

Communication Workers Union – Humanitarian Aid (CWUHA) Convoy

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The day had finally arrived when the CWUHA convoy was due to set off on a journey to Bulgaria to deliver aid to children's hospitals and orphanages. Although this was the day we had all been planning and waiting for, it was the end of months of preparation and fundraising which had enabled us to fill the nine aid vehicles.



Myself and my co-driver Peter Watson (Managing Partner at Simpson Millar LLP) started the day early by arriving at Simpson Millar's office in Leeds to load the remaining items of aid onto the wagon. After placing Millar the Meerkat (our mascot) proudly on the dashboard we were ready for the off, but not before Peter said a few words about the Charity and the convoy on BBC Leeds radio breakfast show.

It was a wet and miserable day as we left Leeds City Centre, we joked around that weather could only get better. We met some of the other drivers at Ferrybridge Service Station before the main rendezvous at Hull ferry port.

The Convoy comprised of twenty drivers from across England, Ireland, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. The nine aid vehicles had been loaned by Royal Mail Group Limited, British Telecommunications, Eircom and An Post. These companies had also provided fuel cards, green card cover and leave for the drivers. The aid vehicles were joined by the food wagon known as the 'Chuck Wagon'.

As we arrived at the port myself and Peter although looking forward to the journey also felt anxious and apprehensive. However, the warm, friendly and enthusiastic faces that met us appeased our worries. There were some experienced convoy goers and then there were those like Peter and I that had never been on a convoy before, and were referred to as 'convoy virgins'.

Shortly after arriving at the port the first convoy idiot medal was earned as the vehicle driven by Carl Webb and Ted Stead nearly ended in Rotterdam after they tried to get on the wrong ferry. Altogether and on the correct ferry we began our journey to Zeebrugge, Belgium. It was a choppy overnight crossing due to high winds, but thankfully the weather improved slightly as we arrived at Zeebrugge. Although it was still raining, it was now drizzle, not torrential rain which we hoped we had left in Hull.

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After a brief rendezvous just outside the ferry terminal we were off and heading east through Belgium. I was extremely nervous as this was my first experience of driving in Europe let alone in a wagon!!!

The roads through Belgium were of a good quality and after stopping for lunch where we were served some lovely Essex pie from the Chuck Wagon we crossed into Germany.

Up until this point things were going well. However, it was in Germany that the convoy experienced the first of many encounters with the police. The culprit on this occasion was the Bob the Builder mascot on the dashboard in the Convoy Leader's wagon. As the police informed the leaders that Bob was too big and therefore contravened the law, clever negotiations resulted in us being able to continue on our journey once Bob was removed from the dashboard. Luckily for us Millar the meerkat who had snuggled into some smaller teddies on our dashboard and the mascots on the other vehicles were allowed to stay.

Up until now the roads had been of a good standard but we knew it was only a matter of time until this changed. Prior to setting off on the convoy we had been told that the further east we got the worse the roads would get. With the honeymoon period nearly over we prepared ourselves for dust tracks, potholes and the kamikaze drivers who we had been told would not stop for anything to pass (this included oncoming artic lorries).

As we passed Vienna we finally experienced warm sunshine and which resulted in songs such as "here comes the sun" by the Beatles being played over the CB radios.

We continued driving crossing to Hungary and finally stopped just outside Budapest after almost twelve hours of driving. It was at this point the second convoy idiot medal was awarded as the chuck wagon driven by Alex Pearson and John Hunt pulled into muddy field instead of the hotel car park resulting in the wagon becoming stuck. After a number of attempts to release the wagon a tractor was called to the rescue.

The following day as we set off towards the Romanian boarder, we all tried to prepare ourselves for the inevitable deterioration of the roads. To our surprise for the first hour we drove along some of the best motorways of the journey, with brand new tarmac and very little traffic. However, this was just lulling us into a false sense of security as a short distance before the Hungarian/Romanian border the motorway came to an abrupt end. As we came off a slip road we were faced with a single lane road with deep ruts. Every ditch, rut, and stone that the wagons and drivers encountered was felt, resulting in the speed of the convoy slowing and a crawl to the border.

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At the border all wagons were weighed, and to the relief of all, we were underweight. We were then asked to show our passports for the first time since we had boarded the ferry in Hull. On leaving passport control we were surrounded by women and children trying to sell us items and asking us for the teddies on our dashboard. After some strategic moves we managed to escape and continued the long and tiring drive through Romania. Single lane traffic and crazy kamikaze drivers who overtook the convoy weaving in seconds before having a head on collision made the drive extremely scary. Heavy traffic and queues meant that we were extremely delayed and hope could finally be seen as we headed away from the towns and towards the Romanian countryside.

In spite of many nail biting moments the journey through Romania was immensely enjoyable. The country was so different to home; it was as if we had stepped back in time. As the journey continued it became very apparent that Romania was significantly poorer than its neighbour Hungary. Farmers with horse drawn carts stacked high with hay navigated the road as fruit growers displayed their produce including local hooch at the roadside. The villages comprised of dirt paths rather than roads, with stereotypical elderly women wearing headscarves sat on doorsteps watching the world go by. Humoured banter on the CBs kept spirits high and as we passed through small villages the CBs became a warning device about possible dangers ahead. Common warnings included “women walking cow in road”, “horse drawn carriage in road” and “road works ahead”. There were then the slightly unusual almost unbelievable warnings like “boy in road doing cartwheel” which caused a ripple of nervous laughs through the convoy.

After the long and tiring drive the early morning starts and long days, sprits lifted as we aimed to reach the Bulgarian Border the following day. Unfortunately things did not go to plan and we had to spend the night approximately two hours away from the boarder which meant another very early start to allow us to reach the boarder for approximately 8.00am. Although well thought out our plan of making distance before rush hour did not materialise due to EU funded extensive upgrading of the roads. This meant that long sections of road were narrowed down to one lane while workers upgraded the other side of the road. Temporary traffic lights and flag men were everywhere, and if stopped to allow oncoming traffic to pass you were often stationary for significant periods of time. The substantial delays meant travelling in a convoy became increasingly difficult.

The roads through Romania were amazing, one minute you would be driving on a newly tarmac road and the next you were on a dirt path with potholes the size of a small country. Thankfully everyone kept their sense of humour

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despite the conditions and the lunatic drivers who continued to overtake on blind bends with seemingly no concern at all about the oncoming traffic.

After long delays we reached a large lake on the border between Romania and Serbia. The road wound round the lake and we continued south towards the Bulgarian border. When it finally looked like we were making good progress the convoy experienced slight navigational problems resulting in half the convoy taking a “slightly” longer route to the border. Peter and I were in this mini convoy with the other half continued on the planned route and arrived in Bulgaria approximately two hours before us. However, this detour (oh sorry alternative route) enabled us to experience some of the most beautiful scenery we had seen in Romania as we travelled through the countryside.

When we arrived at the Romanian/Bulgarian border we were faced by hoards of grown men banging on the windows of our wagons demanding teddies from our dashboard. Their requests were ignored which resulted in them trying to remove the teddies we had all cable tied to the outsides of the wagons. Thankfully we were soon ushered through to the ferry boarding area and away from these men.

The river ferry crossing was interesting only a short crossing from the Romanian bank to the Bulgarian bank and about 300 metres downstream. Getting on and off the ferry was a bit hairy but thankfully we all made it. We then proceeded through Bulgarian customs to meet with the other half of the convoy in a lorry park a short distance away. We stopped for some lunch and waited for our guides who were from the two charities we were working with in Bulgaria, One Life Bulgaria and Laura’s Foundation.

The journey to Sofia took about five hours which seemed like the longest five hours of the trip as we were keen to reach our destination after six long days of driving. Once we arrived in Sofia our vehicles were left in a secure compound on the edge of the town before we were transported to our hotel in minibuses loaned by the Bulgarian Government. At the hotel we talked about the trip so far and gathered our thoughts trying to prepare for the next day’s visits to the orphanages and children’s hospitals.

Finally the day we had travelled for had arrived. We left the hotel at 9.30a.m and were transported to our vehicles. On arrival at the compound we were met by a Bulgarian channel 1 TV crew who wanted to talk to us about the convoy. A few of the drivers were interviewed and the story was broadcast on the national news not just in Bulgaria but also surrounding counties such as Bosnia and Serbia. The publicity could only be good in terms of raising local public awareness and the problems that exist and what needs to be done.

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We then split up in our groups to visit the various orphanages and hospitals. Myself and Peter were due to visit the Orphanage and Baby Hospital in Pleven. We were to be joined by Tony Grogan, Cyril OHare, Bob Miller and Steve Park.

Our Escort to Pleven was Carl Smith and Slavin from One Life Bulgaria and the trip took us through some of the most beautiful mountain scenery I had ever seen. As we were nearing Pleven we received a message that the Bulgarian army were on site at the hospital to help us unload our vehicles. This was a big plus as we were all concerned that we would not have much time to spend with the children and staff if we were to unload our wagons which were crammed full with aid.

On arrival at the hospital the army boys immediately took over unloading the wagons which meant we were able to go straight into the hospital and meet the staff and children. As we walked through the entrance into the foyer there was a welcome reception, with staff and children thanking us for the aid we had delivered. We started to hand out teddies to the children. I was immediately overwhelmed and burst into tears as the children ran towards us reaching for the teddies. The children appeared so happy, hugging us and presenting us with gifts.

The Director of the centre then gave a speech welcoming us and explaining about the work carried out at the hospital. The Director explained that the children were split into four groups. Firstly there were those children that were severely physically or mentally disabled, many of which had poor life expectancy. The second group of children were premature babies. These babies were cared for at the hospital until they reached a weight of 3kgs when they would return home to their parents. The third category of children, were those children described as 'normal' and were waiting to be adopted. The final group was made of children with minor disabilities, who were growing up and like any other young child inquisitive, friendly and demanding of attention.

We were then taken around the hospital. As we went into the wards we gave the children a cuddly toy each. It was lovely to see that the children were lying in cots purchased in country by the CWUHA. This was wonderful as the photographic images we were shown prior to convoy were of children in box type beds, with solid sides where they were unable to see and interact with the children around them. Despite this development, the first few wards were probably the most upsetting. These were wards full of children who were severely disabled, many of which appeared to be young babies when they were in fact a few years old. One boy looked no more than two as he crawled around his cot and it was heartbreaking when we were told he was actually eleven.

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There was very little interaction from the children in these wards. As we gave them each a toy very few responded or even acknowledged our presence. Another very noticeable concern was the lack of noise. There must have been over fifty children in this ward separated into rooms of approximately ten children, yet there was no real noise, no laughing, talking or even crying. This silence was quite disturbing.

As we walked around the hospital it became apparent that the equipment used on a daily basis was minimal and very dated. The babies bottles were one item that really stood out, as they were glass brown bottles with a teat pushed over the top with an elastic band holding the teat in place. Shocking really that something as simple as a plastic baby's bottle was readily available.

We then proceeded to the wards which housed the children who were awaiting adoption. As we entered the ward I was again surprised at the lack of noise. As we walked around giving the children teddies and talking to them only a few stood up in the cots keen to be cuddled or responding to our gifts. The wards were very, bland, furnished to a basic standard with large white walls, providing the children with little stimulation.

We then proceeded to the wards where the older children were playing and at last it was nice to hear the noise of children laughing. As we opened the door the children came running out eager to be picked up. Although they were all in a playroom with a few toys, we were made aware that this was perhaps staged as Carl from One Life Bulgaria who visited the hospital regularly explained that he had never before seen the children out of their bedrooms. We all hoped that the toys and games we had bought would help lead to change and more interaction between the children. The children chatted to us in Bulgarian about whatever was exciting them. One little man took a shine to Peter, asking him to take him to the window so that he could look at the lorries, and one little girl was obsessed with my long hair and kept playing with it twirling it around her fingers. The children referred to us in Bulgarian as Uncles and Aunties and we were told that these were terms of endearment for visitors who came and showed them kindness.

The final ward we visited was the premature baby ward. When I had arrived at the hospital I thought all the children were orphans and therefore I was pleased to see it was also a hospital helping babies to return to their parents. It was clear that extensive care was carried out in this ward but we were told that they simply needed more equipment. We were then shown the incubators that had been purchased by Cyril and Tony, which had already been installed and were being used. The staff were so thankful for these and showed there appreciation for the additional medical equipment and supplies that had been secured and were being unloaded from the wagons.

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The older children were a joy and were so excited to see us. They kept hugging and kissing us before grasping hold of a teddy and taking it over to a table putting it down. It was overwhelming how much joy one small teddy could bring to a child and consequently the reality as to how little they had. I kept thinking how happy these children were when we gave them these teddies and how excited they would be when they received the toys that were being unloaded from our wagons. We also had urgently needed medical supplies which would greatly benefit the hospital. Throughout the visit we experienced a rollercoaster of emotions, one minute we would be laughing and the next minute crying. I tried to avoid the children in my moments of upset as I they were happy to see us and I did not want cause them any upset.

We left Pleven at approximately 5.00 p.m. and started our 3 hour journey back to Sofia. Both Peter and I spent the journey talking and exchanging views about the visit. We both agreed that there were aspects that filled us with despair but other parts that made us feel that there was hope for the children and that we had by delivering the aid made a difference to their lives.

We arrived back at the hotel at approximately 9.30 p.m. where we met with the other groups of convoy drivers and exchanged stories about our different experiences and different places we had visited. There was a real feeling of comradeship between us all after all we had been through to get here and then our experiences at the institutions that day. Our mission had been accomplished but now we had to go home.

On the Saturday after the visit to the hospital we had a free day before attending a meal at a Bulgarian cultural restaurant which had been arranged by One Life Bulgaria and Laura's Foundation. All the key people we had met so far were there. Carl Smith from One Life Bulgaria gave a speech in which he said he was amazed that we had managed to secure everything on the list for the orphanages and that these had been delivered safely. This was definitely a reflection of the great work that everyone back in the UK and Ireland had done over the past few months to help the crews prepare with their fund raising efforts. In Simpson Millar alone we did numerous events such as a charity auction, a raffle as well as dress down days to secure the funds to allow us to buy the aid as well as having donations from companies, the staff and friends of Simpson Millar.

On Sunday the last day before beginning our long journey home we had a reception at the British Ambassador's residence. The Ambassador was very welcoming and the residence was most impressive. The Ambassador gave a short but very sincere and touching speech about the work of the CWUHA and the impact of the aid convoy. We then returned to our hotel to prepare

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for the journey home. Unfortunately Alex Pearson and John Hunt would not be returning with us as the chuck wagon had broken down and they had to wait for parts to arrive to enable the vehicle to be repaired.

The following day we were up early and said our goodbyes to the Bulgarian charities we had worked with during our trip and to Alex and John and returned to the secure compound to collect our wagons. We eventually got on the road after a short delay as one of the vehicles had a flat battery. The convoy leaders had planned a different route back to Romania which would hopefully avoid the difficult roads and the ferry crossing. As we headed for the border town of Ruse it felt a bit strange to be heading in the wrong direction East instead of West, but it was hope that this new route would give us a nice new motorway across most of Romania to avoid the problems we had faced on the outward journey.

We reached the border late afternoon and after paying the vehicle road tax to cross we waved goodbye to our escorts and drove across the bridge to Romania. We were relieved that on the other side the roads were an improvement on the outward journey albeit still pretty ropey by UK standards. We planned to hit the Bucharest ring road, travel round to the North East where we would pick up the new motorway where we would find a motel for the night.

Unfortunately we had been stuck in a 7 km long traffic jam for a while and it was getting dark so it was decided that we would find somewhere to stay. This was possibly the worst decision we had made on the trip as the hotel we found which on the outside looked fairly nice was by far the worst we had stayed in. Firstly as we began to park we had to deal with an aggressive man who was shouting at us asking us to leave. We believe he thought that we were going to park in the car park and sleep in the back of the wagons. Eventually when we explained that there were eighteen people who were eager to have some food and a bed for the night he seemed more inviting.

When we entered our rooms it became apparent that that the rear of the wagons may have been a better option. Shortly after walking into the communal toilet Carl Webb immediately ran out and was sick in his wash basin. Most of us took our sleeping bags in the room to avoid touching the disgusting blankets. The rooms were disgusting and we all joked about itching and feeling dirty. The shower too was filthy and there were dead bugs and other nasty things lying on the shower screen. When I went to turn on the tap I immediately felt sick, as it was covered in slime and dirt. It was at this point I decided that I would wash with wet wipes as I could not even force myself to stand in that bathroom any longer than was necessary. As I tried to sleep in the disgusting room a stray dog found its way into the corridor and ran up and down barking like it was possessed before someone sent it out. The most

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annoying thing about this hotel was not just how disgusting it was, but that it was one of the most expensive places we had stayed in.

The following morning everyone was in their wagons and engines running by the allotted meeting time of 7.30 a.m. It must have been the most prompt departure of the trip and everyone was glad to see the back of the place. Bugs and itches aside we continued with our journey. We wanted to make good progress in the hope of reaching the nice hotel in Hungary we had stayed in on the way, after the lack of sleep the night before.

For the first hour we made really good progress until the only motorway in Romania came to an abrupt end. From then on it was painfully slow and we were travelling at speeds of around 35 mph at best along long stretches of road under repair which only hindered our progress. Then came our final encounter with the police as three wagons towards the rear of the convoy were stopped for supposedly going through a red light. This was incorrect and we believe that the police spotted the foreign plates and thought this was an opportunity to secure a bribe. This time the police demanded the drivers' licences and on inspecting them refused to give them back. The police said if they paid the equivalent of £120.00 per vehicle then they would be returned. Carl who was more than upset about the prospect of parting with money threatened the police with the British Embassy and told them that they could keep the licences and we would report their illegal confiscation when we returned home. To our surprise the bluff worked and they handed back the licences without asking for any payment.

By now the hopes of making Hungary were fading and they sank further when we hit the worst traffic jam of the whole trip. We thought it was just road works but actually it was just a queue to get through a small town. Eventually at 8.00 p.m. we pulled into the same motel close to the Hungarian border that we had stayed in on our way out. At this point we found out that Alex and John were still in Sofia. The part they needed for their vehicle had arrived that morning but was faulty so they would be stuck in Sofia for another 24 hours, whilst a new part was ordered.

The next day the hope of shorter driving days were dashed as we had to queue fifteen minutes just to leave the hotel. We then spent the next three hours crawling a few yards before standing stationary in queues of traffic. Eventually we got to the source of the tailback which was a two hundred metre stretch of roadworks.

After finally passing the roadworks we ploughed on towards the border until we encountered a long line of stationary lorries with engines switched off. We could easily have been in this queue for a day or more and we therefore decided just to overtake all the stopped vehicles and ask the police to let us

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through as humanitarian aid. There was just one problem the road was only one lane each way but we had no choice but to go down the wrong way and hope to find a gap to pull in to when someone came in the opposite direction. We set off one at a time in one minute intervals as soon as we could see a gap in the oncoming traffic. As we set off, Peter in the driving seat we managed to pass about thirty lorries before we saw an artic lorry coming towards us. With my knuckles turning white as I gripped onto the dashboard Peter managed to find a gap and we waited until the coast was clear before proceeding. It was like a rollercoaster ride although much scarier!!! Thankfully the humanitarian aid card worked with the police and after our wagon passed he stopped the oncoming traffic so the rest of the convoy could get through.

At the border in shock due to our near death experiences, our vehicles were searched by customs in both Romania and Hungary. We knew that the roads ahead were going to improve and after half an hour the worst of the roads were well and truly behind us. We stayed overnight just outside Budapest at the hotel we had stayed in on the outward journey and thankfully had a much earned good night sleep. At last the end seemed in sight as we believed we would make the ferry on Saturday.

The following day we continued through Hungary into Austria. After a brief stop at the Austrian border we carried on and drove right across Austria in the afternoon. Some of the mountains in the South already had snow on them and the scenery was very beautiful much greener and lush than Hungary. After 5.00 p.m. we crossed into Germany and carried on until around 8.00 p.m. We had covered about half the distance we had to cover if we were to make it to Bruges by the following evening as planned.

The following day we were up at 6.30 for a 7.00 a.m. start. That morning we had to de-ice the wagons and we had certainly experienced the extremes of temperature. For the first couple of hours we drove along deserted motorways through beautiful scenery, rolling hills, deep valleys and picturesque little villages that lined the route. As we pushed forward further west the landscape became flatter and more industrialised particularly as we reached Cologne. By Mid afternoon we had crossed into Belgium and reached the Brussels ring road just in time for rush hour. This would have not been an enjoyable experience at any time but at rush hour on Friday night the experience was positively frightening. The words 'spaghetti junction' came to mind as there were so many lanes of traffic and crossings of lanes in such a small area. We eventually made it through and miraculously all still together we arrived in Bruges. Everyone was tired but the long day had been worthwhile as we could have a good sleep and some free time in Bruges before we made our way back to the ferry the following afternoon. That night

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we made our way to a restaurant across the road for our penultimate meal. Everyone was able to relax and talk about the trip.

The next day we spent the morning in Bruges before making our way to the ferry port. Following the convoy leaders we again took a wrong turning and ended up at the entrance to the ferry port to Scotland. After finding the correct entrance we began our long wait to board the ferry. As the vehicles started to board the ferry I began to feel very nervous as I saw a number of vehicles reversing and the dreadful news then came that I and some of the other wagons had to reverse onto the ferry. At this point I was a nervous wreck I was shaking and did the biggest snake ride onto the ferry before reversing right down the ferry this was great fun – not!

Finally, the last night on the ferry everyone was tired but looking forward to returning home having made the ferry we were able to relax a bit knowing the trip was almost complete. With the pressure off most of us just felt tired and ready for an early night.

Disembarkation went smoothly and without any passport or custom checks and we were soon on the dual carriageway out of Hull. We congregated on the outskirts for one last time to take photographs and goodbyes.

The trip may have come to an end but the memories will last for ever. Each person with there own unique story and perceptions of this truly life changing experience. It was without doubt both a physically and emotionally demanding journey in which we experienced real highs together with heartfelt lows. We can all be proud that we have made a difference to the lives of the children we visited. Although one thing is for sure, there is still more to be done and without your support the CWUHA will be unable to continue their crucial work.

Ricki James

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