

CONVOY MEMORIES WITH THE 81st TCF

While assigned to the 81TCF, I remember one particular convoy coming home from a 2 week deployment to Barstow, Calif. As was typical of the smaller TCFs, our convoy consisted of the commander's jeep in front, followed by about 20 M35A2-6X6 trucks ("6-bys") with the unit wrecker bringing up the rear. On this particular trip, my truck towed Radar Maintenance's S-280 maintenance shelter and my shotgun was fellow radar maintenance member and good friend, SSgt Bob Booth.

During the convoy back to Cannon AFB (Clovis, NM), we were, naturally, anxious to get back home to our wives/girlfriends (neighbor's wives, whatever) but Barstow-to-Cannon was a three day trip so we had a lot of driving to do. The national speed limit at that time was 55 mph but it didn't really matter since most loaded 6-bys could barely do 50. Nonetheless, the rule was: Pedal to the metal and if you break down, pull over and the wrecker will get you. Meanwhile, the rest of the convoy will continue to that night's motel stop. (In other words, "Your breakdown isn't gonna slow us down!" Anyway, our first night's stop was to be in Needles, AZ but our truck blew an exhaust gasket about two hours west of the motel. Our truck still ran but it was loud and spewed a lot of smoke from the right front wheel well. So we pulled to the side and waited for the wrecker. It was pretty depressing watching the rest of our convoy disappear over the hill on their way to their cold beer, hot meal and clean sheets in Needles. Well, the wrecker put us on the tow bar and since the wrecker had only two seats, Bob and I rode the rest of the way in our 6-by.

Now, as anyone familiar with Needles, AZ will tell you, the area that we were in is quite hilly and the wrecker, which normally struggled to do 50 on a descending road with a strong tailwind, was lucky to crest the tops of the hills doing 20 with our dead truck in tow. (But it was quite impressive because it was already dark and that wrecker was shooting a 3ft flame out of its stack pulling such a heavy load!) So, after a few of these, I decided to try something that the railroads did in mountainous areas: doubleheading. On the next hill, as we started slowing down, I started our engine, fed in some accelerator and slowly eased the clutch out. Once we were engaged, I floored it and the two trucks sped up so fast that the

wrecker crew later told us that they thought that the tow bar broke! We topped that hill doing at least 50 with both trucks shooting flames (ours coming from the right wheel well) and enough smoke and noise that the locals probably thought that Southern Pacific had pulled some of its big steamers out of museums. Thankfully, the road leveled out somewhat after the first couple of hills of "doubleheading" so we disengaged and shut the engine down for the rest of the trip into Needles.

On another convoy (in a different truck) I had an experience that wasn't quite as much fun as our "doubleheading". The 81st was returning home from a two week deployment to Nellis AFB for Red Flag '80 and we had stopped at some mountaintop about 20 miles from Vegas to pick up our Ground Radio and Radio Relay guys and their equipment. Scope Dope and good friend SSgt Don Depaula was driving and I was his shotgun. We had an S-280 shelter full of Ops junk in the bed and an A1B fuel trailer full of diesel on the pintle hook. After collecting our guys from the mountaintop, we started back down with the plan that the convoy would pull over at the bottom to let our brakes cool down (it was a long, curvy and steep descent).

As we neared the bottom, true to plan, the convoy slowed as the trucks started pulling into a large clearing on the right side of the road. However, our truck had different plans - We had NO BRAKES!!! To keep from rear-ending the slowing truck in front of us, Don swung around to the left (thank God there was no opposing traffic!) and we blew past all of our turning M-35s with our horn blaring. As we passed the turnoff, I could see Captain Lord (Director of Ops) screaming at us to turn in as we went flying by (doing, probably, 60-plus and towing 400 gallons of diesel fuel!!!) After a few more miles, and some scary turns, the road leveled off and we were able to drift to a stop.

Don and I were shaking as we got out of the truck just in time for Captain Lord's jeep to come sliding up to us. He was yelling profanity before he even came to a stop. (He was a hothead and assumed that we were just screwing around!) Naturally, he refused to believe our story until the vehicle maintenance guy climbed out from under our truck with a ruptured brake line. Two months later, at Commander's Call, Sgt Depaula and I received the 602nd's

(our parent Group at Bergstrom AFB in Austin, TX) Safety Award for 1980. Predictably, Captain Lord, preferring to believe that we were, somehow, at fault, refused to shake our hands in congratulations.

Now, as Paul Harvey says, here's the rest of the story: M35s had air brakes with an emergency backup braking system. That backup kicked in when it sensed a loss of air pressure in the primary braking system and applied the brakes using the air from a storage reservoir. (Remember the buzzer that used to sound when you first started up an M35? That was the air brake reservoir's low pressure warning that would buzz until it was charged by the engine's air brake pump. It usually took less than two minutes to charge it up but you couldn't drive until then.) Anyway, the key here is that the emergency brakes were activated when they sensed a loss of air pressure in the primary brake system. However, the Achilles Heel of the M35 brake system was a 1 foot long tube that went from the hydraulic master cylinder at the brake pedal to an air valve that controlled the air brake system. Therefore, when that tube ruptured, we lost the ability to apply the brakes but since the air system was still intact, the emergencies didn't kick in. The tube was replaced easily but they had to tow our M35 back to Cannon anyway because the clutch was irreparable. It, along with our underwear, was scattered all over that mountain road!

As I recall, Don and I drank heavily that night!

MSgt Harvey Hartman
81st TAC Control Flight, 1977-81