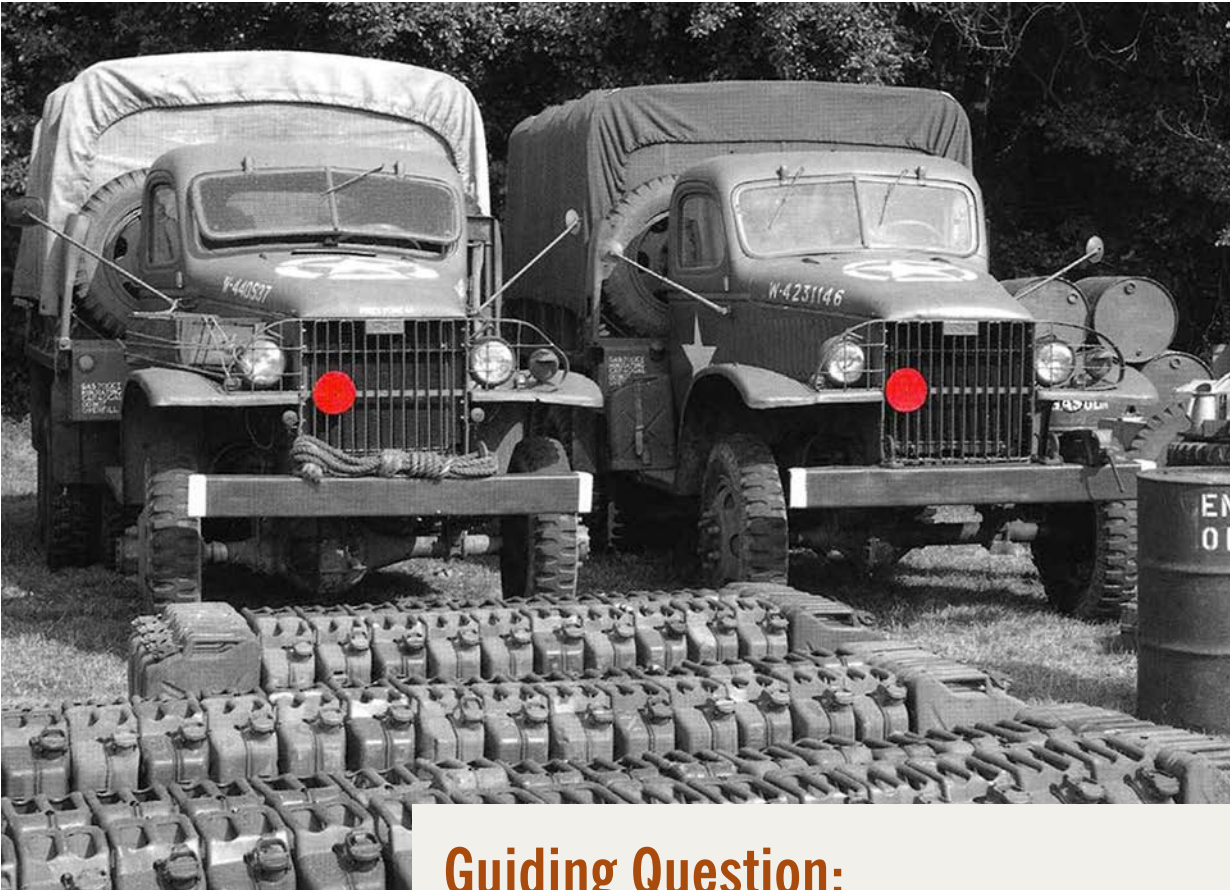




UNDERSTANDING
SACRIFICE

Activity: Riding Along the Red Ball Express



Guiding Question:

How did African American drivers of the Red Ball Express aide the war effort in Northern Europe?

DEVELOPED BY KAMILAH WILLIAMS

Grade Level(s): 9-12

Subject(s): Social Studies

Cemetery Connection: Henri-Chapelle American Cemetery

Fallen Hero Connection: Private First Class Richard Travis Townsend

Overview


The goal of this lesson is to explain the vital role of the Red Ball Express, and more specifically, African Americans serving in Western Europe. This lesson will help students to develop an understanding of the importance of transportation during the war. Through the examination of primary and secondary sources, students will be able to assume the role of a Red Ball driver and construct a journal entry to a relative explaining their lives in Western Europe.

Historical Context

After the Battle of Normandy ended, the war in Europe was far from over. As General George Patton and the Third Army rolled from the beaches of Normandy towards Germany, they needed supplies such as gasoline, food, and ammunition to continue the war effort. With the destruction of the rail lines in Northern France, it became necessary to find an alternate means of getting supplies to the troops. On August 25, 1944, the Red Ball Express was born.

The Red Ball Express was a convoy system that stretched from St. Lô in Normandy to Paris and eventually to the front along the French-German border. The Red Ball Express got its name from an old railroad term that referred to priority freight; other trains had to yield to those marked with the red ball. Between August and November 1944, the Red Ball Express truckers had delivered 412,193 tons of gas, oil, lubricants, ammunition, food, and other essentials. By 1944, there were over 200,000 African Americans serving in Europe, with roughly 90,000 driving for the Red Ball Express, making up 75% of the truck drivers who kept the “Red Ball” rolling. The Red Ball Express played an essential role in the Allied victory in Northern Europe.

Infantrymen like Private First Class Richard Travis Townsend relied on the essential supplies provided by the drivers of the Red Ball Express to press into Germany. Townsend rests today at Henri-Chapelle American Cemetery along with nearly 8,000 other Americans.



“In all my years of teaching, I had no knowledge of the Red Ball Express. As important as the Red Ballers were in transporting the supplies necessary to defeat the Axis powers, their story is absent from every textbook I have ever read. I hope this lesson will enlighten students and teachers alike.”

— Kamilah Williams

Williams is a teacher at Suitland High School in Forestville, Maryland.

Objectives

At the conclusion of this lesson, students will be able to

- Analyze primary and secondary sources to discuss the importance of the Red Ball Express;
- Discuss the implications of the Red Ball Express on the military effort in World War II; and
- Compose a journal entry from the perspective of an African American soldier driving on the Red Ball Express.

Documents Used ★ indicates an ABMC source

Primary Sources

Map, *Highway Express Routes*, September 1944-February 1945

Ruppenthal, Roland G., *United States Army in World War II European Theater of Operations In Logistical Support of the Armies*, Volume II: September 1944-May 1945 (Washington, DC: Office of the Chief of Military History, Department of the Army, 1959), 136.

ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USA/USA-E-Logistics2/maps/USA-E-Logistics2-5.jpg

Photograph, *Awaiting Orders*, c. 1944

U.S. Army Transportation Museum

Photograph, *GMC CCKW Truck*

U.S. Army Transportation Museum

Photograph, *Jerry Can*, 1939

U.S. Army Transportation Museum

Photograph, *A Red Ball Express Truck Gets Stuck in the Mud*

Department of Defense

Photograph, *Repairs to a Red Ball Truck*

U.S. Army Transportation Museum

Photograph, *Trucks loaded with supplies assemble for convoys in Northern France*, 1944

U.S. Army Transportation Museum

Rolling to the Rhine Newsreel

U. S. War Department

youtube.com/watch?v=PKRNYKoEj0

Secondary Resources

Tyler Bamford, " 'Keep 'em Rolling': 82 Days on the Red Ball Express." February 1, 2021
The National World War II Museum
nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/red-ball-express

David P. Colley, *The Road to Victory: The Untold Story of World War II's Red Ball Express*.
London: Brassey's, 2000.

David P. Colley, "On the Road to Victory: The Red Ball Express"
World War II Magazine
historynet.com/red-ball-express

Gilmore, Gerry J, "'Red Ball Express' Supplied Patton's Drive toward Germany"
Department of Defense News

"Other Express Routes"
U.S. Army Transportation Museum
transchool.lee.army.mil/museum/transportation%20museum/expressroutes.htm

"Personal Stories, Red Ball Express"
U.S. Army Transportation Museum
transchool.lee.army.mil/museum/transportation%20museum/personalstories.htm

"The Red Ball Express, 1944"
U.S. Army Transportation Museum

Waterhouse, Charles. *Gangway*, cover image for *American Legion Magazine*, 1984 U.
S. Army Transportation Museum

Materials

- Warm-Up Activity
- Projector or visualizer to display *Gangway* painting
- Link to "[Keep 'em Rolling': 82 Days on the Red Ball Express](#)"
- *Map, Highway Express Routes, September 1944 - February 1945*
- Photograph Analysis Worksheet
- Red Ball Express Photographs
 - Group 1: Traveling the Red Ball Express
 - Group 2: The Life of Drivers
 - Group 3: The Tools of the Trade
 - Group 4: Difficulties Along the Red Ball Express
- Red Ball Express Writing Prompt and Rubric

Lesson Preparation

- Make one copy of the Photograph Analysis Worksheet and *Map, Highway Express Routes, September 1944 - February 1945* for each student.
- Ensure that the projector is prepared to display *Gangway* painting and the newsreel.
- Make one copy of the article "Keep 'em Rolling': 82 Days on the Red Ball Express" for each student (or provide students with a link to the article).
- Print one Red Ball Express Photograph Collection for each group.

Procedure

Contributions of the Red Ball Express (60 minutes)

- *In any war, there are two tremendous tasks. That of the combat troops is to fight the enemy. That of the supply troops is to furnish all the material to ensure victory. The faster and farther the combat troops advance against the foe, the greater becomes the battle of supply.*

-Dwight D. Eisenhower, October 1945

- Project the *Gangway* painting and ask students to analyze it.
- Explain or review the Normandy Invasion and the push to Berlin. Engage the students in a discussion about the possible difficulties the troops may have had while trying to liberate Paris.
 - Engage the students in a discussion about the job of a truck driver in World War II.
- To provide historical context, the teacher may choose to show students the *Rolling to the Rhine* Newsreel (the clip is approximately ten minutes long).
 - Ask students to read "Keep 'em Rolling': 82 Days on the Red Ball Express" for context on the role that the Red Ball Express played in the advance towards Germany.
- Review key points with the students, ensuring they understand that the Red Ball Express was a convoy system used to supply the troops in Western Europe. A few points you may want to stress are:
 - Most of the members of the Red Ball Express were African American;
 - The convoy was necessary as Patton's Third Army was running low on fuel and supplies;
 - The term Red Ball referred to the red ball on the freight trains that were carrying priority materials; and
 - At its peak, there were over 5,000 vehicles carrying over 12,000 supplies daily.
- Display the map, *Highway Express Routes*, September 1944 - February 1945 and distribute a copy to each student. Lead the class in a discussion about the challenges the drivers may have faced as they delivered materials.
 - Prompt students to look at the complexity of the routes. What do they notice?
 - Explain that one way on the Red Ball Express was approximately 534 miles and the trucks could only travel up to 25 miles per hour (*teacher tip*: various sources claim that the trucks were limited to speeds ranging from 25 to 40 miles per hour - we are using 25 for the purposes of this exercise).
 - Have the students figure out how long one way on the Red Ball would take in 1944
 - **Teacher Tip:** Equation: $\text{Time} = \text{Distance}/\text{Rate}$, correct answer is roughly 21 hours.

- Divide the class into four groups.
- Distribute one Photograph Analysis Worksheet to each student. Give each group a set of photographs:
 - Group 1: Traveling the Red Ball Express;
 - Group 2: The Life of Drivers;
 - Group 3: The Tools of the Trade; and
 - Group 4: Difficulties Along the Red Ball Express.
- Allow student groups approximately 15 minutes to view and discuss each set of photographs. Ask each group to complete the Photograph Analysis Worksheet.
 - Make sure each group selects a leader, recorder, timekeeper, and reporter and give each group a chance to share their findings with the class.
 - The remaining groups should take notes as each group presents, as this information can be used to help them to compose their journals.
 - Clarify any misconceptions about the photographs.

Assessment

- Collect the Photograph Analysis Sheet from each student.

Methods for Extension

- Students can research other supply lines (ie. the Green Diamond Route, the ABC Express, the XYZ Express, or the Little Red Ball Express) and create Venn Diagrams or write a comparative essay. Learn more about these lines from the U.S. Army Transportation Museum.
- The American Battle Monuments Commission maintains U.S. military cemeteries overseas. These cemeteries are permanent memorials to the fallen, but it is important that students know the stories of those who rest here. To learn more about the stories of Americans who made the ultimate sacrifice, visit abmc.gov/education and NHDSilentHeroes.org.
- Teachers can enhance students' interest in military logistics by exploring these related lesson plans:
 - [Supplies and Logistics: Problem Solving Alternatives to Japanese Occupation of the Burma Road](#)
 - [The War of Logistics](#)

Adaptations

- Teachers can add captions to the documents for purposes of differentiation.
- Teachers can use a projector and guide students through the photograph analysis task as needed.

Photograph Analysis Worksheet

Name of the Image: _____

| OBSERVE | | |
|---------------------------------------|---|---|
| Describe what you see. | What people and objects are shown? | What is the physical setting? |
| | | |
| REFLECT | | |
| Why do you think this image was made? | Who do you think was the audience for this image? | How does this image relate to the Red Ball Express? |
| | | |

Adapted from: Library of Congress [loc.gov/teachers/usingprimarysources/resources/Analyzing_Photos_and_Prints.pdf](https://www.loc.gov/teachers/usingprimarysources/resources/Analyzing_Photos_and_Prints.pdf)

Gangway, cover image for American Legion Magazine,

U. S. Army Transportation Museum



Group One: Traveling the Red Ball Express

Trucks loaded with supplies assemble for convoys in Northern France,

U.S. Army Transportation Museum



Group Two: Life of Drivers

Awaiting orders, c. 1944

U.S. Army Transportation Museum



Group Three: Tools of the Trade

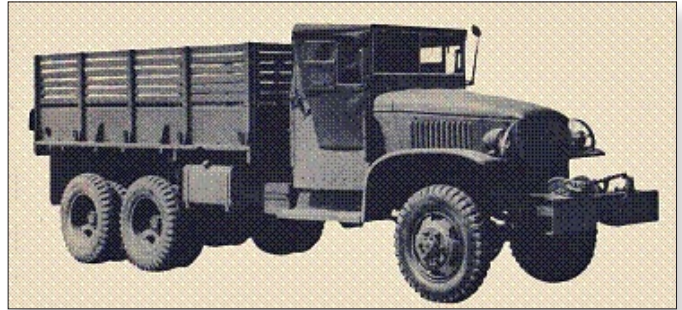
German Jerry Can,

U.S. Army Transportation Museum



GMC CCKW Truck

U.S. Army Transportation Museum



Group Four: Difficulties along the Red Ball Express

Red Ball Express Truck Stuck in the Mud

U.S. Army Transportation Museum



Members of the Red Ball Express repair a 2-1/2 ton truck, while a crewman at a machine gun keeps watch.

U.S. Army Transportation Museum

