

2nd Annual "Red Ballin' through the Ozarks" Convoy

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Arkansas HMV Convoy Commemorates WWII "Red Ball Express" through France in late 1944.

By Tom Essary, Arlington, TX MVPA #31350

The weekend of 24 April 2009 in the Ozark Mountains near Fayetteville in northwest Arkansas, the World War II "Red Ball Express" was resurrected.

In August of 1944, Gen. Patton's 3rd Army broke through the German lines and outran their supplies. The "Red Ball Express" was formed from every available man who could drive and every drivable truck. Millions of pounds of fuel, food, ammunition and other supplies were trucked to the front lines around the clock. At the peak 5958 trucks carried 12,342 pounds of supplies to the front.

- "Red ball" is an old railroad term meaning "priority freight"
- Any truck that broke down was pushed to the side, repaired in place by roving repair teams, and re-joined the convoy as soon as possible.
- Trucks of the Red Ball Express displayed a red ball insignia, which gave them right-of-way over other traffic
- The Red Ball Express ran 81 days, until terminated in November 1944

This annual Arkansas Travelers HMV (historic military vehicle) event grew from 27 vehicles last year to 37 this year and plans are being made to handle a larger number in the future. The setting in NW Arkansas is beautiful and the varied terrain, scenery, flora and fauna of the area are spectacular and it will be hard to run out of superb routes for many years to come. The host hotel is well located on the edge of Fayetteville allows good access to both the town and the rural convoy areas.

Many folks returned for their second Red Ballin' convoy. Those arriving on Thursday started helping each other unload and sharing stories from past events both making new friends and greeting old.

As the weekend approached the number of OD, strata blue and camouflage Historic Military Vehicles (HMVs) grew and by 1400 Friday about 20 some were around the "base". There were representative HMVs from World War II, Korea, and Viet Nam, the US, Austria and Canada and also transport and armor. A superb collection and all in great shape. Several sported machine guns and a weapons carrier has a 37MM anti-tank gun. Needless to say there were no major problems in traffic. Also there participants were from Arkansas, Oklahoma, Texas, Louisiana, Missouri, Mississippi and Georgia. There were members from several affiliate MPVA organizations including: The Arkansas MV Travelers, Blue Bonnet Military Motor Pool, East Texas Piney Woods Motor Pool, Arrowhead MVPA, Kansas City Area "Hell on Wheels" and possibly others.

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A small convoy made their way across Fayetteville to the VA Hospital to talk with some veterans and show off their HMMVs. Several veterans were on hand. There was lots of sharing and everyone on hand enjoyed the visit.

Friday evening at 1800 was a drivers briefing with lots of safety and other details shared. The convoy commander introduced the squad leaders and other drivers that would be providing convoy safety and taking pictures etc. In a packet each drivers received a detailed map, a magnetic convoy logo for the year, and several cards to give to the public that described what we were doing. After the briefing many of us walked a few hundred yards to a nearby restaurant for supper and more sharing.

Saturday mornings schedule was 0730 to be formed up in squads and ready for H-Hour at 0800. There were so many HMMVs that we had to have separate staging areas for each of the three squads. Before day light many drivers and crew were preparing for the convoy. Canvas tops were fastened in place, ice chests loaded and oil checked. The sounds of engines revving for warm up and the chatter of folks as the many HMMVs came to life filled the morning air. The sun rose over the Ozark Mountains and warmed the earth. Much opposite of the previous year when the early morning temperature was just above freezing with a north wind burrrr! That was more like the Battle of the Bulge weather. A temperature around 60° F were maintained all day ... some overcast and occasional sunny spots. Perfect for a drive in the mountains.

Everyone was ready and a police escort lead us onto the road just before 0800. We were off to a great adventure. We wound around through the outskirts of town and then emerged in the farm country of the valley, there were leaves on most trees and the dogwoods were in full bloom. Red clover and Indian paint brushes lined the ditches and blanketed the fields. The string of olive drab punctuated with camouflage and strata blue stretched out for miles through the country side. Twisting our way from hill to hill and around cattle and horse ranches with an occasional bridge to cross and a lake to inspire us, we proudly made our way to our first stop.

The very generous folks of small country church provided donuts, coffee, milk and orange juice to the convoy team. The 37 HMMVs filled the small country church's parking lot. One jeep swung into the lot and stopped in the middle of the group, not lining up as requested. A front passenger side flat was to blame. Several others grab tools and in only a few minutes the spare was on the ground and the Mighty Mite was ready to continue. Other vehicles had hoods raised and many onlookers and helpers to change some fan belts, add oil, etc. All the things that make this hobby grand. The camaraderie of the crew at each stop was fabulous. After many photos and a few quarts of coffee later we were once again on the road. All the HMMVs roaring along had a great sound in the early morning mountain air.

Huntsville, AR city Square was a later stop. We were met by the local law enforcement and many onlookers came over to chat. We filled most available space as we wound around in two or three bands. Several folks stopped into some of the many antique shops and some were off to gather new parts for busted vehicles. An M38 needed two new batteries and an MB needed more oil for the transmission. After about a 30 minute break and a group photo we roared to life and the sheriff escorted us on our way out of town.

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No section of road looked like another ... even though they were very similar. Cleared fields gave way to tree lined hills, there were open lakes with running streams and many beautiful sights to behold. The new leaves on trees and the fresh air made for a great feeling as we rambled along.

The terrain steepened and the coils of the winding roads restricted as we moved closer to the Willow Springs State Park. We again jammed into a parking area and at the base of two tower hills quieted our machines and could enjoy the babbling brook that erupted from the base of a rock cliff. The spring was as if from a fairy tale. Water clear in bright green and the water chilled from the depths of the earth. Rocks were skipped and a canine traveler from the convoy entertained everyone as he jumped in and retrieved sticks for the crowd. Again blankets of dogwood blooms coated the canopy and the sun light splashed off them in impressive grandeur. That tranquil valley experience was too quickly extinguished by the siren of the lead jeep, the signal to mount up.

Twisting, turning, braking, leaning, shifting, gazing, and on and on we went. Driving down from a hill top we circled the trucks in a large opening in the trees next to War Eagle Creek. When silence again overtook us, the sound of the water flowing by and that of a huge undershot water wheel at the War Eagle Mill guided us to our lunch a few hundred yards away.

War Eagle Mill is a working grist mill with many types of flour and ground corn being made and for sale. The building houses a sales area for the flour etc. and a gift shop. Also there is a restaurant on the top floor. The grounds are shaded and the bridge that crossed the creek at the side of the mill is accessible to pedestrians and even fishing.

All too soon the lunch break came to an end and the last leg of the convoy was soon shortening. A couple of short stops and we found ourselves on a dirt road and dust was boiling. The author prefers this considerably but others don't care for it. After driving almost 90 miles on paved roads the dirt was a welcome site. After a few miles a water filled ditch was sighted. At least one jeep and one deuce and a half found their way into the mud and at least side of the vehicle was covered with mud. Unfortunately that too was too short lived. After about 7 hours we found ourselves back at the hotel and preparing for the next evolution. Most of the trail dust had not been so bad and hardly detectible on most vehicles.

At 1830 a small convoy left the hotel parking lot for a short journey to the Baptist Ford Community Church for a Closing Dinner. Bar-B-Que and all the fixin's were on hand and everyone was chattering away as they ate.

After the meal the Arkansas Traveler's president, Paul Harless presented awards for:

The Longest Drive, Joe Schaeffer from GA and Longest Drive in an HMY to the meet, drove the Gamma Goat from Mt. Ida to Fayetteville.

Oldest Participant, ____?____ Gayle from LA.

Youngest Participant, Thomas Hopkins, Little Rock, AR.

Most Vehicles in the Convoy with 5, Joe Allison, Center Ridge, AR.

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The couple that trailered their vehicle the farthest was the ___?___ and ___?___ Sanders from Baytown, TX.

A large thanks and a plaque was presented to the convoy organizers Jerome and Marsha Casey, Fayetteville, AR. There is no way to count the endless hours they spent working on this event. It was due to their tireless devotion that the event ran as smooth and that everyone enjoyed themselves as much.

John Pojunos (MVPA COO and Secretary) spoke to us a few minutes and encouraged us to participate in voting and joining the MVPA. He explained some of the background around some possible by law changes. He is a great asset to the Arkansas Travelers and the MVPA.

Jerry Gardner, Tyler, TX announced the newly formed East Texas Piney Wood Motor Pool and invited everyone to join in their meetings and events.

Nearing 2100 most everyone had left and the cleaning was about finished. Another fabulous HMV convoy meet was winding down. A few good byes at breakfast on Sunday morning and a wave as you were driving away brought to a close the "2nd Annual Red Ballin' Through the Ozarks". Make your reservations early and register soon, see you next year!

Summary of Vehicles

37 Total – 10 Trucks and 27 Jeeps

M35A2	3 (Deuce and a Half)	M211	2 (Deuce and a Half)
WC55	1 (WWII Weapons Carrier)	M37	1 (WWII 3/4 Weapons Carrier)
M561	1 (Gamma Goat)	WC57	1 (Weapons Carrier ¾ Ton)
M3A1	1 (WWII Light Armored Scout Car)		
GPW Ford	6 (WWII Jeep)	MB Willys	2 (WWII Jeep)
M38	5 (Korea Jeep)	M38CDN	1 (Canadian Jeep)
M38A1	7 (Late Korea Jeep)	M151	3 (Viet Nam Jeep)
M718	1 (Viet Nam Ambulance Jeep)		
M422	1 (Viet Nam Mighty Mite Jeep)		
Pinzgauer	1 (Austrian)		

Host Chapter - Arkansas MV Travelers - www.armvpa.com

"Tom and Laurie Essary live in Arlington TX and are new to Arrowhead, Arkansas Travelers and the MVPA. They spent 5 months reviving 1943 GPW-100709 in early 2008. This jeep named "Toby" has over 2600 miles on it since the restoration. Tom can be reached at tom@ad5zo.com See ad5zo.com for more info about the jeep restoration etc. Tom spent about 8 years in the US Navy as an ET3 and LTjg. He served as the Damage Control Assistant (DCA) on the USS Luce DDG-38 in '85 and '86."*