These seven students from Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College had the experience of a lifetime during the recent 2,000-mile 'Carry The Load' event. Making the journey were (l-r): Matt Fryman from Kennesaw, Demarcus Bateman from Ashburn, Rodney Troupe from Moultrie, John Driscoll from Osierfield, Kristoff Cohran from Thomasville, Matthew Reid from Eatonton, and Jo Leigh Warren from Fitzgerald.

ABAC Students ‘Carry The Load’ from New York to Dallas
TIFTON—Rain came down in sheets. Wind gusts tried to lift him up and hurl him into the Hudson River. But Rodney Troupe from Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College would not be deterred. The lights of Manhattan beckoned as he walked in darkness across the George Washington Bridge to “Carry The Load” into New York City.

Troupe, a 20-year-old junior business major from Moultrie, was one of seven ABAC students selected to participate in the nationwide “Carry The Load” relay which is an effort designed to restore the true meaning to Memorial Day by connecting Americans to the sacrifices of the military, law enforcement, firefighters, and rescue personnel.

Dill Driscoll conceived the idea of a national relay for “Carry The Load” three years ago. He and his wife, Susan, are the deans of the Stafford School of Business at ABAC. Through the help of national sponsors, Driscoll and the other organizers developed a relay from West Point, N.Y., to Dallas, Texas. This year’s event kicked off on April 29 and reached Dallas on May 25. For 2,000 miles, participants carried the American flag and the “Carry The Load” flag 24 hours a day.

“This was far and away our best year,” Driscoll said. “These kids have given me renewed faith in America.”

Driscoll knows of which he speaks. He and his marketing company were in charge of the 1996 Olympic Torch Relay from Los Angeles to Atlanta. Susan Driscoll, a Coca-Cola marketing executive at the time, met Dill on that trip. The Driscolls have coordinated eight other Olympic Torch relays since 1996.
Driscoll predicts “Carry The Load” will be bigger and better in 2015. He believes the common theme of “who are you carrying?” resonates with the American public. Most Americans have relatives who have served their country either in the military or as first responders.

“It’s growing every year,” Driscoll said. “All of these ABAC students who were a part of the relay were in real life situations. This was the real world. We picked these kids and trained them. They were ready.”

Besides Troupe, the ABAC contingent included Demarcus Bateman, a business major from Ashburn; Kristoff Cohran, a business major from Thomasville; John Driscoll, a business major from Osierfield; Jo Leigh Warren, a journalism major from Fitzgerald; Matthew Reid, a business major from Eatonton; and Matt Fryman, a business major from Kennesaw.

Dill Driscoll and Lyndsey Walters, the internship and placement coordinator from the Stafford School of Business at ABAC, also made the trek which really started for the ABAC group with a special six-hour walk-off ceremony on the ABAC campus on April 24. It ended when 5,000 people welcomed the “Carry the Load” team to Reverchon Park in Dallas.

“That last day when we were walking into Dallas was huge,” John Driscoll, Dill’s son, said. “We knew what we were walking for but when we got to Dallas, it really hit home.”

“Dallas was awesome,” Fryman said. “We walked alone so many times during the trip but in Dallas, we had 200 people walking through the night with us.”

For Cohran, the day he will never forget is when he walked into Yardley Borough, Penn.
“We were met by the whole town,” Cohran said. “They had American flags, and people were coming out of their houses. It was completely unexpected. It made me really understand what Memorial Day is all about.”

Walters was the operations manager for the trip. She did everything from finding fire stations where the students could take a shower to making daily trips to grocery stores.

“From feeding to cleansing, anything that needed to be done for those 14 people on the bus, I took care of it,” Walters said. “We always stayed ahead of the bus because we had to get ready for the next day. We bought a lot of bananas, cold cuts and peanut butter and jelly. When they saw me coming, they knew the ‘banana boat’ had arrived.”

The group traveled 60 to 150 miles a day. All the leg captains walked a couple of two-hour shifts every day. At night, some of the leg captains and Dill Driscoll rode bicycles to cover more ground. All the males slept on the bus. Walters and Warren stayed mostly at La Quinta hotels, one of the national sponsors for “Carry the Load.”

Reid, assisted by Warren, was the trip’s media coordinator. Both of them spent huge chunks of time on Twitter and Facebook every day besides connecting with local media in the cities and towns they entered.

“We produced over 30 videos and hundreds of photos,” Reid said. “We had over 2,300 followers on Twitter, and about 10,000 likes on Facebook. It was really cool to see how a big television station like WFAA in Dallas developed its stories. They shot a prime time special.”

Warren was looking forward to visiting places she had never set foot in before. As it turned out, those places were secondary to the people she met.
“Before the relay, I was looking forward to seeing all the different places but once the trip got started, it was really the people and their stories that stuck with me,” Warren said. “For those people who lost family members, it wasn’t about just walking with us. It was a healing process.”

Every ABAC student on the journey spent a lot of time listening to men, women, and children who lost loved ones who served in the military or as firemen, policemen, or first responders. In detail, they shared how they were “carrying the load” for them.

“This mom and her daughter talked to me in Tennessee,” Cohran said. “I’ll never forget what the daughter said. ‘Spend good times with your daddy when he’s home, because you don’t know when he might not come home.’”

“It was a life-changing experience to have the opportunity to be a part of something much bigger than me,” Bateman said. “Hearing the stories of the people and how they lost their loved ones was inspiring. It allowed me to appreciate the gift of life. We all should be a lot more thankful.”

For Troupe, it came down to that moment on the George Washington Bridge.

“I had a soldier walking with me,” Troupe said. “It was pouring down rain. It was dark. The wind was blowing. I was carrying the ‘Carry The Load’ flag, and he was carrying the American flag. I had to jump back into my body. Coming from a small town, things like this don’t happen to me.”
Then Troupe saw the lights of New York City. Perhaps he thought of that terrible day on Sept. 11, 2001 when first responders were running into burning buildings while so many others were running away.

For seven ABAC students and two ABAC administrators, Memorial Day will never be the same.

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