

PRESS RELEASE



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SUMMARY OF AMERICAN AID IN REBUILDING GREEK HIGHWAYS AND RAILROADS

ATHENS -- Following is the third in a series of weekly articles summing up achievements of American Aid in various sectors of the national recovery effort in Greece from World War II to the beginning of 1952. The series covers most of the fields in which the United States has tried to assist Greece toward national self-sufficiency. This article concerns reconstruction of highways and railroads.

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Many observers consider the heavy construction work accomplished in Greece with American Aid to be the most spectacular single achievement in the recovery program. It is certainly the most visible, and it has changed -- or rather restored -- the face of the nation in the fields of transportation and communication.

Greece lay paralyzed when AMAG aid began. The Grecian District of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and the various Greek Government agencies, faced the task of rebuilding virtually every normal channel of communication throughout the country. For the retiring NAZI forces, determined both to delay pursuit and to render the country useless to the Allied forces, had meticulously destroyed nearly all port facilities, highways, railroads and telecommunications.

Piraeus and the other main Greek ports were a shambles, with breakwaters and wharves dynamited, drydocks smashed, cranes and warehouses destroyed. The Corinth canal was closed. Ships were sunk to block strategic channels. Almost all bridges and tunnels were blown up on the rail lines, and German efficiency produced an ingenious railway car which automatically clamped and detonated dynamite charges against every second rail along hundreds of miles of track as the last train withdrew. Highway bridges were destroyed, and the smallest culverts were blasted. Even the road surfaces were gone, after the pounding of military traffic, five years of weather, and utter lack of maintenance.

The situation was made to order for guerilla warfare. The loyalist Greek forces had little communication and almost no mobility, and the supply problem was a major difficulty. Communist bands, which had little use for roads anyway, could slip across country, strike at isolated communities or army detachments, and melt back into the mountains before troops could be brought against them.

The AMAG engineers, working with American contractors, centered their efforts on two fields of equal military priority. One was the reconstruction of major ports so that the American Aid supplies could flow into the nation. The other was the job of rebuilding major roads, and constructing and expanding airfields.

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Many road crews, deep in disputed territory, could work only under the protection of large detachments of troops. Workmen were killed. Others were kidnaped and forcibly inducted into the communist forces. Roads had to be swept daily for mines, and there was widespread sabotage on some projects, with raiding bands smashing construction equipment and rolling stock.

When the Marshall Plan began, its Construction Division took over the program of the Corps of Engineers and expanded work into other fields. Since then, the major sectors in which construction has been focused are these: highways, railroads, ports, civil aviation, electric power, telecommunications, aerial mapping, and water supply projects in cities of more than 3,000 population.

HIGHWAYS. The main Greek highway net is now nearly complete, with 3,500 kilometers of road having been reconstructed and paved with some sort of asphalt surface. Only a few small sections remain to be completed on the great north-south road running from Alexandroupolis on the Turkish border, through Kavalla, Salonica and Athens down to Kalamata on the southwest tip of the Peloponnese. In the northern part of the Peloponnese, the road from Athens to Corinth and Patras has been virtually completed down the west coast as far as the port of Katakolon. In western Greece, paved highway now links Patras with Arta and Yannina. One of the most important roads in a mountainous country with few east-west connections, the breath-taking highway that runs over the Pindus range from Yannina to Trikala, is now complete except for a small section in the Katara Pass, highest in Greece.

Equally as important as the main highway network, in both an economic and a military sense, is the secondary road system, and this is now better than ever before. These roads are dirt-surfaced for the most part, and with proper maintenance by modern road-building equipment, are kept open the year round, except in mountain country where they sometimes become impassable in winter. Many hundreds of kilometers of new road have been built, especially to provide easy access to the antiquities and scenic sites which are the main attraction for tourism in Greece.

Great progress has been achieved, particularly during 1951, in two other categories of roads. One group consists of military access roads built by or for the Greek armed forces, which now penetrate large areas of mountain country formerly inaccessible except on foot or muleback. In wild frontier regions, and in rough interior zones which were bandit strongholds during the guerilla war, Greek troops now can move in full fighting kit at instant notice. The other road category in which much has been done is that of self-help roads, with whole communities contributing thousands of man-days of free labor to build rough but serviceable roads to connect their isolated villages with the outside world. Both types of road have received assistance from American Aid funds.

As a sheer physical accomplishment in construction and engineering, the Greek road program has been large-scale. One indication of the work done is that more than 250 highway bridges have been completely rebuilt, along with all of the culverts, retaining walls and other technical works required. But equally as important is the administrative reorganization which made the program possible.

The Greek Public Roads Administration has been completely reorganized. American advisors placed particular emphasis on reconstruction, operation, maintenance, traffic safety, accounting, and testing and controlling materials. Greek personnel received training through lectures, conferences, special courses, and the use of motion picture training films.

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Within the Greek Ministry of Public Works, a separate and independent Highway Department has been organized with directors made responsible for such functions as administration, engineering construction, and maintenance. This reorganization is still in progress. Standard plans, specifications, contract documents and invitations to bid, modeled on criteria established by the American Association of State Highway Officials, have been developed by the Engineering Department of the Ministry. Uniformity in design loads for bridges, roads and airfields also has been established along with a "unit price" system of bidding.

The Construction Department, for the first time in history, is now receiving reasonably accurate and timely progress reports from the men who supervise contract construction work in the field. Maintenance men are permanently stationed in highway districts throughout Greece, and safety inspectors are constantly in the field. Highway contractors are required to carry public liability, property damage and employee insurance. Uniform traffic signs, conforming with international usage, have been designed and erected throughout the country. A highway striping machine, imported from the U.S., has painted center lines and warning marks on most trunk highways.

All these things are improvements. With the general changes in administrative machinery in the Ministry, such reforms are considered by American advisors as perhaps eventually far more important to the future of the Greek highway system than even the physical construction accomplished with American money, machines and technical advice.

RAILROADS. As 1952 began, every main rail line in Greece was operating.

This left certain things to be desired. One point that irked both Greeks and Americans, but which was to be blamed on the various nations who had participated in building the original Greek railway system, was that there were three different gauges of track, and thus three different types of equipment, and an enormous amount of loading and reloading of goods and passengers. Another point far from satisfactory was that many roadbeds were patchworks. Rails included every length from two meters to full size. Trains bumped and grunted and shuffled along in odd, uneven tempo, and on some branch lines passengers never quite succeeded in anticipating the lurches.

But all the same, here was a major miracle. For when the war ended there was no railroad system in Greece. Out of 2,679 kilometers of trackage in Greece, all but 670 kilometers was damaged. The locomotives, passenger cars, and freight cars were either destroyed or missing, with only 707 serviceable units of rolling stock left in Greece. Many had been pulled across into Bulgaria where they still remain. Others were blown up, or shoved off into deep canyons or into the Corinth Canal. Scarcely a bridge or tunnel on the major lines but had been destroyed. The bridges were blown up and the tunnels blown in.

In the AMAC days, the American railroad men and their Greek confreres took stock of an almost hopeless situation and began setting it aright. First came the problem of restoring the lines, and it was a major engineering job. Greek workmen took lengths of rails that were curled like corkscrews by German-placed explosions, and counted themselves lucky if they salvaged two or three meters of useful track that could be straightened and laid anew.

Bridges were rebuilt. Somehow the Brallo bridge, a long span that would be a major engineering achievement in any land, was considered by all Greeks as a symbol. Near Lamia on the main line from Athens to Salonika, it took months to rebuild. It was ready finally at the height of the guerilla war. King Paul and Greek Government dignitaries participated in its dedication. And that ceremony seemed to mark a turning point. If the Brallo bridge was

back in operation, the war was as good as won, reconstruction was well started, and Greece as a nation had survived. That was what the Greek people felt. Nothing that happened afterward ever really shook their confidence.

But the devoted men who worked to rehabilitate the Greek rail lines in this period did so at heavy cost. It was frontline war. The 2,500 Greek workers and American technical personnel working in the Brallo section, rebuilding two tunnels and four large bridges, were guarded by 1,500 soldiers of the Greek Army. Barbed wire entanglements surrounded the four work camps in the area. Anti-personnel mines were planted outside the wire. No one was allowed outside the compound after dark.

Despite these strong precautions, the Communist threat was ever present. Guerrillas mounted loudspeakers on mountaintops and broadcast constant threats to kill the men who worked for the "fascist Greek Government" and the "imperialistic Americans." Workers heard threats against the lives of their families, and the track area had to be searched daily for mines. Despite this harassing which lasted for 18 months, the Greek workers stayed on the job and there was never any shortage of labor.

In all, the Communist bandits murdered and maimed hundreds of Greek workers. The toll eventually included 355 men killed, 50 maimed for life, 402 wounded and four others who simply disappeared without a trace. Such casualties would be accounted heavy for a full division in active combat. Most of these casualties were sustained in central and northern Greece, but many also occurred in the Peloponnesus.

Far to the northeast, along the Turkish border near Alexandroupolis, heavy military operations took place against the railroads. The bandits attacked passenger trains with bazookas and automatic weapons. In one such engagement, in mid-1948, the Communists destroyed a locomotive, drenched the train with gasoline, and gutted it. An engineer, a work foreman, two soldiers and several passengers were killed. The incident was typical.

A year later in the same area, artillery fire from across the Bulgarian frontier destroyed a large bridge. Two workers were killed and three were wounded critically in the attack. The SEK personnel kept up their work under continual shelling, and repaired the bridge.

Late in 1949, with the guerilla war just finished, the first train in six years made the run from Athens to Salonika. Here, in capsule only, is an account of what that accomplishment meant. It required rebuilding 248 bridges. Five tunnels, some of which had to be relocated, were opened up, and 853 kilometers of track were relaid. The task also required restoration of 250 kilometers of telecommunications, 22 signal points, 27 water stations and 17 other buildings of various types. That is one tabulation of the Greek railroad men's accomplishment. It fails to include the many culverts, retaining walls and incidental engineering tasks which were required. And it leaves out of the accounting the lives it cost, or the daily heroism of the men who made it possible.

Meanwhile, the railroad men of Greece had begun the heavy task of renovating and replacing Greek rolling stock. Burned-out shells of freight cars were hauled to shops in Athens and Salonika. Perhaps all that could be salvaged was an axle and a pair of wheels, rusted from long immersion in the sea. It was at least a starting point. Laboring in bombed-out rail yards and roofless shells of roundhouses, which other workmen were trying to rebuild, Greek workers put together new cars from the pieces of the old. Sometimes salvaged parts from three or four locomotives were required to put together one that worked.

Italian war reparations, and trade agreements with France, played a large part in rehabilitating Greek rolling stock. From Italian factories came freight and passenger cars, locomotive engines and glittering diesel automotrices which honked their way along the rebuilt lines. And as the lines were rebuilt, the Greek Government gathered up the scrap metal along the rights-of-way, and shipped it off

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to the Italian factories that were making the new equipment. It was part of the Greek-Italian reparations agreement that Greece would furnish the scrap and Italy would fabricate it into usable equipment.

By 1951, the main job had been accomplished. With opening of the last branch line from Salonika to Florina in northwest Greece, and with resumption of the nation's most famous rail asset, the Simplon-Orient express from Athens to Paris, the rail network was back in operating condition. Then came the second job, rebuilding those parts of the line that had been hurriedly thrown together as a matter of national emergency.

As 1952 began, track crews were busy throughout all Greece, taking up old patchwork rails and replacing them with bright new steel ties and rails from Belgium and other European nations, purchased through Marshall Plan agreements within the European Payments Union. Roadbeds were being re-engineered, and signal systems were being overhauled. Tunnels that had been reopened in emergency were finally getting new linings of concrete and stone. Bridges and culverts were being strengthened and smoothed out, and the rail crews who had built them two years before were finally getting around to installing proud ornamental plaques on the structures, relating their achievements. Throughout the nation, rail movement of goods and passengers was approaching pre-war levels, and wheat, rice, tobacco and other basic commodities were moving on schedule among the major cities.

The Greek railroads, including SEK, running from Athens north; SPAP, south through the Peloponnese, and the Franco-Hellenic Railways in Thessaly, still operated on a deficit basis, and this fact irked Americans and Greeks alike as 1952 began. The deficit was shrinking as business returned, but operating costs also were continuing to rise. It was in this field of administrative operation of the railroads that Americans felt the next big reconstruction battle lay in the field of transportation. As in other countries, bus and truck operation was taking a larger and larger share of passenger and freight traffic. Labor costs had risen, along with the costs of fuel and equipment.

But the rebuilding task was largely accomplished, except for replacement of rolling stock. Operating schedules, previously only vague targets for train crews to shoot at, were being met more and more often by Greek trains. Even freight trains arrived within reason. The Construction Division in the American Mission was virtually out of the railroad business, its main task accomplished. The Industry and Transportation division took over the next big task, that of helping the Greek Government to operate its rail lines on a self-sustaining basis.

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