

Ambulance 255 in the 2013 Inaugural Parade

By George King III

When Oscar Anthony Iasigi drove Ambulance 255 in the battle of Verdun, he would never have expected that in 2013 an ambulance bearing the same number would be in the Inaugural Parade for President Barak Obama. The Chief of Section Eight

in 1917 was Arthur Douglas Dodge of Simsbury, Connecticut who would never imagine that Ambulance 255 would be representing his home state in Washington DC some 96 years in the future.



Volunteer Ambulance Driver in France - Driver Oscar Anthony Iasigi of Brookline, Massachusetts was a recent MIT graduate with a degree in chemical engineering. He volunteered as a driver for the American Field Service and served for 10 months serving as Assistant Chief of SSU8 for the last six months of his service ... Photo credit: The William L and William K Foley Collection of the American

Ambulance 255 was in Washington DC on January 21, 2013, but this time, with driver George King III of North Franklin, Connecticut.

How Project Started - The building of Ambulance 255 was a long term project spanning five and a half years. The first three years were spent conducting research into the history of the American Field Service and the last two and a half years of construction. I became captivated by the story of how private Americans found a way to help the French before America decided to enter World War I. I was amazed that I had not heard of the hidden support before.

History - With the need for a light, reliable, simple and small vehicle able to manage damaged French roads and terrain, 1,200 Model T Fords were donated by Americans and driven by American Volunteers during the years 1914 to 1917. These volunteers signed up to drive for six months and paid their own way over to France, purchased their own uniforms, and then drove to the front lines where the Germans would lob shells at them. 77% of the drivers were college students or recent graduates. 127 drivers never came home.

This story of unparalleled volunteerism impressed me. The idea of these young men giving their time and risking their lives to come to the aid of France was compelling. The more I learned the more I felt that this story needed to be told. At some point during my research, I decided that the only way to tell this story was to build an ambulance.

This would be no ordinary project; it would have to be special. Since the ambulance would be the only one in the country, it had to be right.

My research culminated with a trip to France in 2009 to see the only original American Field Service (AFS) ambulance still in existence. While there, I was able to get a complete set of 116 sheets of drawings of the ambulance. These were painstakingly drawn by Model T owner Rémi Thevenin of Fontenay le Fleury (near Versailles) France. Every Tuesday, when the museum was closed, Rémi would sketch out 3 or 4 parts and bring the sketches home and draw them out in detail on his drafting table. This process took him three years.

Armed with drawings in millimetres and instructions in French, I embarked on creating the most accurate ambulance I could.



The ambulance as it looked in April 2010, after seven months of construction.

I knew that I wanted more than just a replica, so I went to great lengths to get original 1916 Model T parts. Donations of parts from different supporters were received - Don Lang, Travis Cook, and Four Seasons Model T Association member Ray Gravelin donated original parts while other members such as Ted Swol, Ron Miller, and Tom Leffingwell donated time and their expertise to the project.

One of the most important elements in achieving total accuracy was the selections of materials. Our three years of research uncovered many diaries, books, and letters home from drivers that detailed the building of the ambulance bodies in the carriage works of George Kellner and Sons outside of Paris. We knew that ash was used for framing, poplar was used for other applications and white oak was used for the stretcher tracks. However, the greatest part of the body was constructed of mahogany.

With pictures from the AFS archives in New York City, we were able to get experts in the field of dendrology to ascertain that that the wood used in the construction of these cars was African mahogany from the Ivory Coast.

With funding by Ford collector and author Carl Pate and American Ambulance Service, Inc. of Norwich, we were able to purchase \$4,000 of the correct wood and import it to Connecticut.



Carl Pate and George King perched on the frame of the 1916 Model T in front of the mahogany imported from Ivory Coast for the construction of the ambulance body.

Construction continued through 2010 and 2011. Every little part had to be manufactured mostly by hand to be accurate to the original design and drawings. Ted Swol agreed to undertake the blacksmith

work necessary for the project. He set up his forge in my back yard for three months to complete the task. As expected, each piece is a work of art.



Sparks fly as Ted and George form parts for the ambulance.
Photo by: Tom Leffingwell

With the skill of several craftsmen such as Ted, the ambulance took shape as it would have in 1916. Cabinet maker Matt Malley, furniture maker Doug Brown, marquetry artist Silas Kopf, sheet metal artisan Mark Day and many others contributed their talents to ensure that we reached our goal.

Dedication - By May 2012, Ambulance 255 was ready for its grand introduction to the public. On May 5, 2012, we dedicated the ambulance at ceremonies at American Ambulance Service headquarters in Norwich, Connecticut. One hundred supporters, donors and friends joined us in the celebration.



All of our guests, except grandson Evan Carney, enjoy a toast of fine French wine.

Shunning the tradition of breaking a bottle of champagne over the bow or perhaps radiator of the newly commissioned vehicle, we adjourned to the foyer of American Ambulance and raised a glass of fine French wine to mark the occasion.

Our Mission Begins – As mentioned previously, one goal in constructing the

ambulance was to tell the story of the American volunteers who gave so much in the Great War. But perhaps more importantly, we established a mission of using the ambulance in support of the recruiting efforts of public service volunteer organizations. It is our goal to encourage young people to volunteer in service to their communities and country.

We were immediately busy with this mission. Between May and the end of the year 2012, Ambulance 255 made appearances from Maine to Virginia to support volunteerism. On Memorial Day weekend and the following week, we made appearances in Lebanon and Plymouth, Connecticut, Washington DC, Arlington National Cemetery, and Waterville, Maine.

One of our objectives at Arlington was to pay our respects at the grave of an American volunteer from World War I. The individual was Corporal Frank W. Buckles who died on February 27, 2011. He was the last American veteran of the war. His assignment in the army was as an ambulance driver.



Paying respects at the grave site of Frank W. Buckles.

Public Awareness – While building the ambulance we had many discussions as how to best present it to the public and raise awareness of our project. At some point I came up with the idea of participating in the 2013 Presidential Inaugural Parade. Since I had marched in four of them while serving in the United States Coast Guard, I figured it was time to ride in one.

The process was simple but the competition was heavy. To be considered, I had to apply on line including photos, explanations, and other initial details to give the Inaugural Parade Committee an overview of what Ambulance 255 was all about. I was warned up front, that there would be over 2,000 applicants for a limited number of openings.

We had to submit the application in September, before the election. Since it was decided that we wanted to be in the parade regardless of who won, we completed all of the submissions before the first dead line and got confirmation that we were on file. This initiated another string of paper work. The election came and went and the Parade decision making committee was formed. The week before Christmas I received a call from Washington saying that we had been selected. I was surprised and elated. It was hard to believe that we were really going.

Then came the Secret Service background check, photo documentation, transportation arrangements, and myriad other details in duplicate and triplicate. I was very glad that I had experience in these parades going back to Richard M. Nixon's inaugural in 1969. I knew what level of bureaucracy to expect and I was not disappointed.

I had been talking with supporters of the ambulance project for some time about this parade. Carl Pate had offered to transport me and the ambulance to Washington for the inaugural as he had for the National Memorial Day Parade in May 2012. This was a very generous offer and a very special trailer. The fact that the ambulance measures over seven feet tall without the tire on the roof and without the tail light on the back, there are few trailers that can accommodate the car.

Knowing that oil stocks rose in value following the amount of fuel that we consumed driving to DC in May, I knew that I needed help in funding this second trip. I wrote to friends and supporters asking their help in raising \$1,200 for the trip. I received generous support and we came close enough to our goal to make the trip a reality.

My shop assistant Jeff Savalle and I spent a lot of time over two weeks detailing the ambulance. Little parts and pieces that we had ignored earlier now had to be tended to. On January 17, 2013, Carl drove over to our winter quarters at American Ambulance headquarters and we loaded the car in the trailer.

The Saturday trip to Washington was on a clear and moderate temperature day. It took about eight hours. We got a good night's sleep and left Virginia for our meetings, briefings, and inspections on Sunday. We arrived at the assembly area at 10:00 AM and unloaded. We met our parade contacts and tended to last minute details mainly of confirming our entry, parade location and times. I attached the Four Seasons banner to the back of the ambulance only to find out that I could not display it during the parade

as I had not included it in the description and the photos I had submitted in September. We could only remove items

and people from the approved plan and could add nothing.



Ambulance 255 in the assembly area on C Street the day before the parade

We attended our afternoon briefing which took one hour and we made last minute preparations for the inspections later that day. We would be inspected by the Department of Motor Vehicles, the fire marshal, and the Secret Service. These inspections would be at night without the drivers present.

I left the assembly area at 5:00 PM and walked one block to the Native American Museum where my wife, daughter, son in law, and grandchildren were finishing up a long day to exploring our nation's capitol. We walked down to the ambulance so they could see it in the assembly area. While I

was there, the DMV inspectors arrived and began looking at the Model T. One inspector was looking at the rear end and saw the spots where oil had dripped down from where I oiled the brake linkage. He informed me that I had a hydraulic fluid leak from my rear brake cylinder. This would disqualify me from participating in the parade since it could affect my braking capability. After a short lesson on the mechanics of a Model T (that there is no rear brake cylinder used on the car), he removed the violation from my inspection sheet. I was so glad that I happened to be there at the right time. That was a close one.



Three of my grandchildren in the ambulance the night before the parade.
Note the DMV inspector at the rear of the car.

As we were ready to leave, the fire marshal showed up. I told him that I had left all of the compartments open and I told him where I had put the fire extinguisher. We chatted about the ambulance and I pointed out the brass plate indicating that the Groton School in Groton, Massachusetts had been the original donor. He informed me that his wife was from Groton, Mass and I felt that the inspection would go well . . . it did.

Sunday morning was a travel challenge to say the least. I was to go by Metro to the inspection point while Carl drove his car and trailer to the dispersal area. The train was packed and when we got to the city the line out of the station was stopped. I had a deadline to meet so after 20 minutes in line I became concerned. About that time the Metro officials simply opened all the exit gates and did not require us to process our ticket to leave. I made my way to the screening area where I received my identification document and proceeded through the inspection without incident.



The ID card was part of the documentation process

We were then transported to the assembly area where we had to stay. The committee had provided wonderful heated tents with

tables and chairs as well as complimentary sandwiches and coffee.



The warming tent has two 460 volt, three phase electric heaters and blowers to keep us warm. They worked well and were quiet. We were able to take our coats off when inside the tent.

After several years of anticipation, the big day finally arrived. I had to report at 10:30 AM for a parade that was scheduled to start at 2:30 PM and actually started at 4:00 PM. Being a seasoned veteran of these parades I knew that it would be a long cold wait. To prepare for this, I purchased an electrically heated motorcycle riders vest and a pair of electric insoles for my shoes. The projected

temperature for parade day was 43 degrees so I decided not to use the vest. Instead, I wore a sweatshirt under my uniform shirt, my uniform coat and my good old New England barn jacket over the whole thing. I found this to be comfortable but I did plug in the electric insoles. That was wonderful. With an antique lap robe over my legs and feet I was in good shape for the parade.



The well insulated barn coat was even the right color to match my 1916 ambulance driver's uniform.

The parade got started around 4:00 PM and we headed down Pennsylvania Avenue.



I was preceded by a band from Hawaii (who I expect was freezing) and two sign carriers announcing the states in the next segment of the lineup.

The highlight of the parade for me was seeing my family in the stands. I could hear my six year old granddaughter, Amelia,

yelling “Granddad!” over the din of the crowd.



Just look for the frantically wavering arms and you will find my family



Photo taken by my wife Kathy as Ambulance 255 passes 10th Street

In 2010, First Lady, Michelle Obama, gave a number of commencement addresses at various universities extolling the virtues of volunteerism. I wrote her after that to applaud her comments and to tell her of our project. In that letter I informed her that we had a goal of driving the ambulance in the 2013 inaugural parade. I concluded the letter by writing, "I look forward to waving to you from the front seat of Ambulance 255."

Two weeks before the parade, I wrote her again and reminded her of my 2010 letter and to tell her that we had been selected to

participate in the parade. I again said that I would be waving to her. I hoped that one of her staff would tell her about the letter before inaugural day.

As I approached the reviewing stand, President Obama was standing. I saw him consult his list of parade participants which was on a table to his left. He then looked out the window and saw me approaching. He leaned down to his right and said something to Michelle. She looked up and began waving as I drove by.



First Lady, Michelle Obama smiling as waving as Ambulance 255 passes in review.

Being accepted to participate in the 2013 Presidential Inaugural Parade still amazes me. There were 2,807 applicants and only 63 were selected. This includes the military units from the five armed forces plus the U. S. Merchant Marine. Ambulance 255 was the only unit selected from the state of Connecticut.

We had no political connections or other outside influences that resulted in our selection. We made it to the parade on our own merit as an organization with a noble goal and an interesting artifact from the past.

The People Who Made it Happen –

Getting to the parade and staying in the Washington DC area was an expensive proposition. To accomplish this I asked for help and I receive the assistance that we

needed. Below is a list of those individuals and organizations that made this grand adventure possible.

Lucy Elliot
Nat Wilson
Chip Allard
Kevin Cooper
Stadium Motors
Greg Canova
Mac Robbins
Four Seasons Model T Association
Len Parker
Greg Young
Bob Geer

Clinton, CT
East Boothbay, ME
Voluntown, CT
Clifton, NJ
Franklin, CT
Bedford, NY
East Putman, CT
Lebanon, CT
Mystic, CT
Northampton, MA
Ledyard, CT

I would also like to recognize the support given us by:

Raymond's Garage
WFSB Television CBS
WVIT Television NBC
WTNH Television ABC
WFFF Radio
The Day
Norwich Bulletin
Chronicle

Franklin, CT
Hartford, CT
New Britain, CT
New Haven, CT
Ledyard, CT
New London, CT
Norwich, CT
Willimantic, CT

But most of all, to Carl Pate from Glastonbury, CT who has hauled Ambulance 255 not only to the inaugural parade but also to the National Memorial Day Parade in Washington DC in May 2012.

Imagine saying to a friend, "Here's what I want you to do. Hook up your trailer and haul me and my ambulance to Washington DC for the Presidential Inaugural Parade. While I am driving down Pennsylvania Avenue, I want you to sit in your car for

hours, you can't leave, you can't be in the parade, you can't even see the parade and when I am done having all the fun, you can drive me back." Well this is what the mission of the tow vehicle driver is and this is what Carl did for me; a most generous gesture from a good friend. Without whom we literally could not have done it.



An Associated Press photo showing Ambulance 255 in the parade

The Next Chapter – Having recovered from the Washington DC high adventure, we will now prepare to make Ambulance 255 an international star. Our next goal is to bring Ambulance 255 to France for the centennial of World War I.

Watch for us on France 24 TV from Paris.