

1945 February 5-11

The Red Ball Express

Truck Unit Often Under Fire Now Rushes Supplies To Front

WITH U. S. FORCES IN BELGIUM —(Special)— The 4256th Quartermaster Truck company, now busily engaged at an important Belgian port getting war materials to combat troops pushing into Germany, has packed a lot of experience into its three-month life.

Nowadays it doesn't have the long hard pulls that it had when it was part of the "Red Ball Express," carrying ammunition and gasoline from Normandy's Omaha Beach to the American 1st and 3rd armies in the field, often under enemy fire. The supply line is shorter now.

Formed in September, the company drew its personnel from replacement depots. Thus many of its men had been in combat outfits—in-fantry, artillery, tank destroyers, combat engineers—and

battle decorations were the rule.

While on "The Red Ball," the company was part of the quartermaster battalion which hauled more war materials than any other over the famous highway. Then came a special assignment, to haul ammunition on a five-day run to the British 2nd army.

The company was moved to Le Havre next, and for a while carried combat forces to the front. In the Belgian port, the men make intra-port and convoy run, always carrying the ever-important supplies for the front.

Although the men now operate their own well-equipped shops, at one time they used captured German tools for maintenance work.

Pfc. Clarence H. Eyler, 905 Logan street, is a member of the truck company.

(La Crosse Tribune, 1945 February 11, page 4)

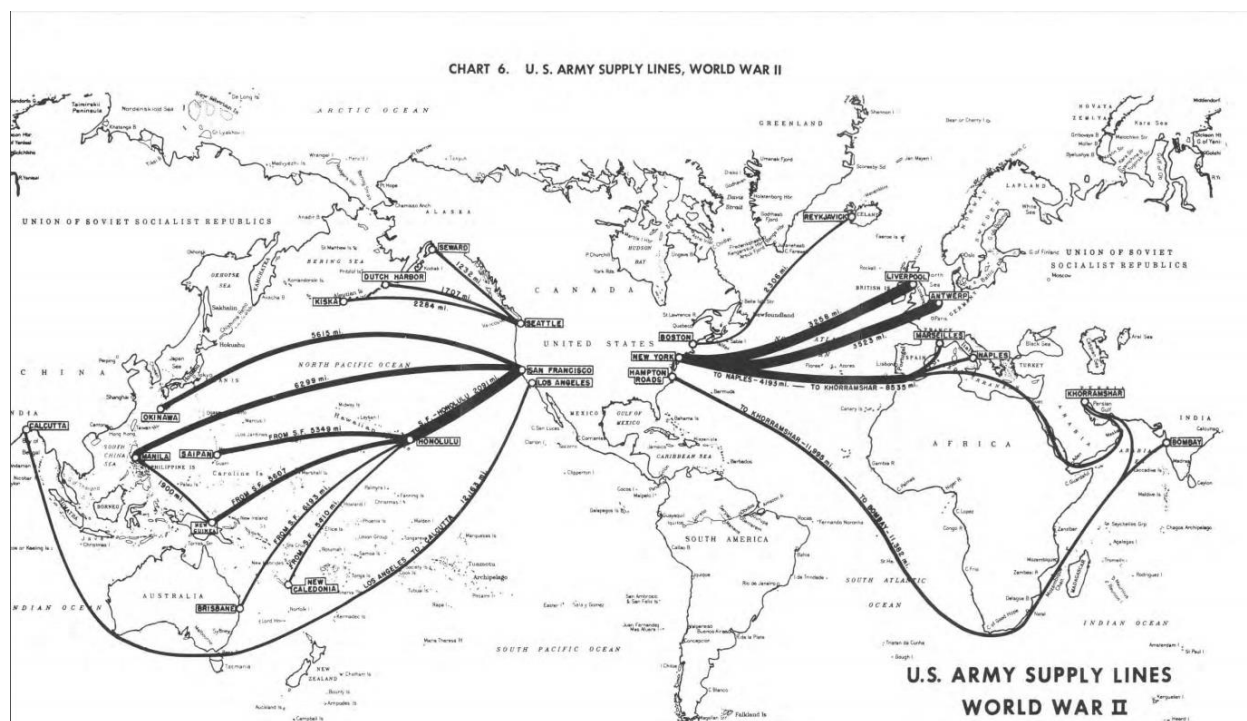
Frederick the Great said, "Leaders did not know then, as our little Friend at Berlin came to know, that 'an Army, like a serpent, goes upon its belly.'" This is often attributed to Napoleon as, "An army marches on its stomach."¹

Private First-Class Clarence H. Eyler of La Crosse was one of the point men at the head of the huge logistical operation that filled the belly of the American armed forces in World War II.

Supplies are the lifeblood of military operations. Starving troops without ammunition are not an effective military force. Supplies are also one of the big factors in maintaining the morale of a military force.

As part of military logistics (“procurement, maintenance, and transportation of military matériel, facilities, and personnel” according to the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* online), the Quartermaster Corps is responsible for procuring and supplying troops with food, fuel, clothing, equipment, mail, and the other essentials.² Its sister organization, the Ordnance Department, takes care of ammunition, weapons, and vehicles.

The incredible scale and challenges of accomplishing this during World War II are hinted at on this map.



(Logistics in World War II)³

For the European Theater, most supplies were shipped to England. From there they had to be shipped across the English Channel to a port in France, at least until ports were captured in France and Holland. Then trucks or railroads moved supplies to forward supply dumps.

Besides the great distances involved, there were other difficulties. German U-Boats sank supply ships at sea. As the Germans retreated, they were very efficient in destroying anything that was useful, such as port facilities, bridges, and railroads. Allied bombing had also destroyed transportation infrastructure. More than 12,000 men of the Army Transportation Corps had to repair 8,000 miles of

destroyed railways in France.⁴ Trucks often came under enemy fire, and there were also mechanical breakdowns.

The farther that the Allied armies advanced, the longer the supply lines became.

The supply requirements of modern armies put a huge strain on logistical support. The tanks in one armored division, for example, would consume 25,000 gallons of fuel per 100 miles.⁵

The mainstay of American military transportation on land in World War II was the 2.5-ton truck, or “Deuce-and-a-half” in G.I. parlance. Its various configurations carried troops and supplies in all theaters of the war.



Deuce-and-a-half truck

(MilitaryTrader.com)

This six-wheel drive vehicle could carry 10,000 pounds of cargo on roads or half that when off-road.⁶

From 1939 to 1945, American manufacturers built 2,382, 311 military trucks of all types.⁷

To accelerate delivery of supplies to the front lines, the “Red Ball Express” was activated on August 25, 1944. At its peak, it operated 6,000 vehicles and delivered 12,000 tons of supplies every day.⁸

M. Todd Hunter wrote: “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.” When the trucks operated at night, they did so with covered headlights that had just a slit to allow a very narrow beam of light to illuminate the road ahead. Each truck had a driver and a relief driver who

often mastered the art of switching places while the truck was moving. In the segregated armed forces of the time, many of the drivers were African-Americans. It took 54 hours to make the round trip on the Red Ball routes. Over its 82-day lifespan, the Red Ball Express delivered more than 400,000 tons of supplies to the front lines.⁹

In the modern military, some of the functions of the Quartermaster Corps have been contracted out to private companies.

During World War II, however, Clarence Eyler of La Crosse was one of the thousands who kept supplies flowing to the front-line troops and helped make victory possible.¹⁰

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Sources & Notes:

¹ "An Army Marches On Its Stomach," *Quote Investigator*, accessed 2020 February 5, <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2017/10/15/army/>.

² The Quartermaster Corps also had additional duties. See: Robert W. Jones Jr., "Quartermaster Units During WWII: The 528th Sustainment Brigade," *Office of the Command Historian*, 2009, https://www.soc.mil/ARSOF_History/articles/v5n3_528th_sustain_brigade_sb_wwii.html.

³ United States Army Service Forces, *Logistics in World War II: Final Report of the Army Service Forces* (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, 1993). https://history.army.mil/html/books/070/70-29/CMH_Pub_70-29.pdf.

⁴ "Rail oddities," *Nonpareil-Journal*, West Salem, Wisconsin, 1945 March 8, page 2.

⁵ Office of War Information, "This Report on Civilian Gasoline Supply is Advance Release: For Wednesday Morning Papers, October 13, 1943," R. Douglas Hurt, *The Great Plains During World War II*, *University of Nebraska-Lincoln*, 2008, <http://plainshumanities.unl.edu/homefront/homefront.docs.0015>.

⁶ Thomas Berndt, *Standard Catalog of U.S. Military Vehicles: 1940-1965* (Iola, Wisconsin: Krause Publications, 1993), 77-78.

⁷ John Ellis, *World War II: A Statistical Survey* (New York: Facts on File, 1993), 278.

⁸ Major Jeffrey W. Decker, "Logistics and Patton's Third Army: Lessons for Today's Logisticians," *Air University*, 2003 March 20, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/ASPJ/journals/Chronicles/decker.pdf>.

⁹ M. Todd Hunter, "Black History Month 2015: Remembering the Red Ball Express," *Disabled American Veterans*, 2015 February 19, <https://www.dav.org/learn-more/news/2015/black-history-month-2015-remembering-red-ball-express/>.

¹⁰ There is a World War II Army veteran named Clarence Harvey Eyler (1916-1989) who is buried in the Central Wisconsin Veterans Memorial Cemetery at King, Wisconsin (findagrave.com/memorial/82422202), but it cannot be stated definitively that this is the same person. (Ancestry.com. *Wisconsin, Death Index, 1959-1997* [database on-line], Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc., 2007.)