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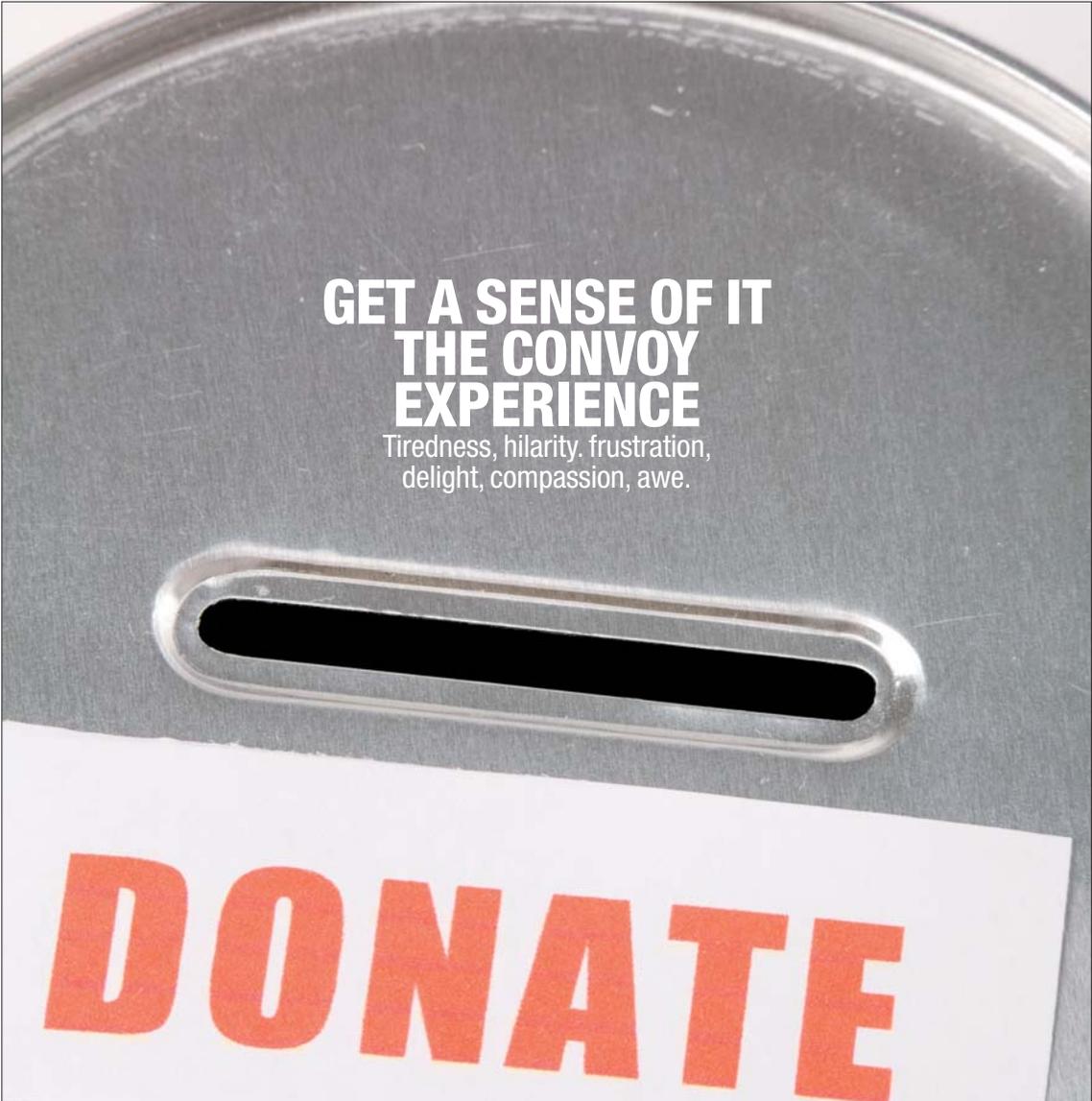
Join Jacqui Stewart on an emotional rollercoaster of a journey to Transnistria which took place September 2007

**MAY 2008**  
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**CWUHA**

# CONVOYREPORT

THE MAGAZINE OF THE COMMUNICATION WORKERS UNION HUMANITARIAN AID



## GET A SENSE OF IT THE CONVOY EXPERIENCE

Tiredness, hilarity, frustration,  
delight, compassion, awe.

**DONATE**

# WELCOME

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General Secretary Billy Hayes  
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Welcome the May 2008 edition of the CWUHA Convoy Report, and we hope you like the new look magazine and enjoy the fantastic reports within.

This issue we feature two interesting and thought provoking convoy reports from trips taken during May and September last year. First Eric Parker reports on his unforgettable convoy experience to Lithuania, certainly one journey he intends to make again with CWUHA.

We also hear from Jacqui Stewart on her

heart wrenching journey to Transdnistria where she often found herself emotionally drained from the hardship she saw over there.

Please visit the website, address shown opposite, and take a look at other convoy reports, see how you can get involved, make a donation or read up on the latest convoy updates from Tanzania and all the other CWUHA charity news.

Also, a big thank you must be said to everyone involved in CWUHA and those who have contributed

to the charity's success. Good luck to those on or about to embark on their own fundraiser or convoy trip and we hope you will write us a story about it for the Convoy Report.



## CWUHA all about us...

Since the organisation was founded in 1995, CWUHA has been delivering a smile to needy children across the globe



**CARL WEBB**  
NATIONAL SECRETARY

Communication Workers Union Humanitarian Aid is a response to the plight of vulnerable children in other countries and the UK from trade unionists, families and friends, who work in Britain's postal and telecom industries.

CWUHA was set up in 1995 in response to an appeal from trade unionists living in War torn Bosnia, in particular the town of Tuzla. The first convoy arrived in Tuzla in

July 1995. The determination to deliver the aid direct to those who needed it most, cutting out the risk of it falling into the hands of self-interest middlemen, set the agenda for every CWUHA convoy that was to follow.

What makes CWUHA unique from other aid organisations is our cardinal principle: our volunteers actually deliver the aid to the

places where it is needed most. This way, Donors can therefore be confident that their generosity will be translated in to aid at the point of need! We are also unique in that we pay no wages or honoraria. The CWUHA office is also run at virtually no cost because thanks to the CWU and BT we pay no rent, no phone/ email bills. All this keeps our office admin costs way below 5%.



# LITHUANIA CONVOY A GREAT SUCCESS

On Monday May 7th last year the CWUHA convoy drove overland to Lithuania, and convoy leader **Eric Parker** reports here on the trip that he will never forget

After having a good night's sleep in Dover we set sail to Calais through wind and rough seas, arriving in Calais at 12.30 with no problems at customs. We hit the road for the long haul across Europe to Vilnius.

Everything was fine until we reached Antwerp. I will never complain about the M25 again; several RTA's, crawling for over six miles, for over two hours, was certainly not our idea of fun. For entertainment purposes it was decided on Sunday night that anything that goes wrong will be known as a 'Coxey'. Little did he know how much stick he would get; bless him; if it rains it's his fault, lights go out it's his fault, tea's cold the poor bloke's on the punishment block. He enjoyed every moment.

Finally we get out of Antwerp and push on to Venlo on the Dutch - German border arriving at 19.00 but not before one of Jack's great

map reading exercises when he decided that we should turn off at junction 40, as long as long suspecting that he drives with both eyes firmly closed, the convoy leader asked if he is sure it's not junction 38? No comes the reply "defiantly junction 40, oh dear that's the hotel we need at junction 38." This led to a little ditto made just for Jack which cannot be repeated, but from that moment he was commonly known as 'one junction Jack'.

## BREAK FOR THE BORDER

Another good night's sleep was had by all and we set off at 08.00 for the long drive across Germany to the Polish border, which compared to Monday's drive was totally eventless even though the vehicles were restricted to 55mph. The fears of leading a convoy at such a low speed didn't result in the problems envisaged before the convoy started. We got to the Polish border which was jammed solid so we did the usual

thing and drove passed the lot and was through the border with ease. We found a hotel about 5 miles into Poland, and settled down to some lovely scream from the back of the mechanics vehicle. After winding down for a couple of hours it was time to hit the sack.

## KAMIKAZE CONVOY

I gave all the convoy an extra hour in bed because of the 452-mile drive through Germany. We set off at 09.00 across Poland and stopped at 19.30 in Olsztyn Poland. The whole journey today was totally eventless apart from the usual kamikaze drivers, which everyone knows are the local Polish drivers who it would appear have a death wish. We were tucked up in bed by 22.30.

Off we go on the last leg to Vilnius. After driving for about one hour Neil's map reading skills, or should I say lack of them, started to shine through, we ended up on a sight-seeing tour of northern

▲ The convoy meet up with the kids and staff in Vilnius, Lithuania

◀ Poland. What should have taken two hours to get to ELK took between three and four hours, but we all agreed the scenery was excellent. At that point you have to ask the question of Neil's professional driving skills (class one driver ha ha!), Driving on the roads wasn't the problem; he was absolutely clueless as to what a dipped headlight was.

Other comments spring to mind from day one when Neil asked the question as to what was the long blue line on the map is and are the red and green lines A and B roads, now you can understand how we got lost. As on previous convoys there is always a candidate for convoy idiot, and up to Thursday lunchtime Neil was running away with the title or should I say the world record.

### LOST IN TRANSLATION

We arrived on the border at 12.30 after travelling on the customary bad road surfaces through the border with relative ease, so after twenty minutes we stopped for lunch. By the time we had finished we finally made contact with Martynas from the charity SOS Valkai who informed us the time difference to home was now two hours making it 16.00hrs. We set off and arrived at the meeting point at 18.30.

Incidentally, through our contacts via email the meeting point was Rasmitas just outside Vilnius. I only found out at the last moment that Rasmitas in Lithuanian is a Texaco Garage and not a village as I originally thought. You can imagine asking for

Rasmitas believing this to be a town and not a service station- we could have been looking all night. We finally meet up with Martynas at 19.00 who escorted us to the main centre in Vilnius where we would unload the aid.

### A WARM WELCOME

What happened next was totally unexpected, as we parked up the vehicles and locked them up for the night the children came out to greet us. How heart warming with two young girls running up and jumping on myself and John Sones, giving us a great big hug and the handshakes from the older children made the whole trip worthwhile and I suspect there was hardly a dry eye among us.

As soon as we had said our hello's and had a quick cup of tea, it was off in the taxi to our hotel for a couple of well earned pints and a good night's sleep ready for unloading on Friday morning.

After recharging our bodies it was off to the centre to unload our aid and again the children gave us a massive welcome. After a quick chat with Martynas it was time to unload, everyone came out to give us a hand including all the children; big or small they all played their part.

When it came to unloading the bikes John the mechanic started straightening up the handle bars and fixing on the pedals.

By the time two of the lorries were unloaded the smaller kids were off on the bikes giving them a good tryout. It was excellent seeing all the kids with smiles on their faces enjoying



“IT WAS EXCELLENT SEEING ALL THE KIDS WITH SMILES ON THEIR FACES”

themselves, even the older boys and girls joined in the fun.

After unloading it was time for a well earned cup of tea which was supplied by the stall along with lunch.

### EVERYDAY PROBLEMS

We asked Martynas and his sister Beata of the problems within Vilnius and wider Lithuania. It would appear that the charity takes in children of all ages from the streets and from families where the children's health and well-being are at risk, giving them food and shelter on a permanent basis. Some of the children go home to grandparents from time to time, all the children go to school but the eldest boy who works on a building site and shares his money with the



charity and the other children. There are 14 children on this site who range from 8 years old to 18 years old who all have jobs to do within the centre that's way they can earn pocket money, it appears that the older children are very conscious of the needs of the younger members within the centre and the village which is about 50k away from Vilnius.

When asked about the problems faced with as a charity Martynes stated that the Government has changed since getting independence from Russia. The government officials (which his mother was one but now retired) has changed since those early years, now people see the government as corrupt even to the degree that they are prepared to take the land away from the charity so that

expensive properties can be built for corrupt government officials, or the site can be sold for a massive amount of money. It's even been suggested by government officials that the children of Valkai are mistreated and abused just to win over a small piece of land which is sanctuary to children who without it would most likely be dead.

The land is leased from the authorities for a five year period at the cost of nine million litres but there is a clause in the contract that states the land can be taken away from the charity at any time without compensation, hence the stories of abuse and mistreatment coming from local government. Fortunately if the ground was pulled from underneath the children there is still the village complex

◀ Far left: New beds were among the donations CWUHA made to make life better for the children

▲ Above left: A young girl enjoys her new bike delivered by the convoy trucks

▲ Above right: The volunteers start the unloading process between well earned cups of tea

▲ Below right: It's all smiles when the girls are handed their teddys

about 50k outside Vilnius for the children, the problem is the older children would much rather be nearer the city then stuck out in the country.

## AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

The centre is in need of some repair, it could certainly do with decorating, and furniture is also required. As for the future of the site this is in the hands of the local authorities.

It was clear to see that all the children are well looked after and there is clearly a family unit made up of all those involved in the charity, the children and the few staff on hand. I was also impressed with the honesty of the charity in that they offered to show us there accounts. Martynes also told us that some of the aid we delivered will be given to other ►

◀ charities within Lithuania and in some cases will be used to get medical supplies as needed.

### NEXT TIME AROUND

I have asked that if we came again next year would it be possible to see some of the other charities and would SOS Valkai become the go between for other charities should there be a need. They have welcomed this and I shall be contacting them in the near future as to collate all information required.

After we had lunch we played with the children. There was also a challenge from the older children to a game of football and like a bunch of idiots the game commenced. Talk about a heart attack waiting to happen! After five minutes we should have rigged up an oxygen tent, but carry on they did and the convoy came out winners. Later that afternoon we said our goodbyes and went back to the hotel for a meal and a good night's rest.

### VILLAGE PEOPLE

Martynas picked us up about 10.00 with four of the younger children to take us to the main village. The village is farm land which has been rented from the owner on a 90 year lease without the same problems of the previous centre in Vilnius, in fact as the owner is getting on in her years there is every chance the charity will be able to purchase the land. There are several buildings on the site from living quarters to a workshop and the main house all of which was supplied and built by the Germans to a very



high standard.

Again we meet some new children, from a year old baby to boys and girls of about fourteen years of age; again it is a credit to the charity that all the children looked well, were polite and a pleasure to be with.

When we got to the village we were met by the mother who is the founder member of the charity and it was always her dream to take in children

▲ One of the highlights of the visit for convoy and kids alike was the surprise trip to the fair

from the street and from families who couldn't cope, and some children who have been abused.

The children at every age were a joy to be with and although there was the obvious language barrier it really didn't seem to matter as the smile hug and handshake said it all.

There was also a mother and baby unit within the village and some old age



pensioners who the charity also looks after along with the children.

## A HUMBLING EXPERIENCE

The whole experience is one that none of us can forget, unlike other convoys this was very much hands on which made you appreciate the work carried out by each individual.

We unloaded some aid ►

# Background on Lithuania

Lithuania has suffered a turbulent history but its people hold their past in great esteem and visitors will find a beautiful county yet to be established on the tourist map. **Sarah Thorley** gives a snapshot of Lithuania's political past, poverty and poetic countryside



The Kingdom of Lithuania became established in the thirteenth century and was the largest state in Europe during the fifteenth century. Lithuanian folklore and legends intertwine with its recent political history from which it has only just fought through to become an independent country.

## The Baltic Way

Lithuania was controlled by Moscow but by the 1990's Lithuanian's were preparing to declare independence. In 1989 two million people from Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia held hands and created a 600km line on the Vilnius to Tallinn Road. This action drew the world's eye to this long suffering region of the world, and became known as the Baltic Way.

With the turn of the decade the country saw the return of its much loved national symbols; the

▲ SOS message for help in a country still finding its feet

flag and anthem, and democracy triumphed over communism.

In September 1991 Lithuania became a full member of the United Nations and the last Russian soldier left Lithuanian soil in August 1992.

## Tourism

In recent years the country has seen an increase in tourists, and no wonder with so much natural beauty around. Lithuania is a land of rolling hills, crystal lakes, two hundred year old oak forests and historical towns and villages.

French scientists sited a located 26km north of Vilnus as the official geographical centre of Europe.

Yet despite the country's new found freedom, poverty is a large scale problem across much of the country and the CWUHA convoy hopes to continue its efforts to make life a little easier for Lithuania's children.



◀ brought up from Vilnius which was gratefully received, the children couldn't wait for the bikes and toys to be unloaded; the delight on their faces said it all.

When we looked around the village the buildings were of a good standard but it was noticeable repairs are required and they are in desperate need for bedroom furniture.

Although we had taken some single beds more are required to bring the living quarters up to standard.

We also noticed that the laundry room only had one washing machine for all the children and families in the village which was about five years old so having spoken to Carl Webb it was agreed to purchase another washing machine and a separate tumble drier for them.

After having some more refreshments and some lovely home cooking we had to say goodbye to all in the village, promising to come back next day with the new washing machine and dryer.

### FREE FLOWING VODKA

We all meet up for the usual Saturday night meal with our new friends from SOS Valkai which turned out to be an a superb night had by all the food was cheap along with the drinks. During the meal we asked Martynas to order the drinks. What a mistake. We ended up having far too many vodkas and eventually got into the taxis back to our hotel to sleep of the excesses. Poor old John Sones; all that vodka took its toll and he kept Aide up all night. From that moment on he was to be known as 'the decorator.'

We awoke to a bright and breezy Sunday morning but Aide stayed in bed, Jack and Ron went around the town and the rest of us went shopping for the washing machine and dryer promised to the village. Poor John; it will probably be the last time he drinks vodka. He was walking around like a zombie!

We purchased the washing

▲ Perhaps a few too many vodkas were enjoyed on the Saturday night. Can you spot 'the decorator'?

machine and the mechanics went to the village to fit the machines in, the rest of us went back to the hotel and waited for the evening to come as we had made arrangements to take all the children from the centre in Vilnius to a fair that was in town. The mechanics successfully plumed in the washing machine and dryer for the village then returned back to the hotel about 16.00.

### FAIRGROUND ATTRACTION

Come the evening we all met up with the children at the fair for a good night's entertainment. We all put in about £20 each (£160 in total) so the kids could have a good time; the idea was to give the kids something to remember us by so Martynas suggested the fair. It turned out to be the best thing we could have done and for the couple of hours the money lasted it was a privilege to see kids of all ages enjoying themselves and I doubt if there was a dry eye

between us. It was an absolutely superb night.

At the end of the night we took all the kids to McDonalds. 14 kids' and 8 adults' food and drink came to a massive total of less than £40. Everyone enjoyed themselves in particular the kids' behaviour was exemplary, again it was a sad night saying goodnight to the children but we had one more surprise left for them which was to turn up on Tuesday morning to say goodbye to everyone. But first we went back to the hotel for a well earned night's sleep.

It was decided that Monday would be a rest day; everyone used this as a personal shopping day.

## A FOND FAREWELL

After a day of rest on Monday it was up early and out by 06.15 so we could catch the children in the Vilnius centre before they go to school. What a shock for the kids seeing us for a final farewell so early in the morning. Having spent some more time with our new friends and seen off the younger members on their way to school, we had a very poignant moment as four young kids went off to school in tears; we all had lumps in our throats.

We had to wait around for Beata to turn up as we thought this was because she required paperwork from the convoy. How wrong we were. She eventually turned up about 08.45 to say her own farewell to the convoy with a large glass plate which was made and decorated by her

husband as a gift to us all, which was totally unexpected.

We said our goodbyes to the rest of the kids and staff and set off on the long journey home about 09.15 with our own thoughts as to what we had left behind. One thing for sure is that every member of the convoy said they will be keeping in touch by emails or phone calls and hoping for the same crowd to go back next year.

Some of us have already said come what may, we shall be visiting them sometime in the future at our own expense; such is the impact these children have had on our lives.

## PERSONAL RECOMMENDATION

I certainly have no problem recommending to the next trustees meeting that further convoys are warranted. I shall personally be sending an email to Vilnius asking what their further requirements are, not forgetting the promise of future contacts with other charities within Lithuania.

From that moment on there really is nothing much to report other than we stayed just outside Dunkirk on the Friday night for a short run to Calais on Saturday morning.

There was one more task to complete, and that was the presentation of the customary award for the convoy idiot. Although there turned out to be many candidates for this position including myself, nobody could catch up with Neil for the mistakes he made on the first four days; well done Neil. ■



WE SET OFF ON THE LONG JOURNEY HOME WITH OUR OWN THOUGHTS AS TO WHAT WE HAD LEFT BEHIND



## ERIC THANKS...

■ I would like to take this opportunity to thank all the drivers: Ron Latham, Jack Chambers, Aide Williams, John Sones, Ray Saunders, John Crowther and Neil Cocks, without your support the convoy would have been a lot harder, you all made it easy for me, thanks to a great bunch of guys.

■ I would also like to thank Kings Cycles, Essex Beds, Wilkinsons, Deichmann Shoes Snow Clothing CWU Branches, Members, families and friends for all your support.

■ Asda Hatfield, TK Max Hatfield, Boots St. Albans, Hertfordshire Fire & rescue, Dagnall Street Baptist Church St Albans, NHCDC Royal Mail Hatfield, Donna Whybrow Royal Mail, Mike and Julia Plant, and my own branch Essex Amal.

■ Special thanks to Royal Mail for releasing the drivers and supplying the vehicles and the MT workshops for all their hard work in preparing the vehicles.

■ Finally my final thanks go out to all the children we have left behind, it's like having an extended family and I will never forget the smiles, the hugs, handshakes and sad faces the day we left. The children in Vilnius will always be in my thoughts bless them all.

■ Convoy Drivers:  
Eric Parker & Neil Cocks  
Ray Saunders & John Crowther  
John Sones & Adrian Williams  
Jack Chambers & Ron Latham

# A LONG AND EMOTIONAL JOURNEY

The convoy staff on this journey to Transdniestria in September 2007 found their trip to be long, difficult and emotionally draining, but they don't regret a second of it. BT worker **Jacqui Stewart** tells her convoy story here

**M**y name is Jacqui Stewart I work for BT and I am a local union representative.

Two years ago I embarked on a CWUHA convoy and at the end of it my last words were "Never again."

So here I am two years later and guess what? I'm here again, and this time I have roped in my sister Elaine who also works for BT.

Maybe it's like having a hangover- you say never again but weeks later you're in bed all day taking Resolve! Once I'd convinced Elaine it would be a good way to see in her 50th year we chose our CB handle "Sister Act" and the fundraising began. It was a long road even before we hit the Ukraine.

## FUND RAISING

We started fund raising a year ago with various events. We set out and submitted a business plan and aimed to raise a minimum of £2500. We did a barbeque, treasure hunt, New Year's party and quiz

► The faithful convoy drivers pose for a quick photograph whilst stretching their legs for a moment

nights, and of course went out begging local businesses and charities and our own union branch.

All this takes time and effort but you keep going because you know it is all for a worthwhile cause.

The year flew by and the pressure started to mount and then it's the drivers meeting before you know it. We raised over £3,500 to cover the ferry crossing and buy the aid we needed, and our union branch supported us for our subsistence. We looked around the room and saw some familiar faces and new ones, but we were all there for one reason. We got our briefing of convoy do's and don'ts, a list as long as your arm, and of course the much needed 'wish list' of required aid. Its now May and we take leave to go and try and get the aid. We approached the local newspaper and radio station. Our houses were by this point crammed to the rafters and we tried to keep a log of the items we accrued.

We were amazed at



“EXCITEMENT, APPREHENSION AND ANTICIPATION WERE COMING OVER ME IN WAVES”

people's generosity and all our family and friends were drafted in to help. It was all we could talk about and I can say that it does take over your lives. You eat, sleep and breath convoy.

## PREPARATION DAY

We are awaiting the wagon and we know we have to have it loaded and manifested at least a month before we go.

The charity has major problems with administration and red tape and the pressure is on and sleepless nights begin.



The call comes to pick up our wagon the following day. I'm apprehensive about driving it back. Why am I doing this? But I recall those children that need our help.

That weekend it was all hands on deck for the big loading. Each box has to be weighed labeled, numbered and manifested. Everything has to be secured in the wagon. We had to make sure we were not over 7.5 ton. This included our body weight (I need to cut down on the pie and chips). Relief as felt all round with the wagon loaded

and within weight (that diet must have worked). Now we have time to relax until departure.

### **DEPARTURE**

We arranged to rendezvous at Newcastle the night before the ferry. Good byes and farewells to family and friends ensued as I prepared to face the long three weeks ahead. Excitement, apprehension and anticipation were coming over me in waves.

At Newcastle we received news of the first problem.

Dame Edna's (Katy and Dorothy) wagon has broken down and needed a new starter motor. Nightmare!

Another restless night was spent worrying if the wagon will be fixed in time for the ferry crossing. Thank goodness the wagon was repaired by the fantastic postal mechanics at the NE Mail Centre and we were all very grateful for their help.

All set now for the docks, it was impressive to see all the Royal Mail and BT vehicles in line ready to board the ship. Fingers crossed for a smooth ▶

◀ crossing. It's a 19-hour sail and last time it was horrendous with virtually everyone suffering from seasickness. Luckily the sea is a mill pond and we are all able to get acquainted at the drivers' meeting going through the itinerary and the all important red book (Vital documents file).

Not knowing what time we were docking (in fact 9.30am) I set my alarm for the crack of dawn after telling sis that this is because you never know when you will be able to shower next.

### ARRIVAL AND JOURNEY BEGINS

As we docked in Holland and we had to squeeze into the tightly parked vehicle and nervously wait to disembark. Elaine had never driven on the right side of the road before (well not intentionally!)

The aim was to reach Berlin by nightfall. These plans are soon thwarted when, to make us feel at home, we hit the first of the traffic jams around Amsterdam and not a tulip in sight. However we manage to speak to a driver stuck alongside our wagon who also works for BT and said he was very proud of what we are doing. Behind schedule but well into Germany by nightfall we stop at Barsinghausen near Hannover. We dined on curry from the chuck wagon and got accommodation at the services.

### EARLY TO BED EARLY TO RISE

Breakfast at 6.30am and on the road for 7am after doing

our daily vehicle checks: tachograph, oil, water, tyres, lights, wipers and fuel. We had a great day of smooth tarmac roads and arrived in Poland by nightfall. This was where we started to see the contrasts as we entered Eastern Europe.

Accommodation was more threadbare and we got our first, but not last, taste of Schnitzel and chips.

We awoke in Konin and horror of horrors for us ladies, there is no water and we are unable to shower or wash hair. Breakfast consists of cold frankfurter.

The wagons roll and the first instruction via the hand held radios is to look out for a bread shop. Not that easy as we hadn't seen a shop for miles and after a three hour drive Alex is still looking for bread and we are hundreds of miles from a Warburton's toastie, half way across Poland, and lost in Lodz.

It's a busy city set in the past with dilapidated buildings and old trams weaving alongside us. The convoy got split up for a while but eventually we manage to regroup and decide to get accommodation as we were not too far from the Polish/Ukraine border. Torches in hand on a cold, damp, dark night, we had spaghetti bolognese from the chuck wagon.

All eager and ready to go we planned breakfast at 6.30am but it wasn't served until 7am. On the road and we only go 5km when we see all the stationary wagons queuing for the infamous border crossing. The 'Count' (Stuart) counts 374 wagons

“  
WE ARE  
HUNDREDS  
OF MILES  
FROM A  
WARBURTON'S  
TOASTIE,  
AND LOST IN  
LODZ”

and we are still at least 9 kms from the border.

Jim & Duncan our convoy leaders went on ahead clutching the relevant paperwork and manage to get us to the front of the queue. We pass the long queue and daren't look at those poor drivers who have been waiting for up to two days just to get to the front. Ray as a convoy virgin thought that we would sail through the border but it took six hours, a few stamps and weigh-ins we are out of Poland.

### BORDERS BARRIERS AND BUREAUCRACY

We now had the ultimate challenge ahead of us- to enter the Ukraine. Call me a cynic but from my past experience I was already getting bad vibes and my stomach sank when I saw the compound and the memories of my previous convoy came flooding back. But it's sunny and everyone is optimistic that our paperwork is in ok and that we wont be too long.

Mr & Mrs (Heather & Steve) put on a quick brew and are immediately fined for the privilege of using the gas canister. At that point the border guards had not noticed Alex and Ian producing the bacon and sausage butties

Hours pass and still no indication of any movement and we were still waiting information via our interpreters. More hours pass and we appear to be getting nowhere. The decision is made that we are definitely here for the night. Bizarrely the hotel is only a 100 yards walking distance from the



compound but it is over the border. We can walk freely to and fro but just can't get the wagons through. Boredom and frustrations started to set in and only our humour and banter kept us going.

Up early again and back to the wagons and the admin nightmare begins. Unless you have been in this situation it's hard to describe the ludicrously of what happens.

One of us had to stay with the vehicle so Elaine then armed with the Red book disappeared into the admin hut but soon returns smiling, as unfortunately it's my name first on the check-in sheet.

At 4.00pm I started the stamping process at window number one and looked forward to the twenty remaining windows and subsequent 36 stamps. Our wagons are checked and sealed and we get chance to take any personal belongings

from the back to put in the chuck wagon. Luckily at 8.00pm the shutters go down on the windows as it's the Border Guard shift change. This allowed us to eat but the process resumes at 9.00pm and I am back in the hut. By 11pm we think that we have been given full clearance and wagons roll. Stop, halt, we have missed a stamp. Near to tears Elaine is marched back clutching \$10 for our final stamp, then we are actually through the barrier and allowed to drive the 100 yards to the hotel car park.

Unfortunately some of our co drivers were still back doing their paperwork and it was almost 2am before everything was finalised.

Tired and still in disbelief we fell into bed knowing it was an early start once again in the Ukraine.

Driving there was like a roller coaster ride. What a

▲ **Above left:** The BT truck leads the convoy on to Moldova

▲ **Above right:** The truck starts the lengthy process of being unloaded

▲ **Below right:** Jacqui and her sister Elaine take a quick break

culture shock- no signs, no lines on the pot- holed roads. Horse and carts, small shanty type villages- each house seemed to have its own cow and chickens. Elderly women in headscarves sell fruit and veg by the roadside. Vast flat landscape as far as the eye can see. Tending the land with horse drawn ploughs.

The group started to get a bit apprehensive as we needed somewhere to stay and we were going down small dark roads and then past run down tenement blocks when we eventually pull in at a bizarre looking hotel. We were pleased to be away in the morning but not pleased to find that we are covered in insect bites.

## **SO NEAR YET SO FAR**

We thought that we were still about 40km from the Ukraine/Transnistria border but it was late and ►

◀ getting dark. In the morning we found that the border is only 15 minutes away and we are first in the queue at 8:30 and the border opens at 9:00. This should be easy.

Several hours later after numerous stamps again the wagons are sealed and the contents photographed.

### NO MAN'S LAND

Hallelujah- by mid afternoon we are out of the Ukraine and traveling along a never ending road lined with trees in no-man's-land leading to Transdnistria – we congregated at the border in a small compound and are quickly processed through with the help of our translators – not of course before we have our bacon butties from the chuck wagon and share our food with our old Transdnistrian friends.

By late afternoon the convoy was escorted to the outside of the main customs house but we then had to split up, and our wagon and the Balti Brother's wait patiently for the go ahead to unload that evening at the neurological hospital.

The customs officers were called at home on a Saturday to resume work and supervise the operation and the flashing blue lights of the only ambulance through red traffic lights then escort us to our destination.

### HIGHLIGHT

We were met at the hospital by Victor, the head of the unit, with his colleagues and our translator plus a multitude of patients. All eager to help we were joined by Irene, Miya and Natasha – who were all

amazed that women have undergone the trip and actually driven the wagon and they said they feel very proud of what we have achieved.

It started to get dark and so it was all hands on deck. The Balti Brothers got to unload first and they had the help of a line of male patients passing along the boxes of aid to the storeroom under the very close scrutiny of the Customs Officers who are meticulously checking the manifests. Thank goodness they are correct and all items are accounted for!

Then it's our turn and as it was completely dark now we grabbed our torches and pulled the seals off the wagon and lower the tailgate; excited patients scramble on board and are fascinated.

We unloaded all the computers first and delicate items and work our way through all the hundreds of boxes of clothes, shoes, games, stationary, bedpans the list is endless. We then got to the very heavy items- fridge freezers tumble dryers and large dining tables, with the help of the muscled 'Wee Stevie'. We were hot, sweaty and covered in dust but with the wagon emptied we felt a sense of total joy and satisfaction.

We were invited for a cup of tea and were taken through the hospital corridors to a small room. The door opened and there awaited a massive feast of fantastic food and beverages. The hospitality is quite overwhelming. Then followed lots of hugs and kisses and tears; they are so grateful for our help, it makes us feel very humble and all

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the frustrations of the Ukraine boarder pales into insignificance and melts away. It had all been worth it; we have so much and they have so little. We were on an absolute high.

### NEXT DAYS

Early next morning we went on our mini bus tour of all the establishments we have raised aid to help from this convoy and got to see where it will be distributed First on the agenda was a concert performed by the young boys at the neurological unit and the opportunity to join in the fun and games in the grounds and play area funded by the charity. Wee Stevie (aka Paul) and Dorothy eagerly entered the sack race and egg and spoon race, closely followed by Kevin feeling up Ray blindfolded trying to locate clothes pegs off Ray's body (definitely one for the web site!). All this happened whilst being filmed for the local TV station and interviews being conducted with the convoy leaders Jim and Duncan. It was amazing to see all the improvements from my last visit here and the massive impact the charity has made on the lives of all these mentally ill and disabled boys and men.

For me, the most upsetting time was to see the very young boys, some seriously ill and looking lost and lonely in their little pajamas, lean on the sofas in desperate need of love and attention; I found it very difficult to leave them.





This was followed by yet another hospitable luncheon, even greater than the previous evening; their generosity is second to none. Fed and watered we are then taken to visit a selection of families in their homes, we had seen the dilapidated tenement blocks from the mini bus but nothing can prepare you for what is inside, and the awful conditions these women and children have to live in. Whole families occupy either one or two small rooms with no private washing or toilet facilities. Cooking is done on one gas ring and lighting is by way of an oil lamp or candles. It feels damp, dark and desperate. People do not have any of the basic commodities that we can take for granted. There were lots of tears and reflection on the journey to our next venue.

We managed to visit the small offices and local Charity HQ and meet the staff to see how they are helping families and getting homes for the

rescued street children and we realise again how important the CWUHA is and how much our assistance is needed.

### **RECEPTION EVENING**

After a long and emotionally draining day we meet up for an evening with dignified guests and friends and enjoyed an excellent concert of singing and dancing from the children. Some of the brave convoy members try and join in the ballroom dancing without falling over.

We have been told that Transnistria rarely gets any foreign visitors so the next day we are escorted by the minister of affairs on a tour of the Military museums, academy and hospitals. The contrast of life at home and the difference in culture is very evident.

We got to see a new centre that houses young male street children and educates them to be repatriated with families and hopefully leads to a better life. That afternoon we were

▲ **Above left:** A lovely little girl enjoys an arm full of new toys

▲ **Above right:** Jacqui was particularly tearful over the very ill boys that see very little hope, love or attention

◀ **Opposite inset:** Football seems to transcend language barriers and provides some relief from the childrens' daily hardships

able to visit the Women's neurological center and see the ladies in much improved conditions since our last trip. They have nicely decorated rooms, more space and gardens to sit in. But there is still clearly a lot more work to be done. The ladies loved to see us and enjoyed having their photos taken and seeing themselves in the picture. Another emotional time for all.

Next stop was the Disabled Children's home and the chance to give out lots of toys and sweets and take a tour of all the new facilities.

There is no question that to undergo this journey you definitely have to be physically and mentally fit the long days of driving from 7am till dusk can be draining and it takes its toll. It was decided to take an additional day's rest and we had the opportunity to check out the sites of the capital, Tiraspol.

The first item to get was a map and we stumbled onto the main street and selected ►



one of the small handful of shops with not many wares. Antique glass counters and two elderly assistants sat close by. Nobody speaks or understands English and we certainly cannot speak Russian. Attempting to purchase a map and postcards in the absence of a till the lady adds up the total price on an old wooden abacus and then turns it around to indicate the price. After a shrug of the shoulders we rummage for a pen and paper for them to write down what we owe.

Next morning after dragging our 35kg plus cases down five flights of double stairs (none of the hotels have lifts and they always put us on the top floor) it's time to leave Tiraspol and after lots of sad goodbyes to our new and old friends we collect our wagons from the compound and depart with a police escort out of the city and face the journey home.

This was the journey in reverse and it was more difficult to keep our spirits up

as people just wanted to get home after the job was done. Tiredness sets in and brain cells malfunction, and I direct the convoy to turn right at the dead end T-junction! And also to keep right in the left-hand middle lane! My brain has definitely ceased to fully function.

The boarders where much easier to cross with an empty load so we fast tracked through. We tried to maintain the all important banter and jokes and the limericks came flowing through especially from Mick and Paul.

## EPILOGUE

Over 6000 kilometers, averaging 52km per hour, good roads, bad roads, and sometimes no roads. The main issues were having a good meal (not cheesy chicken), finding somewhere to sleep that was clean and had a decent toilet.

Back on UK soil we say our goodbyes and look at each other... would we do it again? Yes we would. ■

▲ A game with the parachute always gets the convoy crowd moving

COMMUNICATION WORKERS UNION  
HUMANITARIAN AID



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