

Testimony
SB 46-Senator David Wilson
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In the spring of 1942 America's leaders watched, helpless, as the Empire of Japan drove American forces in headlong retreat across the Pacific. The terrifying vulnerability of remote Alaska, critical to defending American interests in the Pacific, brought an old issue to the top of their agenda. Men interested in Alaska and the Canadian territories, concerned to defend them or interested in economically developing them, had kept the idea of a land route from the United States to its Alaska Territory on the agenda for years, but had never succeeded in bringing it to the top. The Japanese brought it to the top in just one day—December 7, 1941.

FDR's order to get the road built galvanized the Corps of Engineers, and the Corps dispatched seven regiments to British Columbia, Yukon Territory and Alaska—creating some of them, literally, as they boarded trains heading north, organizing them on the fly. To the consternation of its generals, the Corps didn't have enough white soldiers for seven regiments; black men would have to do for three of them. Young white officers led the segregated black soldiers of the 93rd, 95th and 97th through the bitter cold, endless rain, and sucking muskeg of the isolated northern wilderness.

Six regiments, including the black 93rd and the black 95th, worked in Canada. The seventh regiment, the black 97th, worked in Alaska.

The 97th came up from Florida, and winter still gripped Valdez when they landed in late April. General Simon Bolivar Buckner, commander of American forces in Alaska, had reluctantly accepted the black regiment, but he wouldn't allow them near Alaska's citizens. The 97th would march through Valdez as quickly as possible to bivouac in the cold 13 miles north of town. In the end, they wouldn't even be allowed to unload equipment and supplies at Valdez. A small detachment of white troops and civilians would unload and truck the supplies out to them.

The young black men of the 97th shivered in frost coated tents while their commander, Colonel Stephen Whipple, tried to figure out how to get men and equipment hundreds of miles inland to the proposed route of the Highway. The first leg of their journey would follow the Richardson Highway over Thompson Pass, but an avalanche plugged the pass in 1942 so the 97th worked through May to help the Alaska Road Commission unplug it. From Thompson Pass they would make their way to Gulkana and then to Slana and finally through the dreaded Mentasta Pass to Tok, where they could begin building the Alcan south toward Canada.

There were some white men involved with the project in Alaska. First, the three regiments who worked in Yukon Territory, two of them white, got themselves and their equipment into Canada through the port at Skagway, Alaska, but they were just passing through. Second, a very few white men manned the small port detachment at Valdez to bring supplies out to the 97th. Third, the white men of the Alaska Road Commission worked with the 97th at Thompson Pass.

The original plan called for a white regiment, the 18th to work north from Whitehorse. The black 97th would work south and the two regiments would meet in Alaska. In the end, though, it didn't happen that way. The 97th crossed the border and their climactic meeting with the 18th occurred at Beaver Creek in Canada.

The white men who made the greatest contribution to actual road construction in Alaska were the experienced, well paid and well equipped civilian contractors supplied by the Public Roads Administration (PRA) to work with the 97th. They deserve a great deal of credit. And, thanks to Army public relations, they **got** a lot of credit. Photographers, newsreel cameras and reporters flooded to record the epic of the Alcan.

But the young black men of the 97th, totally inexperienced, fresh from the semi-tropical Deep South, forced to survive an Alaska winter in tents so they wouldn't contaminate the local population, enduring the torment of mindless prejudice, deserve even more credit. Photographers, newsreel cameras and reporters came to the white regiments and the PRA civilians. For 74 years the black men have been ghosts in the historical record—vague in the background. In 2015 a trained and educated black archivist at the National Archives in College Park, MD informed one of us that “there were no black soldiers working on the highway.”

We can't change history, but we can fix the historical record. We can bring the accomplishments, sacrifice and patriotism of these black men out of the shadows and give them the credit they so richly deserve.

We suggest that passing SB-46 is, simply, the right thing to do.

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