

PRINCIPAL FACTS CONCERNING THE FIRST TRANSCONTINENTAL
ARMY MOTOR TRANSPORT EXPEDITION, WASHINGTON TO SAN FRANCISCO
JULY 7 TO SEPTEMBER 6, 1919

HISTORICAL

The First Transcontinental Motor Convoy, conducted by the Motor Transport Corps of the United States Army, under the command of Colonel Charles W. McClure, inaugurated a new epoch in the long distance operation of heavy motor transport. In this connection, a world's record was established in the total continuous distance traveled of 3,251 miles, the nearest approach to which was the record movement of an army motor convoy between Chicago and New York, through a distance of approximately nine hundred miles.

In addition to this record, the expedition possessed an historic significance, it being the first motor convoy to cross the American Continent, comparable in its sphere, to the first ox-team prairie-schooner trek; the first steam railroad train, and the first airplane flight across the vast expanses of fertile valleys, rolling prairie, rugged mountains, and desolate wilderness that lie between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans.

Briefed from the official report
compiled by William C. Greany, Captain
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OBJECTIVES

The principal objectives of the expedition were to service-test the special-purpose vehicles developed for use in the first World War, not all of which were available in time for such use; and to determine by actual experience the possibility and the problems involved in moving an army across the continent, assuming that railroad facilities, bridges, tunnels, etc. had been damaged or destroyed by agents of an Asiatic enemy.

The expedition was assumed to be marching through enemy country and therefore had to be self-sustaining throughout, in addition to surmounting all of the obstacles interposed by mechanical difficulties, unfavorable road, bridge, topographical, and weather conditions.

There were many and outstanding instances of the army Corps of Engineers motto in action: "To accomplish the purpose with the means at hand."



PERSONNEL

The personnel consisted of 24 expeditionary officers, 15 War Department staff observation officers, and 258 enlisted men. Twenty-one men were lost thru various casualties en route.



LIVING CONDITIONS

The living conditions of the personnel were comparable to those generally experienced in the advance zone of battle operations, but the tour of continuous duty was of a longer duration than is usual for such service. The average amount of sleep which the personnel procured during the entire sixty-two days was limited, due to adverse conditions, to about five and one-half hours per day.

Aside from this, much inconvenience and at times even hardship was experienced due to the almost continuous and excessive amount of strenuous work, insufficient rest and sleep, lack of shelter, ration difficulties, lack of bathing facilities, and at times the scarcity of even drinking water. Other conditions such as alternate extremes of temperature, rain, high winds, excessive dust, sand storms, and the rarefied and the extremely dry atmosphere of the arid western region combined to make a condition that only military discipline as administered by the commanding officer could overcome and insure the success of the expedition.



SCHEDULE

The convoy proceeded on a pre-arranged schedule regardless of weather conditions. Heavy electrical, rain and wind storms were encountered on several occasions. Winds were experienced for days at a time varying in velocity up to a maximum of 50 miles per hour in the Rocky Mountains in Wyoming, while absolute calm was met with on the Salt Lake Desert. Temperatures were observed which varied between a maximum of 110 degrees F. (130 in the sun) on the desert lands of Utah and Nevada and a minimum of 30 degrees in the Sierra Nevada Mountains. About 1,300 miles of the journey were traveled at altitudes between 4,000 and 8,000 feet while the highest point reached was 8,427 on the Continental Divide in Wyoming.



PROGRESS

The convoy departed from the (temporary) Zero Milestone, on the Elipse south of the White House, in Washington, D. C., on the morning of July 7, 1919, and arrived at the Presidio in San Francisco, California, sixty-two days later, on September 6, after having accomplished an average progress of 58.1 miles per day and 6.07 miles per hour of running time, much of official Washington, under the leadership of Secretary of War Baker and Army Chief of Staff March, were present at the starting ceremony. A granite and bronze milestone now marks the starting point of this historic expedition.



VEHICLES

A total of 79 specialized military vehicles were included in the convoy, with individual gross weights ranging up to a maximum of 22,450 pounds. The convoy was comprised of 34 heavy cargo trucks, 4 light delivery trucks, 2 machine shops, 1 blacksmith shop, 1 wrecking truck, 2 spare parts stores, 2 water tanks, 1 gasoline tank, 1 searchlight, 1 caterpillar tractor, 4 kitchen trailers, 8 touring cars, 1 reconnaissance car, 2 staff observation cars, 5 sidecar motorcycles, and 4 solo motorcycles. Of these, 9 vehicles were destroyed or so damaged as to require retirement while en route.



ROADS

In 1919, there were no transcontinental highways. The route directed for the convoy was the proposed location of the Lincoln Highway (now US-30) which at that time existed largely in the imagination and on paper.

Of the entire distance traversed, 1,778 miles or 54.7 per cent of the mileage was made over dirt roads, wheel paths, mountain trails, desert sands and alkali flats. Of this distance, over 500 miles was practically impassible to the heavy vehicles which were included in the convoy, and was negotiated only through the combined efforts of the most extraordinary character on the part of the personnel. It frequently was necessary to pull and push the vehicles by man-power over wide areas of gumbo mud in the central states and across the desert lands of the far west, for many hours at a time, and to laboriously construct wheel paths of timber, canvas, sage brush or grass for long distances. On a number of days the personnel labored from fifteen to twenty-four hours to accomplish the pre-arranged forced-march itinerary.

There were also encountered hundreds of miles of mountain trails some of the most dangerous character with steep grades, and numerous sharp turns, where a deviation from the wheel paths meant destruction in the depths below. On the alkali flats dust up to 2 feet in depth was passed through, while in other localities quicksands were encountered in which certain of the trucks sank to depths up to several feet and had to be rescued by timber, rope and chain tackle and jacks.



ROAD ACCIDENTS

There were 230 road accidents, that is, instances of road failure and vehicles sinking in quicksand or mud, running off the road or over embankments, overturning, or other mishaps due entirely to the unfavorable and at times appalling traffic conditions that were encountered. In addition to this, there were three instances involving an aggregate period of forty-two hours, which were spent in the most arduous and heroic effort in rescuing the entire convoy from impending disaster on the quicksands of the Salt Lake Desert in Utah and the Fallow Sink Region in Nevada. In these emergencies, the entire personnel, regardless of rank, engaged in rescue and salvage operations.



BRIDGES

During the progress of the convoy, there were damaged or destroyed a total of eighty-eight mostly wooden highway bridges and culverts, all of which had to be repaired or rebuilt by the convoy personnel, before the expedition could proceed. It was practically impossible to determine the stability of a bridge thru pre-inspection, due to the dried-out condition of its timbers. Even some of the bridges reinforced by the convoy engineers collapsed during use.



PUBLIC RELATIONS

The expedition crossed eleven states in addition to the District of Columbia, and passed through about 350 communities. In this way, approximately 3,250,000 persons were afforded an opportunity to personally see a unit of a motorized army and to understand the vast importance and urgent necessity of motor transport and good roads in the cause of national defense. It is estimated that this matter brought directly to the attention of about 33,000,000 persons, or nearly one-third of the population of the entire country through the medium of local publicity in the states crossed. In a number of communities, refreshments were served to the personnel.



SOME OF THE THIRTY NINE OFFICERS
OF THE FIRST TRANSCONTINENTAL EXPEDITION
WASHINGTON TO SAN FRANCISCO

Picture Taken August 30, 1919, East of Carson City, Nevada

Personnel left to right:

1. Captain Bernard H. McMahon, Train Commander
2. First Lieutenant Daniel H. Martin, Company Commander
3. Major Charles K. Berle, Sanitary Officer
4. Captain William C. Greany, Expeditionary Adjutant and Statistical Officer
5. Captain Richard J. Gurrine, Mess Officer
6. Lieutenant Colonel John Mather, Observer, Coast Artillery
7. Jay Smith, Press representative
8. Major Sereno E. Brett, Observer, Tank Corps
9. Colonel Karl C. Greenwald, Observer, Field Artillery
10. Captain Earl A. Harper, Air Corps
11. Colonel Ralph M. Pennell, Observer, Field Artillery
12. Lieutenant Colonel Dwight D. Eisenhower, Observer, Tank Corps
13. Lieutenant Ralph W. Enos, Guide Officer
14. Lieutenant Colonel Whitman R. Connolly, Observer, Field Artillery
15. Colonel William T. Carpenter, Observer, Coast Artillery
16. Lieutenant Colonel Charles W. McClure, Expeditionary Commander
17. First Lieutenant William F. Scheumann, Dental Surgeon
18. First Lieutenant Robert E. Colvin, Assistant Engineer Officer
19. Captain Andrew E. Ritchey, Engineer Officer
20. Major Matthew J. Farrell, Maintenance Officer and Inspector
21. Lieutenant Colonel Taylor E. Darby, Medical Officer
22. First Lieutenant Kenneth C. Downing, Train Adjutant
23. First Lieutenant E. R. Jackson, Observer, Ordnance Corps
24. First Lieutenant William B. Doran, Publicity Officer

