

NO TASK TOO GREAT IN ALASKA



CHAPTER I OF THE HISTORY OF THE 97TH ENGINEER BATTALION (CONSTRUCTION)

Updated 16 November 2013

The 97th Engr Bn (Const) started off as the 56th Engr Bn (Separate) when this unit was placed on the inactive list of the Regular Army on 1 Oct 1933, the 97th's official birthday. The battalion was re-designated as the 97th Engr Bn (Separate) on 1 Jan 1938, and was initially activated for full military service at Camp Blanding, FL, on 1 Jun 1941. On 22 Feb 1942, the battalion was re-designated the 97th Engr Regiment (General Service), later to be renamed the 97th Engr General Service Regiment on 1 Aug 1942.

After initial training in basic military operations at Camp Blanding, to include some indoctrination in construction engineering fundamentals, the regiment departed Florida aboard a troop train secretly bound for Seattle, Washington, and in April 1942 reported to Fort Lewis, Washington. Then at the Port of Seattle, the 97th boarded the *SS David W. Branch* and began the most famous single project in its history as its first major assignment. The entire unit and some of the heavy equipment, not informed of their destination until this point, sailed to Valdez, Alaska, where a temporary camp was set up in the harsh winter. The men of the Regiment were forced to sit in their chilly environment for a full month because the extreme cold had frozen the ground, made trails impossible, and created many other natural obstacles. The 97th was well equipped with bulldozers (24 of them); but only one operator, an officer, was available. His task of training and guiding enough men to man the dozers was soon accomplished.

In June, under the command of **COL Stephen Carson Whipple**, the 97th Engineers set out to meet a construction engineering challenge. The 97th received orders to build a road from Slana to the junction of the road travelling south from Fairbanks. Although many major obstacles were confronted, the men were favored with nearly 24 hours of daylight during the Alaskan Arctic summer, and work progressed on a round the clock schedule.

Many bridges were needed during this construction, not only over rivers, but over dry land as well. Several times the 97th encountered spots where many tons of fill failed to cover seemingly bottomless pits of the Alaskan tundra. These became the sites of the "land" bridges. Barriers of these and other types made it impossible to build the road according to plans; so the original plans were changed, and the road was rerouted. Despite the considerable lengthening of the road these changes involved, the project was completed on schedule. This done, the 97th Engineers embarked on a job, which gained world wide attention – the building of the Alcan Highway!

According to plans, the 97th was given the mission of constructing the northern end of the highway, the 500 miles from Fairbanks, Alaska, south to White Horse, Canada. Much of this stretch of the North American Continent had never been visited by man. The 97th Engineers preceded both the explorers and the survey teams, which usually investigate new territory first.

The men of the 97th carried plenty of enthusiasm into the fight against the adverse conditions, which prevailed. Work on the previous road project had nurtured the high morale and technical skill necessary to tackle the Alcan Highway's construction. These professional engineer soldiers finished the project ahead of schedule, arriving at the White River in Sep 1943. After setting up a temporary camp to await the arrival of the Canadian section of the Alcan, the two groups finally met in an impressive ceremony, which marked another monumental project finished by the Engineers.

Upon accomplishing their important mission, the 97th prepared to return to the States; but a change of plans forced the unit to remain for yet another bitter Alaskan winter. The low morale this disappointing news caused was not helped by the Christmas Day temperature low of 79 degrees below zero, the frozen water and fuel supplies, and the one death attributable to the widespread hardships imposed by the cruel winter.

When spring and the time to depart approached, the 97th was more than ready to bring to a close their successful Alaskan chapter.

**CONGRESSIONAL RECOGNITION OF THE BLACK CORPS OF ENGINEERS,
ALASKA:**

For more information, consult "The Black Corps of Engineers and the Construction of the Alaska (ALCAN) Highway," by E. Valerie Smith; Negro History Bulletin, Vol. 51, December 1993; and the resolution that recognizes the contributions of the 97th Engineer Regiment in Alaska:

<http://www.catkillers.org/97thEngr/black-corps-of-engineers.pdf>

BUILDING THE ROAD TO ALASKA, by John T. Greenwood:

<http://www.catkillers.org/97thEngr/Road-to-Alaska-Greenwood.pdf>

MEN WHO BUILT THE ALASKIAN-AMERICAN (ALCAN) HIGHWAY:

Visit this site for additional history and photographs:

<http://www.juneteenth.alaska.alcan.com>

Men Who Built The Highway



<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/biography/alaska-men/>

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