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THE most famous auto race in history was recalled last month when the little town of Gagny, in the suburbs of Paris, commemorated the taxi lift that brought 5000 French reinforcements to help win the Battle of the Marne.

Just as they did forty years ago September 7, a long stream of wobbly, wheezing autos, backfiring furiously, rattled down the town's main street. But this time the procession took place amidst a holiday crowd, accompanied by blaring municipal bands and overhung with multicolored bunting. There were top hats and frock coats, caps and boaters, curled-up mustaches that were too perfect not to be fake, tuckers, veils and ostrich-plumed hats. Everyone had decided to forget about war and wars and to celebrate peace.

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Miracle on the Marne

These 1900-style cars, with their shiny brass and carefully polished woodwork, were only an escort. They preceded the only authentic witness of the anxious convoy of 1914, a G-7 Renault taxi with big gas lanterns which was driven by one of the last survivors of the chauffeurs who took part in the "big race"

The battle known as the Battle of the Marne was really set off along the Ourcq River by Joffre, French supreme commander, who launched the Fourth Army against von Kluck's advancing German troops. Paris seemed already lost. This attack was the last chance and the French knew they must throw into it everything they had.

The Seventh Division had just arrived from Lorraine. On September 6, Gallieni, the military governor of Paris, gave the order to transport by highway a brigade of six battalions to the front. It was hoped that another brigade, the remainder of the division, would come up the following day by railroad.

But the army transport services had only 250 cars available. "A very insufficient number for the number of men necessary," pointed out the officer in charge of carrying out the order.

"You have a free hand," replied Gallieni. "The first convoy of cars must leave Paris tonight."

There remained one solution : to commandeer the cabs. In the streets of Paris, policemen began to whistle down every taxi they saw. From all parts of town, cars began to stream toward the staging area on the Esplanade des Invalides. A few hours later, in a long, somber file, they crossed the Seine and disappeared into the night.