

HB

98

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE

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STATE AFFAIRS
ECONOMIC TASK
FORCE

REPRESENTATIVE BETTYE DAVIS
DISTRICT 21

MEMORANDUM

APR 8 1993

TO: SENATOR LOREN LEMAN, CHAIR
SENATE STATE AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

FROM: REPRESENTATIVE BETTYE DAVIS BD

DATE: APRIL 8, 1993

RE: SCHEDULING OF HB98

**********/*****

I respectfully request that HB98, " Naming the Black Veterans Recognition Bridge on the Alaska Highway over the Gerstle River" be scheduled at your earliest convenience.

HB98 has received favorable consideration from the Senate Transportation Committee. A quorum of Committee Members signed a "do pass".

I have attached a copy of the Bill, sponsor statement, fiscal note and other pertinent information for your review.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me, or Liz Roberts, or Renee Chatman of my staff at X3875. Thank you for your attention to this matter.





Official Business

Alaska State Legislature

House

REPRESENTATIVE BETTYE DAVIS

Pouch V
State Capitol
Juneau, Alaska 99811

SPONSOR STATEMENT

HB 98 - Naming the Black Veterans Recognition Bridge on the Alaska Highway over the Gerstle River.

1992 marked the 50th anniversary of the construction of the Great Alaska Highway, a 1,522 mile-long road from Dawson Creek, British Columbia to Fairbanks, Alaska. Heralded as a near impossible feat, the construction was completed in a record time of eight months and twelve days.

Of the 10,607 soldier who worked on the road, 3,695 were members of the Black Corps of Engineers, a fact not widely known or reported. These men, mostly from the South, toiled under great duress, ill-housing, sub-zero temperatures, insufficient clothing, monotonous food and 20 hour work days.

During the formal dedication of the road, Brig. General James O'Connor, head of the Northwest Service Command, stated:

"Some day, the accomplishments of these colored soldiers -- achievements accomplished far from their homes -- will occupy a major place in the lore of the North Country."

Instead, they were forgotten.

It was just last year that their contributions received state and national recognition. In January, thirteen veterans were reunited in a fun-filled event in Tallahassee, Florida, sponsored by the University of Alaska and Florida A&M University.

In July, Alaska hosted eight of the men during "*Alaska Highway Rendezvous 92.*" In addition to the "Miles and Miles" pictorial at the Anchorage museum, the veterans were honored at parades, picnics, and a host of other events sponsored by local groups, the Great Alaska Highway Society and the Division of Tourism.

The Alaska Highway, rich in historic and scenic sites, is enjoyed by thousands every year. I hope you will join me in honoring the black soldiers who helped to make it possible.

FISCAL NOTE

Revision Date: Department Affected: DOT&PF
 Title: Black Vet's Recognition Bridge, Alaska Hwy BRU: Interior District M&O
 Sponsor: B. Davis Component: Highways & Aviation
 Requestor: B. Davis Component Serial Number: 584

EXPENDITURES/REVENUES: (Thousands of Dollars)

OPERATING	FY94	FY95	FY96	FY97	FY98	FY99
PERSONAL SERVICES	0	0	0	0	0	0
TRAVEL	0	0	0	0	0	0
CONTRACTUAL	0	0	0	0	0	0
SUPPLIES	0	0	0	0	0	0
EQUIPMENT	0	0	0	0	0	0
LAND & STRUCTURES	0	0	0	0	0	0
GRANTS, CLAIMS	0	0	0	0	0	0
MISCELLANEOUS	0	0	0	0	0	0
TOTAL OPERATING:	0	0	0	0	0	0

CAPITAL	0	0	0	0	0	0
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REVENUE FUND SOURCE	0	0	0	0	0	0
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FUNDING: (Thousands of Dollars)

1002 FEDERAL RECEIPTS	0	0	0	0	0	0
1003 GF MATCH	0	0	0	0	0	0
1004 GF	0	0	0	0	0	0
1005 GF/PROGRAM RECEIPTS	0	0	0	0	0	0
1006 GF/MHTIA	0	0	0	0	0	0
OTHER	0	0	0	0	0	0
TOTAL FUNDING:	0	0	0	0	0	0

POSITIONS

FULL-TIME	0	0	0	0	0	0
PART-TIME	0	0	0	0	0	0
TEMPORARY	0	0	0	0	0	0

Estimate of current year (FY93) impact: \$0

ANALYSIS: (Attach a separate page if necessary)

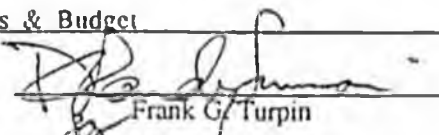
The direct costs of plaque preparation and installation will be absorbed by the Alaska Highway MP 1222 N / Celebration 92 balance.

Prepared by: Dawn Mach

Phone: 465-6987

Division: Plans, Programs & Budget

Date: February 2, 1993

Approved by Commissioner:  Frank G. Turpin

Phone: 465-3901

Agency: Department of Transportation and Public Facilities

Date: February 2, 1993

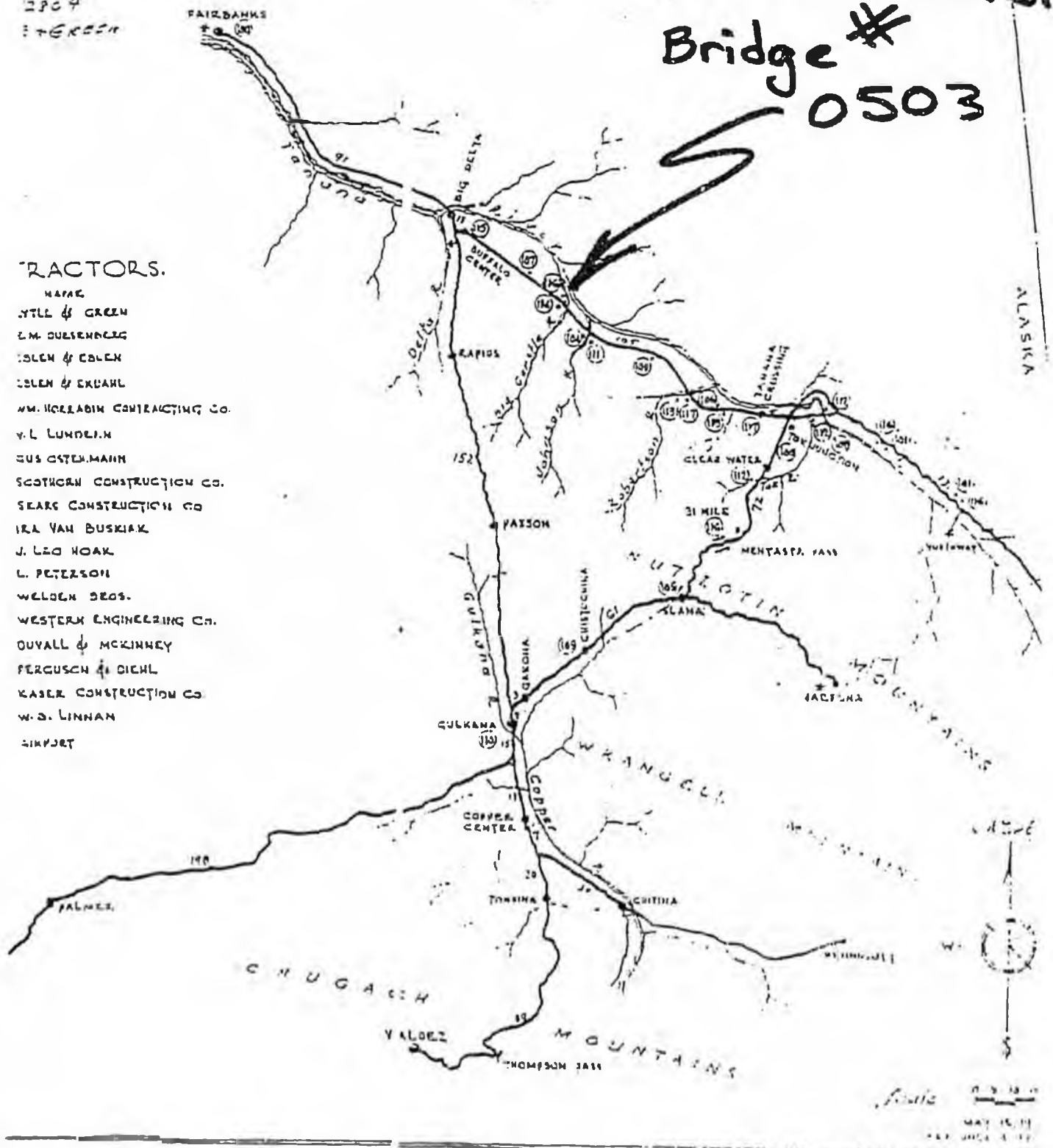
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Gerstle River
 Bridge #
 0503

FACTORS.

- NAME
 YTL & GREEN
 E.M. DUBENECZ
 SOLEN & SOLEN
 SOLEN & ERKAHL
 W.M. HOREADIN CONTRACTING CO.
 V.L. LUNDLUN
 BUS OSTENMAHN
 SCOTHORN CONSTRUCTION CO.
 SEARS CONSTRUCTION CO.
 IRA VAN BUSKIAK
 J. LEO HOAK
 L. PETERSON
 WELDEN SEAS.
 WESTERN ENGINEERING CO.
 OUVALL & MCKINNEY
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 W.S. LINNAN
 SIMPSET



1943 Map of Construction Camps

Miles and Miles

Honoring Black Veterans Who Built the Alcan Highway



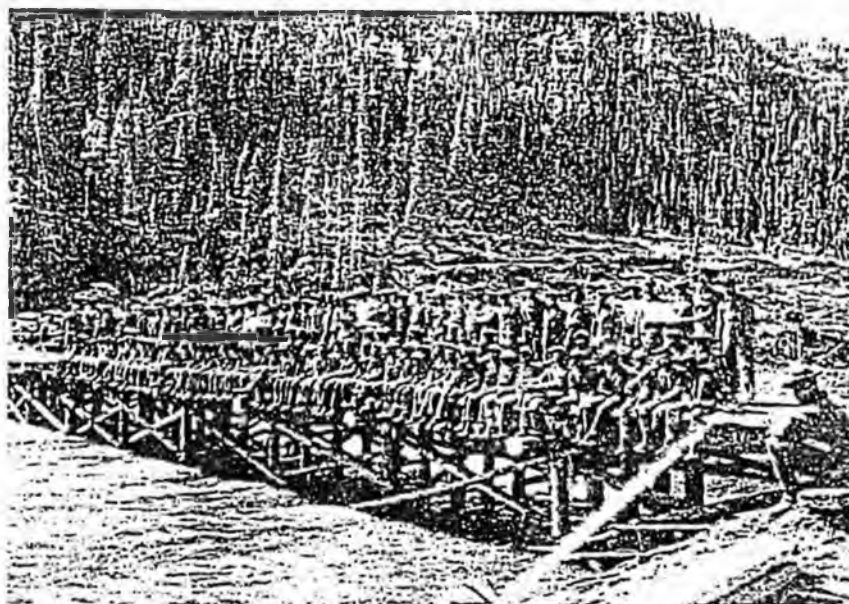
Presented by the
Department of
Journalism and Broadcasting
University of Alaska Fairbanks

at the

The University of Alaska Museum
February 1 — March 15, 1992

Men of the 95th, stationed at the wild Sikanni Chief River, bet their paychecks they could break all records bridging it and won in 84 hours—roughly half the time usually required for bridge construction. It is one of the few original bridges still standing.

Photo courtesy of
Edward G. Carroll



Deep in a stack of dusty 1943 war records is a wistful quote from a Negro soldier who had been asked what working on the Alcan highway was like.

"It's miles and miles of nothing but miles and miles!" he said.

The building of the Alcan (Alaska) Highway during World War II has been likened to the construction of the Panama Canal. Most experts predicted it couldn't be done. The route spanned some of the coldest, toughest, least explored, most dazzling country on the North American continent. Yet the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers pushed through a 1,500-mile pioneer road in just eight months and 12 days.

One third of the 10,607 men who built it were Blacks, originally deemed unfit for the task. Yet despite incredible odds in an harsh and alien land, they more than proved themselves.

Alaska Went to the 97th

The Alaska section of the road was built by the all-Black 97th Division of the Corps of Engineers over the protests of the U.S. Army commander for Alaska, Gen. Simon Bolivar Buckner Jr., son of a Confederate general who had surrendered to Grant.

"Certainly, the Army has a responsibility in not further complicating the population characteristics of the Territory by leaving a trail of new racial mixtures," he argued. And he was placated only by the

Cover: Mired! Engineers muster to help a trucker who failed to pass in a big way.

Photo by Father John Paul Tanguay, Yukon Territory

promise that Black troops would not be allowed near any settlements.

Buckner's objections were echoed by top brass in Washington who worried that Black soldiers would not have suitable intellectual capacity to handle bulldozers. Blacks who had little chance at education were delegated to stateside "housekeeping" assignments until a desperate shortage of manpower caused military planners to chance sending them north for the strategic Alcan mission.

It proved to be a good gamble but the coldest winter in recorded history was a setback. The majority of the men, like Fred Spencer of Snead, Florida, were from the deep south.

"We knew we were going to freeze to death so we took precautions," he recalls with a grin. "Those northern boys thought they could 'bulldoze' the weather so they froze their fingers and their toes and their ears."

A confidential report noted during a field inspection at -63 below the clothing of Delta's Black



This outdoor latrine may not look too plush but it was a luxury compared to early accommodations in the field. It wasn't too bad in summer but picture it in blowing snow at 63° below!

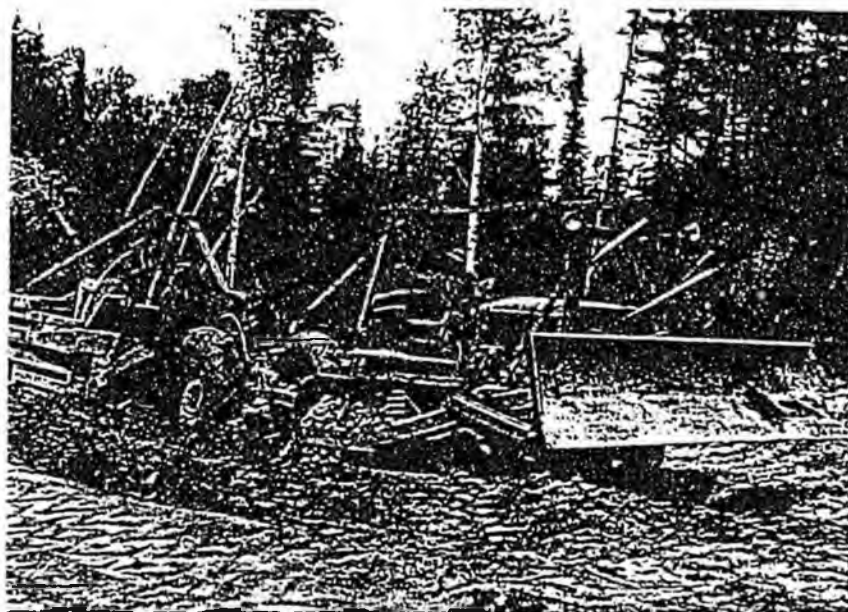
Photo Courtesy of
Howard Garbor

A Pontoon bridge spans the Stikin River at Milepost 119 on July 22, 1942. The Engineers built a total of 133 bridges and 8,000 culverts to complete the highway.

National Archives Photo

Early on, officials debated about whether or not Blacks could be trained to use heavy equipment. Here Corpsmen show the answer is "yes" with a Caterpillar Diesel D7 Tractor and LeTourneau Carryall scraper.

U.S. Army Photo
National Archives



regiment was found to be in "abominable condition."

"The pathetically ill-equipped 97th is doing little else but hibernating at present. It is of great importance, however, to point out that these men are not freezing in unusual numbers," the report concluded.

The warm accommodation of the newly built air base was off limits to Blacks. Most wintered in tents. But the men and their white commanding officers often made good use of off hours for training programs. And, given a break in the weather, these troops made up for lost time.

Walter E. Mason's "A" Company built 295 miles of road through stunted forest from Slana, across the Tanana River, and then south into Canada. And 85 miles of that was corduroy road—some of it five layers deep to counter the permafrost.

"We made about five miles a day; had to move camp every two or three days," the Virginia engineer recalls. "Ours was the first Cat (bulldozer) to cross the border and everybody climbed on. We were supposed to meet the (all white) 18th coming up from the south. When they didn't show up, we kept on going."

Like many other companies, Mason's men went

for long periods without leave, mail or fresh food, but there were few complaints.

"The morale was good as every man accepted the conditions and lived with them," agrees Howard Garber who headed Company "E" of Alaska's 97th Second Battalion. "Our men's work effectiveness was very good considering that during the summer they worked seven days per week and almost 24 hours a day."

The 95th, 94th, 93rd and 388th also Mustered

Other Black regiments—the 95th, 94th, 93rd and 388th—moving north from Dawson Creek also made good showings. The 95th, stationed at wild Sikanni Chief River, bet their paychecks they could break all records bridging it and won in 84 hours—roughly half the time usually required for bridge construction.

Many like Joseph Prejean of Lafayette, Louisiana, were highly motivated. Prejean made good money in the endless rounds of crap games that kept Alcan troops from boredom in off hours. Learning to read from a buddy who was going with a school teacher, he got through Army cooking school and went on to become a highly paid chef in civilian life.



An *ice bridge* fails big time near Ft. St. John. Engineers would replace it with a pontoon structure after spring breakup, but the in-between season was rough trucking.

Photo courtesy
Ft. St. John—North Peace
Museum Archives



U.S. Army commander for Alaska, Gen. Simon Bolivar Buckner Jr., son of a Confederate general who had surrendered to Grant, was not pleased to learn Black troops would be sent to Alaska. Because of his protests, Blacks were generally not allowed near towns or villages.

Painting by
Lt. William Cummings
Alaska 1944.

His parents had worked as tenant farmers for 21 years and Prejean recalls that their landlord tried to scare him out of enlisting, warning he'd be killed.

"I told him I just couldn't make it on \$1.50 a week," the tall well-spoken restaurateur recounts gleefully. "When I got home, I had all that money in the bank and he was dead."

When Herbert Tucker, Washington, D. C., narrowly missed passing an entrance exam for officer's training in the spring of 1942, he found himself crossing the Peace River on an ice bridge with the 95th and lasted until October when he recalls the mercury suddenly plunged to -50 below.

"If I have to pass that test to get out of here, that's what I'm going to do," he declared on the spot, and the next week he was on his way south to become a career officer.

Our Men Proved Themselves

The Alcan assignment offered unprecedented opportunity for many Blacks who, for the first time, received the same pay and benefits as white workers, notes the Rev. Edward G. Carroll, a graduate of Columbia University and Yale Divinity School, recently retired as bishop of the Methodist Church for New England.

"Yes, there were discrimination problems," he concedes. As one of few Blacks allowed officer status by virtue of his calling, he sometimes felt the brunt of it.

"They said we didn't have the mentality to deal with heavy equipment. The race you don't know is the race you suspect, but our men proved themselves."

During the formal dedication of the road, Brig. Gen. James A. O'Conner, head of the Northwest Service Command, singled out the Black troops for special recognition.

"Some day the accomplishment of these colored soldiers—achievements accomplished far from their homes—will occupy a major place in the lore of the North country," he promised.

Instead they were forgotten. When the Alcan was completed, the Black engineers were sent to

active duty in the South Pacific, Europe and Burma, reversing an earlier pronouncement that they would be unfit for battle. Many were decorated. Ultimately, after Blacks performed with valor and skill under fire, the military became the first agency in America to integrate. But the only tangible tribute to the Black builders of the Alcan is the remarkable road they left behind them...still in use and our sole land link to Alaska after 50 years.

Lael Morgan
Guest Curator



Corps of Engineers camp on the shore of Kluane Lake. This photo was taken in the early morning when trucks lined up to take troops to work. Note logs in foreground used to build "corduroy road" over permafrost.

National Archives Photo

Carolyn White
907 (353-5414) home
306-7604 duty

Black vets honored in parade, exhibit

By KELLY SHEETS
Daily News staff

Nehemiah Atkinson of Louisiana was inducted into the Army in 1942. After eight months of medical school, he was sent to Alaska to join the all-black 97th Division of the Corps of Engineers, which was constructing the Alcan Highway.

"We worked more than 10 hours a day," he said. "But I don't have to do much, because everybody was healthy. There were a few accidents with the heavy equipment, but Alaska was so healthy that if you got a flu on you, it would be gone the next day."

One-third of the 10,607 men working on the project were black. The Alaska section of the road was built by the 97th Division over the protests of the U.S. Army Commander for Alaska, Gen. Simon Bolivar Buckner Jr. Buckner didn't think black soldiers were intelligent enough to handle bulldozers. He was proved quite wrong.

In one of the most outstanding accomplishments during the building of the Alcan, the 95th, stationed at the wild Sikanli Chief River, bet their paychecks they could break all records rigging it, and they won in 48 hours — roughly half the time usually required for the construction. The bridge is one of the few original Alcan bridges still standing.

During the formal dedication of the road, Brig. Gen. James A. O'Conner, head of



University of Alaska Fairbanks
Corps of Engineers veterans gather for a 50th anniversary reunion in Florida. They are, back row, from left: Donald Norland Sr., Walter Dudrow, Albert Franca, Irving Smith, Alexander Powell. Front row: Reginald Beverly, Frank Brehon, Willie Richardson, Richard Trent, Bishop Edward Carroll, Nehemiah Atkinson.

the Northwest Service Command, singled out the black troops for special recognition.

But other than O'Conner's commendation, the black troops — the 97th in Alaska and the 93rd, 95th and 388th in Canada — were forgotten. Most literature about the highway overlooked their significant contribution.

Frank Brehon of Florida joined the 388th at age 18. He said the hardest part of the job was the cold. The winter of '42-'43 was the worst on record at that time. Temperatures hovered at 50 degrees below zero for weeks, and the temperature

dropped into the minus 60s and 70s a few times. The troops were issued inadequate leather boots and cumbersome mittens to work in, Brehon said, and had virtually no fresh food for months. They slept in tents.

Working in the summer was equally hard, Brehon said: "It was light out for so long that they made us work 12 hours or more hours a day," he said, often "in mud over our ankles. Sometimes it was almost up to our knees."

It was 72 degrees below zero when Nehemiah Atkinson left Alaska. He was then

sent to New Guinea, where the temperature was 120 degrees — a difference of almost 200 degrees. He hasn't been to Alaska since working on the Alcan, but he, Brehon and eight other black veterans have returned to take part in today's Fourth of July parade. They will also attend a reunion reception at 7 p.m. at the Anchorage Museum of History and Art, where a photo exhibition titled "Miles and Miles: Honoring Black Veterans Who Built the Alcan Highway" will be on display all summer. The public is invited to the reception.