

## Senate Bill 46 - October 25<sup>th</sup> – African American Soldiers' Contribution to Building the Alaska Highway Day



## October 25, 1942

In October, two crews, one moving north and one moving south, completed the road's last link. Later, The New York Times reported what happened when they "met head-on in the spruce forests of the Yukon Territory."

"Corporal Refines Sims Jr., an African American from Philadelphia, was driving south with a bulldozer when he saw trees starting to topple over on him," the account said. "Slamming his big vehicle into reverse, he backed out just as another bulldozer, driven by Private Alfred Jalufka of Kennedy, Texas, broke through the underbrush."



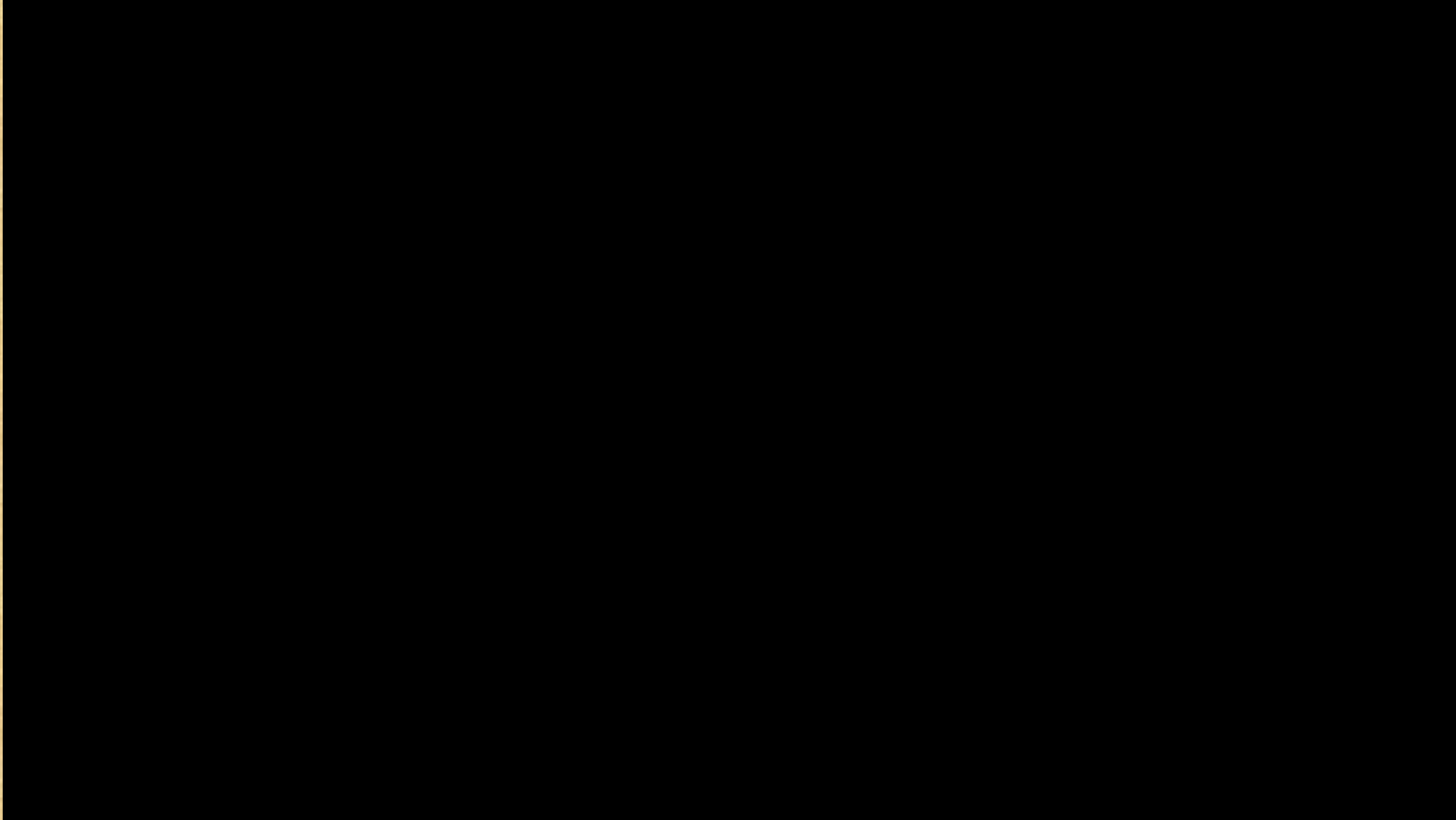
1942 Cpl. Refines Sims Jr., left, and Pvt. Alfred Jalufkamet in the middle. Army Corps of Engineers

The Alaska Highway is considered one of the biggest and most difficult construction projects ever completed by the U.S. Corps of Engineers. It stretches 1,422 miles from Dawson Creek, British Columbia, to Delta Junction, Alaska, at a cost of \$138 million dollars (\$2.1 billion in today's dollars).





# Alaska Highway – “The Road to Civil Rights”



The African American Army regiments that built the Alaska Highway established a reputation for excellence especially in the field of bridge building. However, their accomplishments were consistently ignored by mainstream media and press. It took decades for them to receive proper recognition for their achievements. Some say they were as “legendary” as the Tuskegee Airmen and the Buffalo Soldiers.



Black engineers build a trestle bridge during the construction of the Alaska Canada Military Highway. Black G.I.s made up roughly forty percent of the estimated 11,500 Army troops who in just nine months completed a wilderness highway linking Alaska with the contiguous United States.

Anchorage Museum of History and Art



Portrait of a soldier working on the Alaska Highway in 1942. The Army engineers assigned to the project had withstand severe cold while working with poor equipment and supplies. The role of black troops in the highway's construction – underplayed until recently – contributed to the full integration of American armed forces after the war. (Courtesy Alaska State Library, Fred B. Dodge Photograph Collection)



# Why the recognition of the African American soldiers' contributions to building the Alaska Highway?

It's about the historical context. Race relations in America were very different in 1942. Opportunities for African Americans were rare and expectations were low. Racial segregation was common; housing, medical care, education, employment, transportation, and social segregation (restaurants, drinking fountains, bathrooms, etc..).

The movie "Alaska at War" was a documentary on Alaska's role in World War II, such as the opening of oil fields, Japanese bombing of Dutch Harbor, struggle to recapture the Aleutians Islands, and the construction of the highway. "Not one African American soldier was shown in the movie," as stated by Eugene Long, who was enlisted in the 95th Engineer regiment deployed to Alaska to assist in building the Alaska Highway.



# Why the recognition of the African American soldiers' contributions to building the Alaska Highway?

Consider the following:

- Congress passed the Reconstruction Act of 1867, the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution in 1870 providing the right to vote, and the Civil Rights Act of 1875 forbidding racial segregation in accommodations.
- In 1896, the U.S. Supreme Court sustained the constitutionality of Louisiana's requirement that railroad companies provide "separate but equal" accommodations for white and black passengers.
- Over the next 25-35 years, equality in racial relations progress was lost, in particularly in the South. By 1910, segregation was firmly established across the South and most of the border region.
- In 1954, legal segregation schools was banned in the U.S after a series of rulings in the U.S. Supreme Court.
- In 1964, all legally enforced public segregation was abolished by the Civil Rights Act.

The U.S. War Department's tradition and policy mandated the segregation of African Americans into separate units, led by white officers. During the construction of the Alaska Highway, African American troops were ordered to not leave camp and mingle with the locals, the whites were allowed to mingle. They were treated unequally and yet defied expectations in many situations, with even fewer resources.



# Why the recognition of the African American soldiers' contributions to building the Alaska Highway?

Little publicity or notoriety has been given to the African American soldiers for these efforts. Examples of the lack of press coverage of the African American troops include:

- National Archives contains only a few dozen photos among the hundreds taken of the Alaska Highway construction;
- African Americans were edited out of a 1991 National geographic feature on the highway, despite the fact that the magazine obtained interviews of seven who served building the Alaska Highway; and,
- The official 759-page U.S. Army history of the Corps covers African American troop involvement with a one-sentence footnote.

This event and others that followed during World War II influenced our American leaders and some believe that it was a turning point in race relations in America. In 1948, President Truman signed into law a desegregation plan for the armed forces.

In 1992, Colin Powell, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, after seeing Ms. Lael Morgan's exhibit in Fairbanks stated, "I had no idea black men has done anything like this." "They are deserving of recognition."

Douglas Brinley stated, "the Alaska Highway was not only the greatest feat of the World War II; it is a triumph over racism."

Gen. James O'Connor, during the formal dedication stated, "Some day the accomplishments of the African American troops-achievements accomplished far from their home-will occupy a major place in the lore of the North country."

This happened in Alaska!!



# Acknowledgment and Thanks!



The legacy of the African American Army soldiers wouldn't be known today nor the official recognition from the military if not for the works of many. Just to name a few:

Health Twitchell Jr. (Historian); James Eaton (Curator of the Black History Archive at Florida A&M University; Ted Stevens (U.S. Senator); Andrew Molloy (Head of Pentagon's Affirmative Action Office); Colin Powell (Retired Four Star General); Stan Cohen (Author); John Virtue (Author); Mike Dunham (Anchorage Daily News); Cornelia Dean (New York Times); Tim Ellis (KUAC News); Rickie Longfellow (News Writer); Bill Gifford (Washington City Paper); Kani Saburi Ayubu (Black Art Depot Today); Douglas Brinley (Historian); Jean Pollard (Educator) and **most importantly**, University of Alaska Journalism Professor Lael Morgan.

Thank you all for your contributions in revealing this remarkable story and your support of Senate Bill 46's efforts to establish October 25<sup>th</sup> as "African American Soldiers' Contribution to Building the Alaska Highway Day."