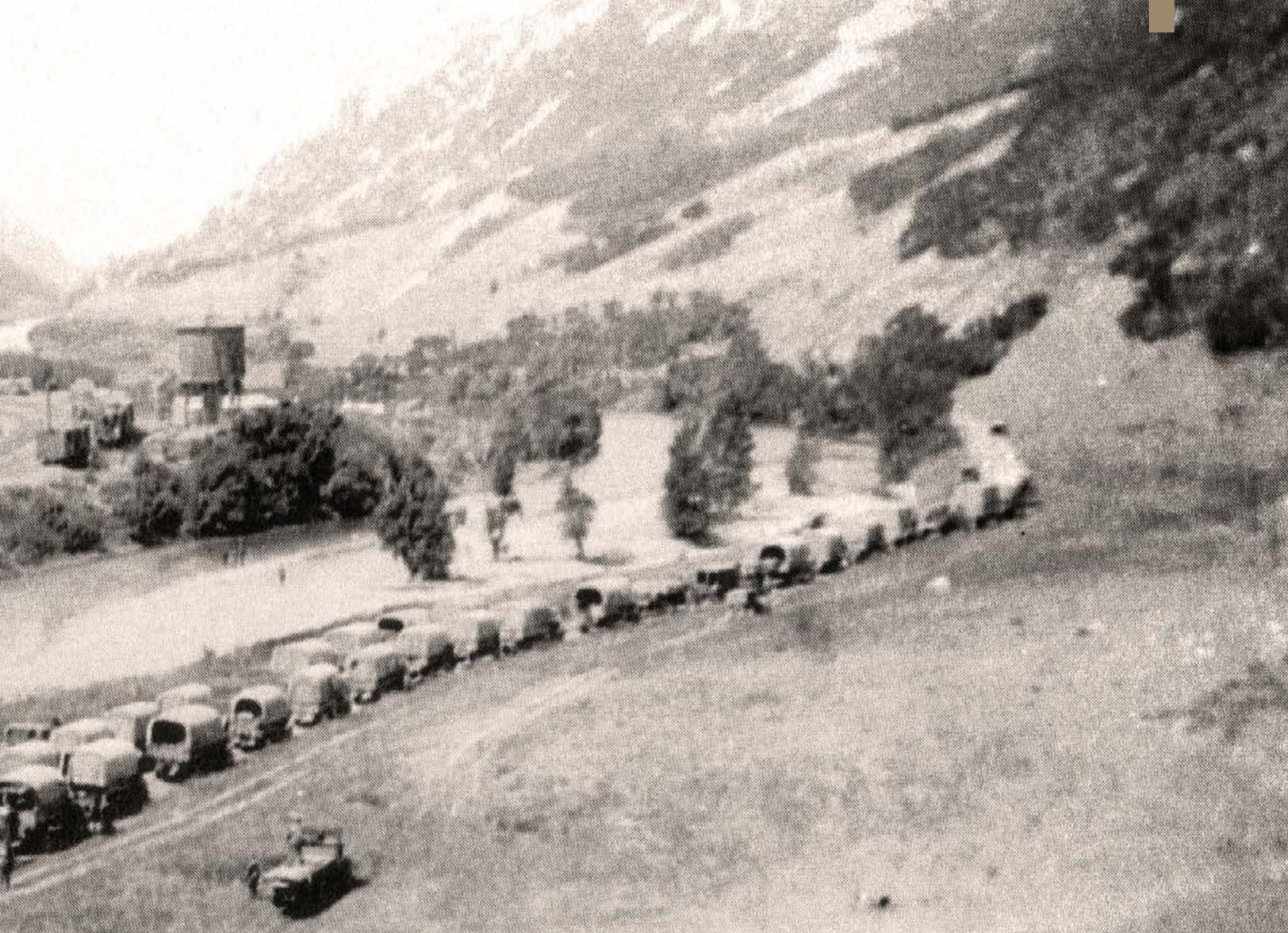


The Army Goes Rolling Along

■ By James A. Harvey III



The Motor Transport Corps transcontinental convoy proceeds through Utah in 1919. (Photo courtesy of the Eisenhower Library)



In 1919, then-Lt. Col. Dwight D. Eisenhower was part of a convoy of military vehicles to test the Army's mobility on U.S. soil. That convoy helped lead to the creation of the U.S. interstate highway system.

Operations in Afghanistan have often presented U.S. military vehicles with off-road challenges. Many Afghan roads are not what most people in the industrialized West would consider a real road. It is hard to imagine that less than 100 years ago, the United States was much like parts of Afghanistan. Travel was long and roads—if they could even be called roads—were virtually impassable.

The military after World War I saw this as a national security issue and decided to test the Army's mobility in case of war. The Army's Motor Transport Corps was given the mission of conducting a transcontinental convoy from Washington, D.C., to San Francisco

following the Lincoln Highway. The Department of War also sent observers, including the young Lt. Col. Dwight D. Eisenhower, to record their observations.

The convoy traveled 3,251 miles in 62 days at an average of six miles per hour. Although it was a success, the mission was anything but easy.

The Need for Mobility

By 1919, the United States was beginning to worry about the growth of the Japanese military, which had seized numerous German Pacific islands during World War I. The Japanese were later awarded the islands in 1920 by a League of Nations mandate, moving the Japa-



A dispatch rider sits on a motorcycle at Camp Meigs, Washington, D.C., during the transcontinental convoy. (Photo courtesy of the Army Transportation Museum)

nese Empire's military influence closer to the United States and its territories.

War Plan Orange was the secret plan for war with Japan and would require moving equipment and troops quickly to the West Coast by land. The plan assumed that the Japanese would sabotage major railroads and tunnels.

The Army also had other reasons for embarking on a transcontinental motor convoy. The final ordnance report dated October 31, 1919, from observer 1st Lt. E.R. Jackson noted that there were four objectives to the convoy mission:

- To show the War Department's support of the "Good Roads Movement," which encouraged high-quality transcontinental roads for economic and military purposes.
- To assist Army recruitment efforts with a focus on the Motor Transport Corps.
- To encourage public celebration and pride over the U.S. victory in the Great War, later known as World War I.
- To extensively study and observe U.S. terrain and equipment in a real environment.

Heading Out

The convoy departed Camp Meigs, Washington, D.C., on July 7, 1919, and began the mission.

In the 81-vehicle convoy, cargo trucks made up the largest number of a certain type of vehicle. For maintenance, two trucks carried spare parts while two were complete machine shops. Two tankers carried fuel, and a third carried water. Other vehicles included 11 passenger cars, five ambulances, and four kitchen trailers.

The convoy had a pontoon trailer for river crossing, a Militor wrecker winch for the recovery and towing of broken or mired vehicles, and a Maxwell tractor for towing purposes. The convoy also had nine Indian Head and Harley Davidson motorcycles, two of which served to scout the road ahead each morning.

The convoy personnel consisted of 39 officers, 258 enlisted men, and one Ordnance Department civilian employee.

The first leg of the journey, from Washington, D.C., to Frederick, Maryland, would take a modern motorist only one hour or less. In 1919, Eisenhower wrote in his journal that it took the convoy more than 7 hours to complete the 46-mile trip. Interestingly, Eisenhower said that on this part of the trip, with a few exceptions, they were driving on excellent roads.

Eisenhower also noted immediate maintenance problems, including a broken coupling on a kitchen trailer and a fan belt broken on a passenger car. The Militor had to tow a cargo truck that had a broken magnetic coupling into the Army camp at the Frederick fairgrounds.

Difficult Terrain

Once the convoy reached the Midwestern states, the difficulties worsened. In his entries for Aug. 2, 1919, Eisenhower noted that rain in Nebraska made the dirt roads slippery.

He mentions that 25 trucks slipped into a ditch during the driving for that day and that it was "very apparent all trucks should be equipped with chains for front wheels as well

as rear.” Eisenhower called the roads “gumbo mud” and noted that Soldiers had to reinforce two weak bridges before the convoy could cross over them.

Aug. 3 appeared to be not any better because the roads were described as “sandy, some quicksand.” The convoy drove 34 miles in more than 9 hours, and at one time the tractor towed 12 engineer trucks at the same time after they became mired.

Some maintenance problems that day included a Dodge passenger car with a carburetor clogged with sand, a tanker with a blown front cylinder head gasket, and several broken fan belts on a Dodge four-wheel-drive light delivery truck.

During the journey through Utah, the situation actually became desperate while the convoy crossed the Great Salt Lake Desert. The “salt marsh with [a] thin, hard crust of sand and crystallized alkali” ground mired vehicles so much that at one point Eisenhower wrote that “prac-

tically every vehicle was mired and rescue work required almost superhuman efforts of entire personnel from 2 p.m. until after mid-night.”

Eisenhower also wrote that the desert delays caused a shortage of fuel and water. Water had to be placed under guard and rationed to one cup per man for supper and the night.

Eisenhower wrote that the stalling of a fuel truck also prevented a hot meal and that supper itself was just cold beans and hard bread. A team of civilians eventually arrived by horse and provided the needed water.

The convoy finally arrived in San Francisco on Sept. 6, 1919. The journey created an awareness of the importance of a national road system for national defense.

Lessons From the Convoy

The convoy of 1919 demonstrated that 62 days was the fastest that troops and equipment could reach the West Coast. However, after such

a journey, most of the equipment could not be considered combat ready. Some equipment never even made it to San Francisco before being retired from service.

Capt. William C. Greany reported that the convoy itself caused obvious damage. He noted that the convoy destroyed or damaged 88 bridges and culverts that troops had to repair before continuing. The convoy demonstrated that a national road system was important to national defense, just as the Panama Canal had been for the moving of naval vessels after the Spanish-American War.

Convoy reports give a vivid picture of life on the convoy. While the public treated the convoy members well and often showered them with food, drinks, parties, entertainment, and hygiene opportunities, much of the journey was in rugged field conditions.

Capt. Greany’s report noted an “almost continuous and excessive amount of strenuous work” with lit-



The transcontinental convoy of 1919 treks through mud in Nebraska. (Photo courtesy of the Eisenhower Library)



A standard B "Liberty" truck sits mired in sand 13 miles west of Grand Island, Nebraska. (Photo courtesy of the Army Transportation Museum)

tle sleep and rest. The convoy also lacked shelter and had ration difficulties, few bathing facilities, and at times little water. Sleep averaged about five and a half hours a night. These conditions were exacerbated by extreme temperatures, rain, high winds, excessive dust, and sandstorms.

In his final ordnance report, 1st Lt. Jackson concluded that the convoy had met all of its objectives. First, interest in the Good Roads Movement was aroused by the convoy's passage. Second, some enlistments were directly connected to the convoy, although the total number was not as high as expected.

Third, the general public's hospitality everywhere demonstrated the excitement of a nation that had been on the winning side of the Great War. Fourth, the convoy resulted in many observations and lessons

learned about equipment, operations, and terrain.

As president of the United States, Eisenhower signed legislation in 1956 to start the construction of the nation's interstate highway system. Often people believe that Eisenhower was simply inspired by German highways; however, he was also influenced by his early experiences in the transcontinental motor convoy.

Before the convoy, Eisenhower was considering leaving the Army in the post-World War I drawdown. The convoy offered an exciting opportunity that kept him in the Army, which he would later lead to victory in Europe during World War II.

For more details of the hardships of the transcontinental convoy, including Eisenhower's official daily log, visit the Eisenhower Presidential Library website at [\[hower.archives.gov/\]\(http://www.eisenhower.archives.gov/\). You may also enjoy the book *American Road* by Peter Davies, which is an account of the convoy that includes a history of U.S. military and social life after World War I.](http://www.eisen-</p></div><div data-bbox=)

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