugiyama a Honda that had seen better days. They have been friends ever since.

Sugiyama secretly owned and rode a series of Hondas and Kawasakis during his five years in the Japanese air force,

despite a rule banning motorcycling. He then became a long distance bus driver and at the age of 28 bought himself a Harley-Davidson. It was while he was ordering parts for his Harley that he saw another Rikuo, in for a service at the Harley dealership.

He bought his first Rikuo, a 750 RQ, in 1980. Since then Kikuo Sugiyama has accumulated 60 Rikuos. After the first

▼ Tank carries four litres of oil, eight litres of petrol. Rikuo's speedo is marked in km/h

Rikuo he was a man with a mission and scanned the small ads in motorcycle magazines on his way home from work on the train. If he saw one advertised he would phone as soon as he got home and then get back on a night train to go and see it, often spending the whole night on the train to get there and back. Then he would hire a pick-up truck to go and get the Rikuo, spending another night at the wheel. Once, when he had already spent all his own money, he emptied his wife's bank account to buy more Rikuos. ►



“Rikuo V-twins retained old fashioned features to the end. Riders didn't want automatic advance/retard — they preferred to do it themselves”



▲ Sugiyama-san has spent nearly 20 years collecting Rikuo motorcycles and spares, travelling all over Japan in his search. Complete engines are stacked two deep in his garage

◁ Mrs Sugiyama likes to remind her husband about this incident.

Sugiyama would follow the merest rumour. If he heard of someone who knew someone who had lived next door to someone whose uncle's workmate had ridden a Rikuo he'd happily spend several months following the trail. When he located a machine he would visit the owner over a period of several weeks, always taking a small gift of cakes or sweets, but never broaching the subject of buying the Rikuo.

Eventually it would occur to the owner that such was Sugiyama's dedication that it was only right that he should have the old V-twin.

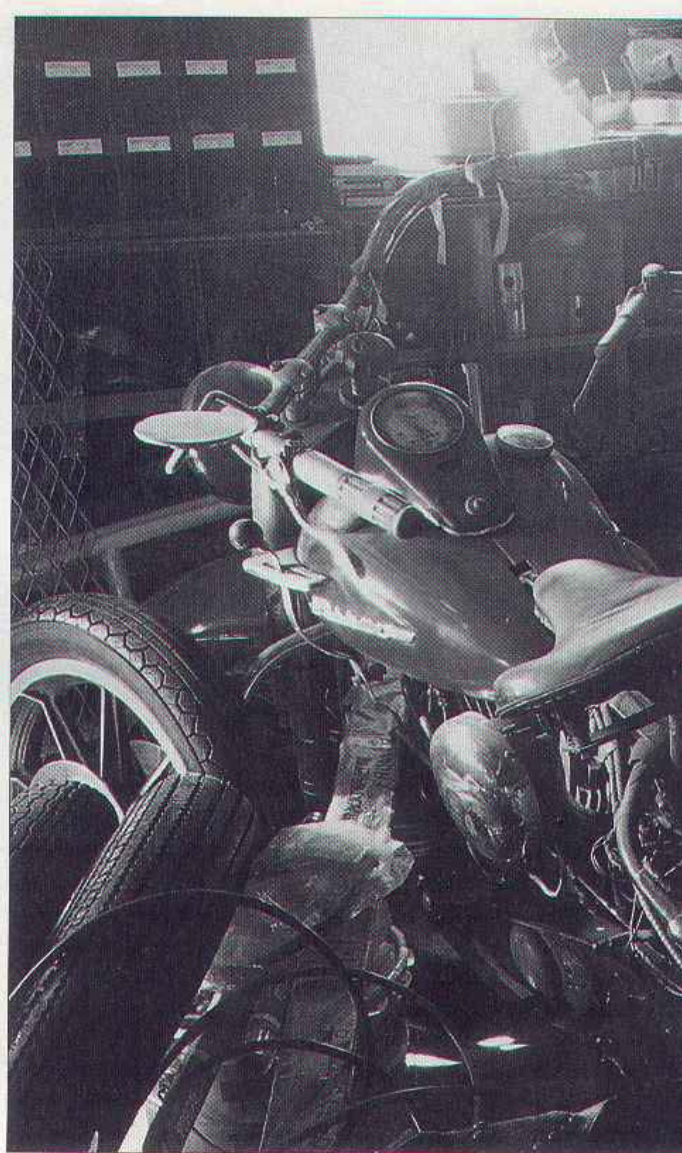
Price was another problem. In the Fifties a Rikuo cost the same amount as a family sized house in Japan, says Sugiyama. So he would tell owners how much money he had and leave it up to them.

That was when there were still Rikuos to be bought. Now, people who have them keep them.

Rikuos don't come cheap. A 1958 750 RT is worth £10,000. A 750 RT sidecar outfit would cost you £22,000. Rikuos were often owned by doctors, lawyers and other wealthy professionals.

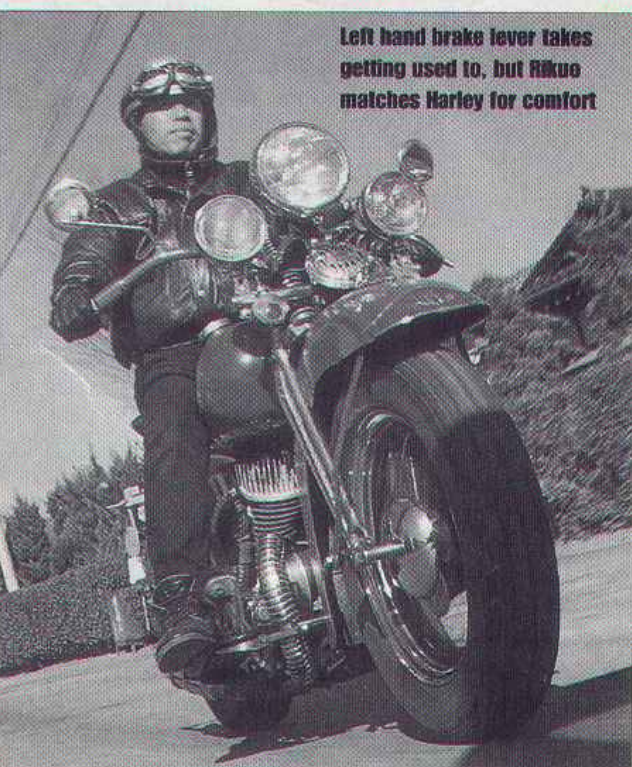
When I asked him how much he's spent on Rikuos, Kikuo Sugiyama replied that he tries very hard not to think about this. And he would never mention it in front of his wife.

Rikuo V-twins are heavy beasts — well over 500lb ready to roll — and retained old-fashioned features to the end. Ignition advance and retard are controlled manually on all models up to 1958. The large tank contains petrol in one side and oil in the other. On pre-war machines metal quality is good but workmanship poor. The opposite is true of post-war



▲ Sugi has the biggest collection of Rikuos in the world, with 60 bikes stored away

machines. At the end of the Korean war, many surplus Harley-Davidson engines found their way to Japan where they were fitted into Rikuo cycle parts. These are known as Rikuo-Davidsons.



Left hand brake lever takes getting used to, but Rikuo matches Harley for comfort

Rikuo riding

My head was buzzing when I got off the Rikuo and killed the engine outside Sugiyama's house. I was still analysing the way the Harley lookalike handled. How it stopped. How the motor picked up on the throttle. And how I'd managed to survive the traffic light grand prix of downtown Saitama-Ken.

That's my excuse for forgetting the first rule of Japanese etiquette. If someone's so generous as to lend you their precious motorcycle, thank them and say how wonderful it is before saying anything else.

But Sugiyama-san caught me off guard. He bounded out of his garage when he heard me pull up outside and asked: "What do you think?"

"It handles like a Harley 45 with a bent frame," I replied. And almost immediately wished I could borrow a knife and commit hara-kiri.

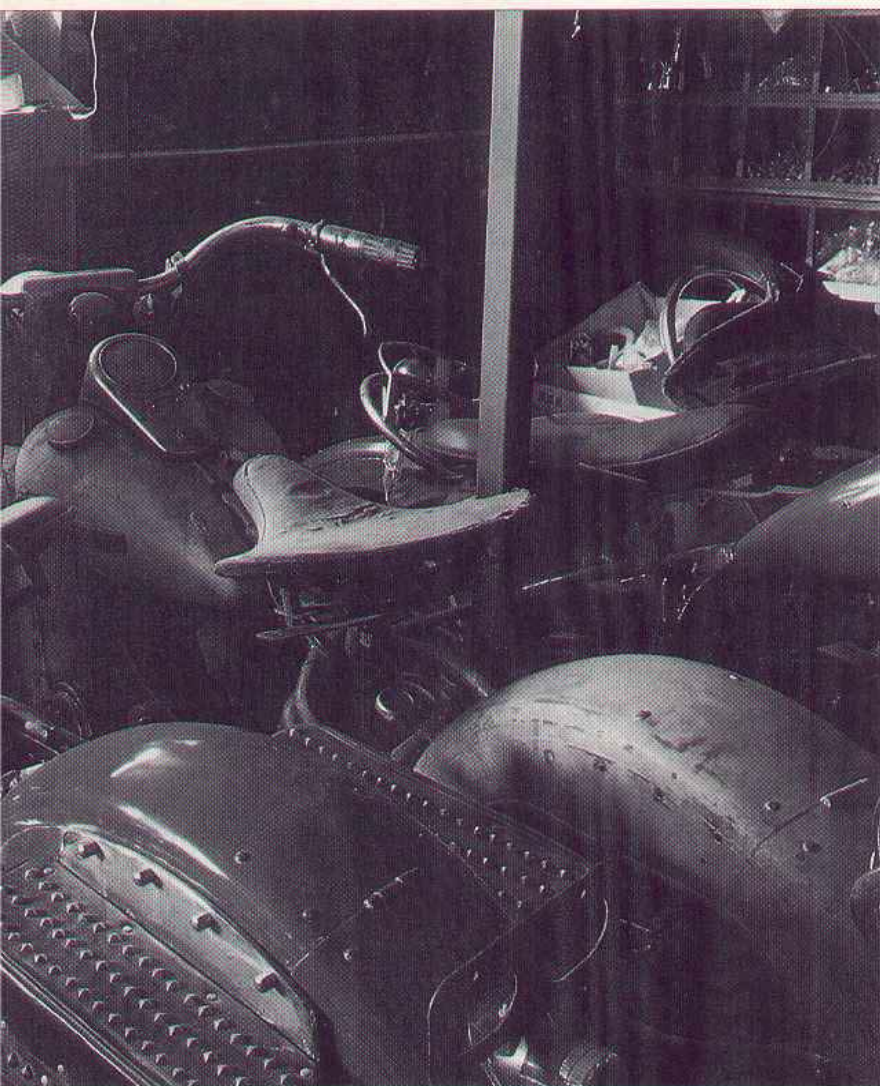
Sugiyama-san nodded politely. "It is not

as good as a Kawasaki Z1," he offered.

Just like the Harleys that despatch riders rode during WWII, the Rikuo is rugged, reliable and comfortable. But it is not the best bike in the world for chucking through city traffic, or bendswinging around roughly surfaced country lanes.

Sugiyama's Rikuo spent most of its life hauling a heavyweight sidecar, so my gut feeling that the brazed lug frame was twisted is probably true. And the fork — almost identical to the 1936 Harley product — was set up much too tight to move freely. Instead, I got thrown out of the saddle every time the Yokohama World Tour tyres failed to absorb the shock of hitting a bump. The low centre of gravity is a bonus offset by low ground clearance.

The suicide foot clutch didn't bother me — I rode a solo 1140cc Royal Enfield V-twin with a foot clutch for eight years, so hand-over-the-tank gearchanges are second nature. But I didn't get on with the left hand front brake lever. What's more, the 7in single sided drum was barely effective,



Technological progress at Rikuo Motorcycles was slow. Approached by a manufacturer of automatic advance/retard mechanisms when they first became available, the motorcycle

so I relied on the 6in rear stopper.

The three gear ratios are nicely spaced, with first taking you to a frantic 30km/h (19mph). Second gear is good for 60 (37mph), while top will just about let you see 100 (62mph) on the clock. The 750cc side-valve is happiest cruising between 60 and 75km/h (37-47mph). Push it harder and petrol runs through the 35mm Linkert pattern carburettor at an alarming rate. That's why Sugiyama fitted a fuel gauge to the petrol tank filler cap.

I didn't need to use the auxiliary oil pump. The Rikuo always puffed out a light haze of blue smoke when I accelerated hard after cruising for a couple of miles, so I knew I had enough oil in the sump.

This is one of only about 100 surviving Rikuo V-twins, and the only running model RO. It was an honour to be allowed to ride it, Sugiyama-san. Thank you. Arigato gozaimasu.

Phillip Tooth

maker turned them down with the comment that Rikuo riders preferred to do these things for themselves. Automatic advance/retard was finally introduced in 1958 after a demonstration showed what an improvement this made to performance. The Rikuo's foot clutch and hand gear change controls were reversed in 1956 and dry sump lubrication introduced in 1958. These changes came too late to save the company. The speed with which upstart manufacturers like Honda and Yamaha introduced new technology left Rikuo far behind.

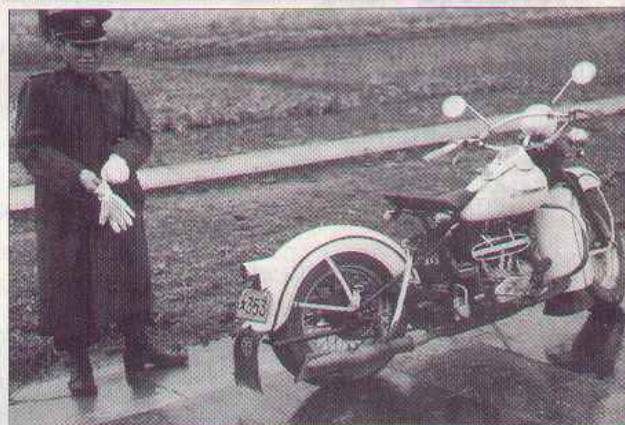
Of the 60 machines owned by Mr Sugiyama, nine are in running order, another 14 or so will start, 20 won't and the remainder have been broken up for parts. In addition to his collection of complete machines and parts, Sugiyama has a business manufacturing Rikuo parts. In 1986 he bought a hoard of new old stock parts from the man who cleared the Rikuo factory after its closure.

Many older Harley parts will fit Rikuos, particularly engine items. There are 300 Rikuos left in Japan, but only a handful are street legal. Many owners feel that preservation is more important than use. Kikuo Sugiyama knows almost every Rikuo owner in Japan, and has by far the biggest collection. He would like

FACT FILE

Rikuo Motorcycles

- 1933-35 Harley-Davidson Nippon, 1207cc 30bhp side-valve V-twin, top speed 60mph
- 1935 Rikuo VFD, 1207cc 28bhp side-valve V-twin, 60mph
- 1937 750 RD, 743cc side-valve V-twin Servi-Car type three wheeler, top speed 40mph
- 1950 1200cc 30bhp sidecar outfit, top speed 60mph
- 1952 750 RD, 747cc 22bhp side-valve V-twin, top speed 68mph
- 1952 1200 VFE-LTS sidecar outfit, top speed 60mph
- 1953 Model A, 345cc 20bhp BSA ohv single copy, top speed 68mph
- 1953-56 750 RD, 747cc 22bhp side-valve V-twin, top speed 70mph
- 1954 350 AB, 345cc 16bhp BSA ohv single copy, top speed 62mph
- 1956 250 F, 247cc 12bhp BMW ohv single copy, top speed 60mph
- 1957 1200, 1207cc 30bhp side-valve V-twin, top speed 75mph
- 1958 350 AC, 345cc 20bhp BSA ohv single copy, top speed 75mph
- 1958 250 FB, 247cc 12bhp BMW ohv single copy, top speed 60mph
- 1958-60 750 RT, 747cc 25bhp dry sump side-valve V-twin, top speed 80mph



▲ Few Japanese could afford a Rikuo in the Fifties, but this Tokyo traffic cop got his 1200 for free. Expect to pay over £12,000 for a runner today

to start a Rikuo museum but realises that this is unfeasible. Instead, he would be happy if some of his Rikuos could be incorporated into a major collection of Japanese machines.

Sugiyama has a fine sense of the absurd. He knows that he will never recoup the money he has laid out on Rikuos, but couldn't care less about those who think he's a fool. In the process of tracking down all those machines he's made a lot of friends. And if he should end up broke and sleeping rough, he is certain that his example will provide amusement for others. Most of all, he is happy to have saved so many examples of the Rikuo, Japan's king of the road ■