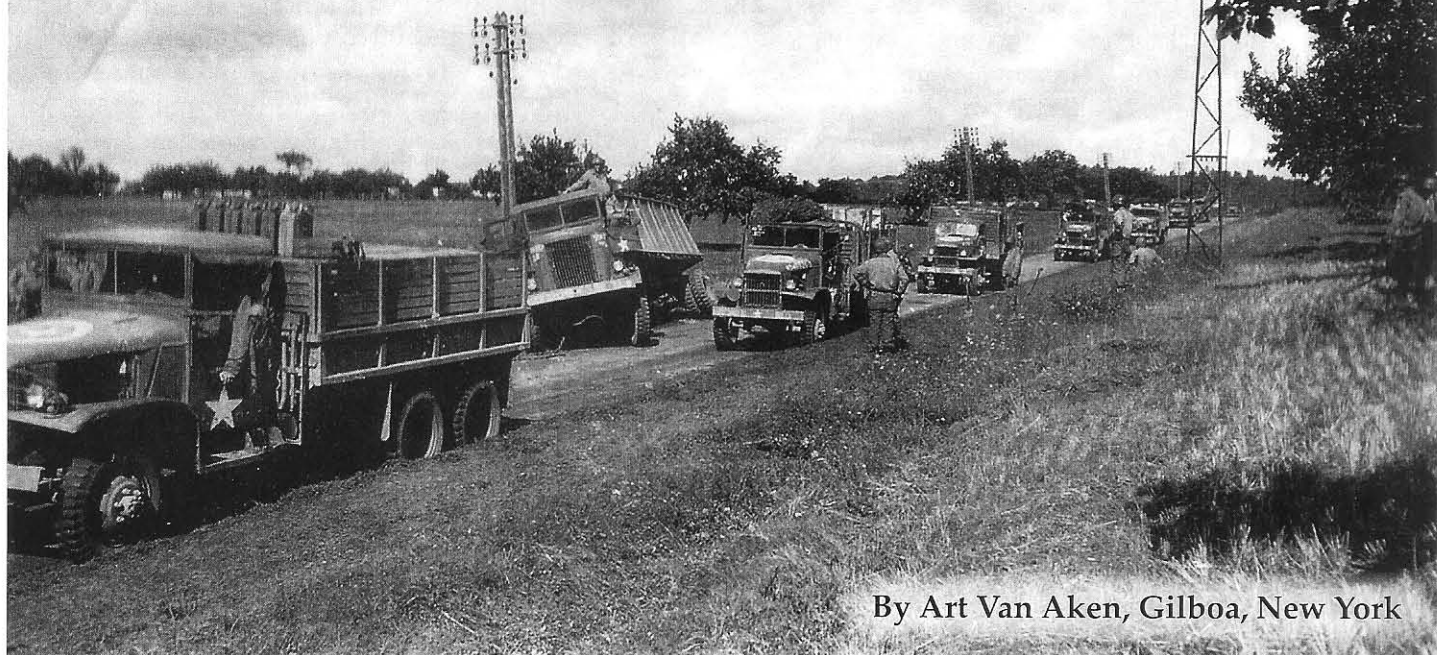


Driving on the

Red Ball Express



By Art Van Aken, Gilboa, New York



This sign helped to keep the traffic flowing.

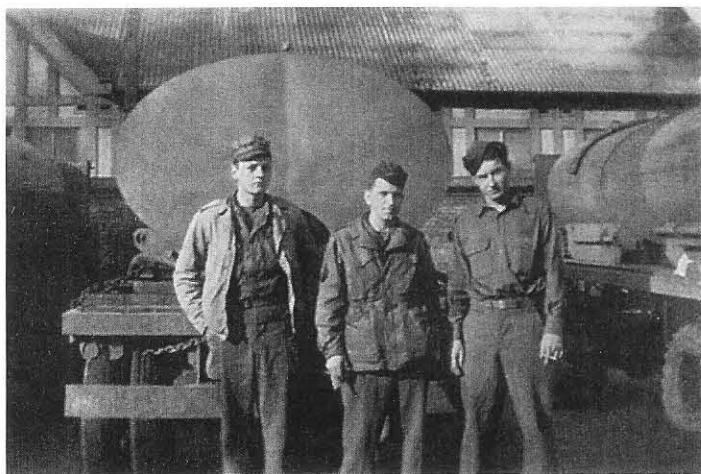
There was something rolling around under my feet, and I cursed under my breath. Whatever it was, it was getting between my feet and the pedals, a big problem if I had to shift gears or slam on the brakes. As dawn was finally breaking I could see the object rolling around the cab of my truck. It was a thermite bomb that had become detached from my steering column. Its purpose was to prevent my vehicle from being captured by the enemy. This little bomb had enough heat to melt my truck down to a pile of slag. I really needed to stop and secure the bomb, but I didn't because I couldn't. It was the summer of 1944, and I was driving across France on the Red Ball Express.

Just months before, I had been living on my parents' farm in upstate New York. I did my basic training at

Fort Lewis, Wash., and then learned how to drive a military truck in the high desert of Eastern Oregon, a vast wilderness roughly the size of New York State. We trained there because at the time the Military High Command thought we would be shipped to North Africa.

But the war wrapped up in the desert of North Africa, so my outfit moved to Camp Roberts, Calif., to prepare for the Italian Campaign, where there was plenty of mud. When my outfit suddenly got the call we discovered we were not going to Italy. There was a much bigger surprise waiting for us, but first we were sent to Camp Miles Standish in Boston, where a Liberty Ship was waiting for us.

My outfit was the 3954th Gas Supply Company and consisted of 120 men. Training in Oregon's



Shown here are some of my co-drivers. I'm in the photo above at left with Joe (in the middle) and Jim. Above right are unnamed and below right are Andy (left) and Ed.

desert and California's hills and mud prepared us well for our mission. My first ocean going cruise was on a Liberty Ship, and I have to say it really was not too much fun. The Liberty Ship bobbed around like a cork in that stormy North Atlantic, so most of us spent our time hanging over the rail. At first we wished we wouldn't get sick, and then wished we would spot land, but the motion of the ship never stopped.

We finally got to England, where our trucks were being prepared and loaded to follow the Normandy Invasion into France. My truck was a GMC CCKW-353 6x6, one of the finest vehicles to come out of Detroit during the war. The Germans made some fine weapons, but we had the trucks. My truck had to be outfitted with some waterproofing equipment, so that when we splashed ashore on Omaha Beach we wouldn't stall out in the high surf. In addition to the truckload of filled gas cans, we each pulled a G-518 trailer, also overloaded with gas.

As we drove out of the landing craft through the high surf on Omaha Beach, everywhere we looked we saw gruesome remnants of the fierce battle that had raged there. A crude road had been built up the steep hill that overlooked the beach. We had been ordered to use first gear, low

range for the climb, as a mishap here would have jeopardized the entire operation.

We all made it to the top of the hill, but there was no place to go. The tanks were all stopped at the hedge rows. We had to wait it out with our camouflaged trucks; the breakout could come at any moment. The following nights were rather noisy as numerous anti-aircraft guns blasted away and little bits of metal rained down on my helmet.

Then we got word that "Operation Cobra" had begun. General Patton had rounded up his men, tanks, and trucks and was advancing at tremendous speed toward the rapidly retreating enemy. Soon we could not keep up with supplies, which meant the combat units were running out of ammo and food. Also, the M26 heavy tank was quite a thirsty animal, sucking up gas at about one gallon per mile. A better system was needed to get supplies quickly to the front, so the Red Ball Express was born.

A dedicated supply route was organized, with nearly 6,000 trucks carrying supplies over narrow roads that were well-marked but in horrible condition. They were better suited for ox-drawn carts than for trucks. There was a one-way road to the advancing army units and a one-way return route that only Red Ball trucks



would be allowed to use. We were able to corral enough trucks, but not enough trained drivers. Non-combat units were stripped of men, and they became truck drivers. Some of these fellows had never even driven a car before, so the number of accidents from rookie drivers was not surprising. We speculated that they wrecked or disabled more trucks than the enemy, as the roadsides were littered with crashed, burned, and abandoned vehicles that had been hastily pushed out of the way. Many were enemy vehicles, but many were ours.

My outfit, the 3954th Gas Supply Company, was up to the challenge, thanks to the months of training we

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Getting stuck in the mud was common, but never fun. The GMC CCKW was the backbone of the Red Ball Express.

had received, but it was still a daunting task. Driving for 30 or more hours without sleep in blackout conditions at high speeds on narrow, battle-scarred roads while carrying a cargo of gasoline does not exactly increase your life expectancy. The biggest hazard was falling asleep, letting your vehicle drift off the road into a tree, and being consumed in a big fireball. Pulling off the side of the road was also hazardous, because the Germans loved mines and had left plenty behind. I had always been blessed with the ability to stay awake for long periods of time, but after 30 hours of driving, I did have one inci-

dent of dozing off behind the wheel. It was only for a few seconds, but as I awoke I felt like I was driving over a cliff! I slammed on the brakes and slid, just missing a tree. Sometimes my GMC would quit due to mud clogging the exhaust pipe, as we had to drive off the road to avoid debris or huge bomb craters.

There was not much time for sightseeing as I drove through the French countryside. Occasionally you would see where a German Tiger tank had ambushed a column of American tanks and halftracks but met its own demise from an airstrike. Once we had stopped for a chow

break and my buddy Don yelled, "Look at that!" I observed a small German tank by the side of the road whose turret was rotating slowly toward us. It was just some French kids playing, but it gave us quite a scare. At night, the sky would light up from artillery fire, accented by the red glow of burning French villages on the horizon.

We were told that we controlled the air, but occasionally we would pass by some of our trucks that had been strafed by the Luftwaffe. We were not allowed to stop for anything or anybody—medics and MPs would take care of problems.



Driving on snow was no fun, either, and accidents happened.

Dining was never a formal affair; if we wanted a hot meal, we filled a helmet with sand, oil, and gasoline, buried cans of food in it, and lit it up. Sometimes we put some C-rations on our exhaust manifold as we were driving. It was a rare occasion when I could sleep in a bed, but even stopping by the side of the road and slumping over the wheel was a real pleasure. However, we always had to be very careful where we parked, because one of those anti-tank mines could really mess up your day.

It was stylish to drape your truck with captured enemy equipment such as machine gun belts or gas masks, and helmets with insignia were especially prized. My truck became overloaded with German equipment, because there was just so much of it lying around.

My route would start at the supply depot, where I helped load my own truck with more than 200 five-gallon G.I. gas cans as fast as possible. The American design was an improvement over the German "Jerry Can." We redesigned the spout so you could pour it in a vehicle's gas tank without spilling it all over the vehicle or yourself. When I pick up one of them now I have to grunt, but it did not seem that heavy when I was 19. After my truck was loaded I drove up to the front on the Red Ball route, driving as fast as possible. We unloaded the gas, sometimes with the help of prisoners of war, and then made a quick turnaround trip back to the supply depot with a load of empties or a truckload of POWs. It was great to see how their faces fell when they saw the mammoth size of our supply depots—that's when they knew that the war was lost.

As we got closer to Paris, I finally got to meet some of the pretty French girls I had heard so much about. Fraternizing took on a whole new meaning! On one occasion I drove my truck into a small village that had not suffered much damage from the



Gas supply company depot.

war. I bought a long loaf of bread which was delicious—I had never tasted anything like that before. The local folks told me in broken English that a detachment of the Germans had just left about an hour ago, so I wasted no time in getting back to my outfit. At this stage the war was moving so fast that many small pockets of German troops had been left behind. It was very lucky for me that we did not become better acquainted.

Soon my outfit was detached from the Red Ball and sent to the Port of Antwerp in Belgium, where we faced some new hazards—V-1 and V-2 rocket bombs—but that is another story.

For someone who loves trucks as much as I do, this was an adventure of a lifetime. I survived due to



Hurry up and wait!

a combination of skill, training, and good luck. Some of my friends did not fare so well, and they are still in France—in a field of white crosses. It has been more than 66 years, but I can still smell the gas and hear the rumble of trucks as I did my part to win the war, driving on the Red Ball Express.

