

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE



REPRESENTATIVE GERAN TARR

HB 94

"An Act establishing October 25 of each year as African American Soldiers' Contribution to Building the Alaska Highway Day."

Sponsor Statement

House Bill 94 recognizes the contributions of African American Soldiers in building the Alaska Highway and commemorates their efforts by establishing October 25th as African American Soldiers Contribution to Building the Alaska Highway Day.

Six years before the U.S. Army desegregated, it was 1942, and the Army Corps of Engineers assigned more than 10,000 men to build the Alaska Canada Military Highway. About a third of those men were black soldiers: members of three newly formed "Negro regiments". At the time, many people felt that due to their race, African American engineers could not perform as well or be as skilled as the Caucasians. This was during a period of history where segregation and Jim Crow laws were common and the ideologies that go hand in hand were encouraged.

While working on the same highway, the African American and Caucasian united were kept strictly and heavily segregated. In some cases, the African American engineers often had to give up their machinery in exchange for hand tools so that the Caucasian engineers when theirs broke. An entire African American unit, 95th Engineer Regiment, the final unit transferred to the highway were reduced to hand tools at one point.

On October 25, 1942, African American troops were deployed to Alaska to build 1,500 miles of road. Over 100,500 men (of which a third were African American), built the road in just over eight months. We compare this extraordinary accomplishment to that of the construction of the Panama Canal, and although African American soldiers played a very crucial and key role in helping build the highway system we still use today, little has been done to recognize their contributions in the constructing of the Alaska-Canadian (ALCAN) highway. Because of the work that was done on the ALCAN highway by African American soldiers, both military and civilian leaders decided to desegregate the armed services in 1948. The Alaska-Canadian Highway is referred to as, "the road to civil rights" by the Federal Highway Administration.

2017 marks the 75th anniversary of the construction of the ALCAN highway. It's only fitting that we recognize the work done by these courageous African American men.