

# Black History Month 2015: Remembering the Red Ball Express



African American members of the World War II Red Ball Express repair a 2.5-ton truck while a crewman at a machine gun keeps watch for the enemy. Photo courtesy Army Transportation Museum.

The night is moonless, you're in a foreign land, and the sounds of war are steadily growing louder. The seemingly endless route has left you exhausted; yet the burden of your mission dictates for you to remain on high alert. You're growing exceedingly nervous as you draw closer to the chorus of carnage, and although your sweaty palms have slickened the steering wheel, you're clinching on to it so tight your knuckles have turned white. The blasts of incoming German artillery continue to approach ever closer, but only because

you're the one who is on the move. In the dark. Without headlights. Driving 60-miles per hour.

Welcome to the Red Ball Express.

"I've driven when I couldn't hardly see, just by instinct," said former Red Ball driver James Rookard in a 1999 *Cleveland Plain Dealer* interview. "You sort of *feel* the road."

Rookard, still a teenager during World War II, was one of hundreds of black soldiers drawn from the Army Quartermaster Corps to form the Red Ball Express – a truck convoy system made predominantly of African-American drivers that served as the supply route of Patton's Third Army. The men, many of whom were taught to drive by the Army Transportation Corps, carried critical supplies inland from St. Lô, France, to 28 American divisions that had broken through the beaches of Normandy and were racing across Western Europe in pursuit of retreating German forces.

The 700-mile route – which was marked with red balls so the drivers wouldn't get lost – was treacherous for the drivers. Tires were routinely shredded by shell fragments, barbed wire and empty C-ration cans that littered the roads along with wandering livestock and starving civilians who would stand in the trucks' path to beg for food. Overloaded trucks tipped and flipped, sank into the mud of country roads, and veered into ditches as drivers nodded off at the wheel from lack of sleep.

"Those trucks just kept running. They'd break down, we'd fix them and they'd run again," said Rookard, now 90.

At its peak, the nearly 6,000-vehicle fleet of 140 truck companies carried more than 12,000 tons of desperately needed supplies such as ammo, food and fuel to the front daily. On an average day, roughly 900 fully-loaded vehicles were on the route with drivers officially ordered to observe 60-yard intervals and a top speed of 25 miles per hour. It took 54 hours round-trip.



A truck driver fills a tire with air along the Red Ball Express highway during World War II. Photo courtesy Army Transportation Museum.

“We had to drive slowly at night because we had to use ‘cat eyes,’ and you could hardly see,” said Rookard. “Cat eyes” were narrow slits masked onto truck headlights that reduced light to a dim beam so convoys couldn’t be spotted and attacked. Rookard added operating in blackout conditions was the most dangerous part of the Express. “If you turned on your headlights, the Germans could bomb the whole convoy. So we had to feel our way down the road,” he said.

Red Ball drivers used other tactics as well. Some removed the governors from their vehicle carburetors to travel at higher speeds, while others learned how to switch seats with their relief drivers while the trucks were still in motion. It was ingenuity born of necessity and duty.

“When Gen. Patton said for you be there, you were there if you had to drive all day and all night,” implored Rookard.

Through a span of 82 days in late-1944, Rookard and other drivers delivered more than 400,000 tons of war materials to the front, prompting one British infantry brigade commander to note: “Few who saw them will ever forget the enthusiasm of the Negro drivers, hell-bent whatever the risk, to get Gen.

[George] Patton his supplies.”

“We hauled anything Gen. Patton needed,” said Rookard, who was drafted into the Army in March 1943. “We took supplies all the way to the front line, back and forth, back and forth. Some of the fellows ran into ambushes, but my company, Company C, 514th Quartermaster Regiment, wasn’t. We were lucky, because there was shooting all around us.”

Some vehicles were equipped with .50-caliber machine guns, while others had only carbines for the drivers.



African American members of the World War II Red Ball Express repair a 2.5-ton truck while a crewman at a machine gun keeps watch for the enemy. Photo courtesy Army Transportation Museum.

“My worst memories of being in the Red Ball Express were seeing trucks get blown up and being afraid that I might get killed,” said Rookard of Maple Heights, Ohio. “There were dead bodies and dead horses on the highways after bombs dropped. I was scared, but I did my job, hoping for the best.”

Discharged in December 1946, Rookard returned home to marry his high school sweetheart. He and his wife, Mary, raised two sons while he continued driving for the city of Cleveland

until his retirement in 1986.

“James Rookard and the rest of the Red Ball Express drivers played a major role in liberating Europe during World War II,” said DAV National Headquarters Executive Director Barry Jesinoski. “These brave men literally carried the load on behalf of men of different races despite their segregation. It’s a story that isn’t told enough, and DAV is proud of the contributions to freedom, liberty and humanity made by the men of the Red Ball Express.”

“It was a great experience for me,” Rookard concluded. “I was glad I was able to come back home, and I hope I don’t ever have to go through anything like that again.”