

TOP NEWS

THE TORCH'S JOURNEY

Once-in-a-lifetime trip for convoy leaders

'I feel like I'm doing something special every day'

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CALGARY HERALD

Eighteen-hour work days, wind chills reaching -39 C, stray ATV riders and frequent whiteouts have become routine for Art Lewis as he helps escort the Olympic flame across Canada.

None of these unusual driving conditions have bothered Lewis quite as much as another, much smaller road hazard.

"Stone cracks in the windshields," said Lewis, without a hint of hesitation, when asked what annoyed him the most during his cross-country trek. "We had to replace eight in the last four days."

But for Lewis and Serge St. Louis, the two men responsible for managing the convoy of motored beasts escorting the Olympic torch as it makes its way to Vancouver, all the challenges are just small pitfalls during a once-in-a-lifetime journey.

Lewis, from just outside of Parry Sound, Ont., and St. Louis, from Apple Hill, Ont., have been organiz-

ing the logistics of the convoy ever since being hand-picked to manage the three-month trip last year.

A district service manager with GM dealerships in Ontario, Lewis said he is still not sure why he was picked. "I guess I'm just a lucky person," he quipped.

Luck, in this case, comes with a hefty workload. The convoy includes 16 GM vehicles sporting the Olympics graphics, as well as dozens of support vehicles for security, shuttling and other purposes.

In total, the two men are responsible for the smooth operation of 10 vehicles as they make their way across 26,000 kilometres of countryside.

During 15-day shifts on the road, each have to follow the main procession as it winds its way through practically every nook and cranny of the second largest nation on the planet.

"I'll be honest, the first three days off I get, I sleep," said St. Louis, who is currently back home in Ontario, but will take over for Lewis when the torch departs Calgary for Kamloops on Jan. 20. "When I'm on, I got up on average at 6 a.m., and I never went to bed before 11:30 p.m."

The pair have each taken in some of the most desolate stretches of the country during the coldest months of the year. St. Louis recounted that the mercury fell to -30 C in Timmins,



Courtesy, Art Lewis and Serge St. Louis

Art Lewis and Serge St. Louis are in charge of the 110-vehicle convoy that accompanies the Olympic torch as it criss-crosses the country.

Ont., on New Year's Day, and the crew resorted to extreme measures to make sure everything ran smoothly.

"The cars will start anyways, but we don't want to take any chances," he said. "So we had the security guards start the cars every three hours overnight."

St. Louis, meanwhile, faced -39 C wind chill as he and the convoy left

Winnipeg on Jan. 7.

There were other misadventures, too — Lewis said an overzealous ATV rider rode into one of the main buses as it was parked overnight in a small Quebec town, damaging the graphics — but everything went off without a hitch when push came to shove.

"We called the repair guys and they had it ready in 24 hours,"

St. Louis said.

And the rewards? Seeing the mass of Canadians descend along the route, just for a glimpse of the torch.

"It's like a snowball," Lewis described the way crowds were getting bigger as the convoy moved west. "It was big in Ontario, but now we're coming into little towns that I thought couldn't possibly hold that many people, and the streets would be packed . . . I feel like I'm doing something special every day."

St. Louis said, despite seeing the faces in every Canadian town, it never gets old.

"Never," he said. "Sometimes, I'll just drive to the end of the convoy, and you get chills seeing all the people cheering. I called my wife on the phone once, and she was getting chills just listening on the phone."

Currently, Lewis is with the convoy as it tours Alberta before hitting Calgary today. St. Louis will take over for the trip to B.C.

"Once the (Olympic cauldron in Vancouver) lights up, it'll symbol that we've done our jobs," St. Louis said. "I always thought I was a tough guy, but I'm going to have a tear in my eyes."

"It's something I don't want to tell my boss, but every job after this is now going to be boring."

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