

## The Red Ball Express

The Red Ball Express was a famed truck convoy system that supplied Allied forces moving quickly through Europe after breaking out from the D-Day beaches in Normandy in 1944. In order to expedite cargo to the front, trucks emblazoned with red balls followed a similarly marked route that had been closed to civilian traffic. These trucks were also given priority on regular roads.

The system originated in an urgent 36-hour meeting and began operating on August 25, 1944. At its peak, the Express operated 5,958 vehicles, and carried about 12,500 tons of supplies a day. It ran until November 16, 1944 when the port facilities at Antwerp, Belgium, were opened, some French rail lines were repaired, and portable gasoline pipelines deployed.

Sgt. Jack Finley was one of the drivers for The Red Ball Express, and these are a few of his memories. Jack writes:

Somewhere in France near a road junction and in a large field. It is about 3:30 AM, and a convoy of trucks enters the area. They are loaded and have been gone for about 54 hours. As the drivers get out, the convoy commander says to fuel up, check the oil and tires and wake up your other driver. This morning, I am the other driver. In my hooch, I ask if everybody is back and if my truck is ok. "Yes." says the other driver. "What is the load"? I ask. "Gasoline," he answers.

I pick up my sleeping bag, weapon, canteen, C rations, jacket, and a ditty bag and head to the convoy. Lt. Donnell is the convoy commander. He gets everyone together and tells us how we are going to operate. There's nothing new, you just follow the truck in front of you. Lt. Donnell is a fine officer that looks out for his people. He gets into his jeep and moves to the front of the convoy. The convoy

commander is supposed to bring up the rear, but Lt. Donnell always leads the convoy.

We start moving. We leave the area just as it is getting light. As it gets lighter and lighter, we move faster and faster. After some time we see a sign for an area where we can take a break, but we're not slowing down today. I think, "Somebody must really need this load." Later, we see wrecked trucks, field artillery pieces, and abandoned tanks along the road side. They are German. We're moving down the middle of the road. We must be getting close. We spot a small road and turn off onto that road. I think, "We are going to unload here, and we'll also get some rest." We unload, but we don't get any rest. Lt. Donnell comes by and says to start up the trucks, we're moving out. It's getting late in the day now, and I hope we get far enough from here to use our headlights.

It gets later and later, and we keep moving. We're getting tired and sleepy, but there is no stopping. Then we see the beach. It is lit up. We see a depot, and they lead us to the depot that has boxes stacked all around and a sign that says, "Ammo." We're going to haul ammo back near the front. I back up to a pile of stacked boxes and cut off my engine. I put my head on the steering wheel to try and sleep while the truck is loaded.

After the trucks are loaded, Lt. Donnell moves us out. We're able to use our headlights, and I wonder where we're going. I think, "It looks like we're going to deliver this load before we get some rest." We're moving pretty fast. Our luck running with headlights runs out, and we start blackout driving. We have to keep a close eye on the truck in front of us. We don't want him to fall asleep and wreck himself and us too. I think about how it was at driving school when we ran

blackout the first time. I told the instructor that I can't see. He said that I'd better figure it out or I'd be dead.

We're really moving now, and it has started raining. It's really hard to see. We stop. Lt. Donnell has everyone clean their windshield and rear blackout lights. He tells us to drive slowly, but we have to keep moving. I sure am tired but so is everybody. Lt. Donnell has it the worst. He has everybody to look after besides the responsibility of getting the convoy to its destination. I don't envy his job.

We get lucky, as it stops raining. We can see better. We hope we can stop soon to take a break while we wait to see where this load is going. We drive past the stopping area. I wonder, we can't go much further, or we'll be delivering this load to the Krauts. Soon, Lt. Donnell stops the convoy and tells us to drive along very carefully because the road ahead has not been cleared. We can't go much farther, there is a lot of noise and flashing from batteries. We arrive at a battery, and they are just about out of ammo. They're glad to see us. He tells us to unload, and we'll see who needs us next. We did our job, now we'll help them unload, and then maybe we can head "home." Lt. Donnell looks better and less worried.

We're heading back to our area, and the sky is lit up. So much so, that we can see where we're going. Lt. Donnell pulls us over. He thanks us all, and lets us know we're going just a little further, where we'll fuel up and get some rest. We move out, and we are almost at the beach.. I hope they take a long time loading cans of gasoline so we can get some sleep. We move out and finally make it to our command post, which has moved since we left. I turn over the truck to my other driver, wash off and get some sleep.

We were on the road many hours that trip. We didn't lose a truck, and delivered our loads. This was just one of many trips for the "Redball." We were there to do a job, and we were determined to finish.

I think the hardest part of the job for me was blackout driving. My first load in France was at night, blackout driving. My eyes would get used to the dark, then we'd pass something like a POW camp, and the light would be like day. After we passed it would take a while for my eyes to adjust to the dark again. It was scary.

During the Battle of the Bulge, General Patton said we could move in, so we left our area in Luxemburg and drove with our headlights ON. It was very strange, but the General wanted us there with supplies soon. He needed what we had and what we could get to him. I did not get into Bastogne. I was loaded with ammo, but had to unload on the edge of the city. They were glad to see us, and they sure looked mighty good to us.

Somewhere in Belgium, our sergeant got us together and told us to get our stuff out of our trucks and get to our new truck assignments. They were tractor trailers. Some of the guys said they couldn't drive them, but after a couple days and some bent fenders and bumpers, we were driving. One night on a run, two drivers were assigned to the cab of each truck. I was sleeping and the truck started bouncing and weaving all over. I got knocked all over cab. He stopped and said that he must be off the road. Well, yes we were, and there wasn't another truck in sight. I got behind the wheel and off we went, got back on the road, and we were able to catch the convoy.

Driving the "Redball" was not easy, but we were not always under fire. Our command posts would also come under fire sometimes. We faced air attacks and

extreme fatigue. We were not always out of the weather either. I'd sleep in my truck if it was at the command post. There were no showers. We moved so much that we couldn't set up much at our posts. Our mail was always slow catching up with us. We ate c-rations, warmed on the truck manifold. The telephone poles in France were made of concrete and buried deep in ground. If you hit one of those, it ended up in the cab with you. We also had to haul, among other things, empty gas cans, shell casings, POWs, and dead bodies. But, we got the job done, as did all our brave soldiers.

That's my story.