

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE

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Session:
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Senator David Wilson

Senate Bill 46

October 25th – African American Soldiers’ Contribution to Building the Alaska Highway Day!

Senate Bill 46 recognizes the contributions of African American Soldiers in building the Alaska Highway and commemorates those extraordinary efforts by establishing October 25th as “African American Soldiers’ Contribution to Building the Alaska Highway Day.”

Why October 25th? On this day, African American Army troops of the 93rd and 95th regiments constructing the Alaska-Canadian (ALCAN) highway north from Dawson Creek, met the white troops constructing the ALCAN Highway heading south. The troops connected the two segments on October 25, 1942, at Contact Creek, near Mile Post 590 in the Yukon Territory.

Four regiments of African American Army Engineers from the 93rd, 95th, and the 97th Engineer General Services Regiments and the 388th Engineer Battalion were deployed to Alaska to assist in building the 1,500 miles of road (The highway cost \$138 million to build at that time). The 10,607 men, of which a third were African American, built the road in eight months and 12 days. This extraordinary accomplishment was compared to the construction of the Panama Canal.

Little recognition has been given to the African American soldiers for their contributions in building the ALCAN Highway. For example:

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

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The road was built as an overland route across Alaska during World War II (WW II) for strategic purposes in our country's fight against Japanese aggression. A shortage of manpower early in WW II led to the U.S. Army's decision to send African American troops to Alaska to assist in the ALCAN Highway construction.

At the formal dedication of the road, Brig. Gen. James A. O'Connor singled out the African American troops for special recognition: "Someday the accomplishments of these African American soldiers – achievements accomplished far from their homes - will occupy a major place in the lore of the North country," he promised. Because of the African American troop's performance in contributing to the construction of the ALCAN Highway, military and civilian leaders decided to desegregate the armed services in 1948. The Federal Highway Administration has called the ALCAN Highway, "the road to civil rights."

This year, 2017, marks the 75th anniversary of the ALCAN Highway. It's fitting we recognize these men and celebrate their contributions in constructing the ALCAN Highway!