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Walter Dubrow

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Lael Morgan, interviewer

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Walter Dubrow introduces himself. He was a second lieutenant in the 93rd Engineers. They worked on the Alcan Highway. Their railhead was in Carcross and they built the highway from an access highway from Carcross to Tagish. They joined there with the Alaska Highway. They started heading south building the highway. Their sector went just a little below the British Columbia border. Lael Morgan asked about dates. Dubrow said he was from West Virginia. He graduated and was in ROTC. He got his commission in 1940 as a second lieutenant in the Corps of Engineers. In April of 1941 he was put on active duty for what was supposed to be a year. He went to Louisiana for training. He joined the 93rd Engineer Battalion. He was there until the summer and then went on maneuvers. Their job was to repair roads and fences. They worked on the construction of a railroad out of Camp Polk. In February of 1942 they were sent to Seattle and headed for the Alaskan Highway on a train. They got off at Skagway and took the White Pass Railroad up to Carcross. There were about 1200 in their unit. It was called a separate battalion. He said during the ROTC training they trained for six weeks at Ft. Knox, Kentucky during the summers. They were not polished engineers but they learned fast. He talked about the makeup of his troop. It was a good outfit and he enjoyed working with them. Most of them were from Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana. A lot of them had couldn't read or write. They tried to teach them. There was a group from Tuskegee University. They enlisted quite a few of the graduates. They all worked together trying to teach the men to read and write. One of his duties was to make out the payroll. He had the men sign their checks and then he would have to witness the signatures. It took a lot of time. After a few months they could all sign their payroll. They wanted to learn more. Some were trained for office work. One of the men from Tuskegee was waiting to sign. He wanted to use the typewriter and Dubrow saw how well he did typing. Dubrow assigned him to headquarters company right away. Most of the men from Tuskegee applied for training as officers and went to train as officers. He talked about the other training programs for equipment. After they were on the highway they became experts. They would move every two or three days. He said it was to keep up with the mess hall. Sometimes they would get bogged down in the thick muskeg and it would take them a long time. One area they called Big Devil's Swamp. There wasn't any way to get around the thing. There were mountains on both sides of it so they had to build a highway across the swamp. It was deep muskeg. There were a lot of woods on either side and they could get logs for corduroy roads. They calculated that they had 11 layers of corduroy before it stopped sinking. It was a mile and a quarter across the swamp. The road was supposed to be forty feet wide and they ended up with about a hundred feet wide. He had an interview with a news journal at Daytona Beach. The reporter wanted to know what they did for entertainment. Carcross was the nearest town. There were ten white

people and 125 Indians there. It was a trading post and a railway station. They had the Caribou Hotel. They were a long ways from Carcross. They did play poker. In the summer the men were on eight hour shifts and the officers were on twelve hour shifts. It didn't matter when you were on shift because it was daylight all the time. They worked around the clock. He said the men were good workers. They were dedicated. They did an excellent job. The 341st Engineers were supposed to start on an area south of them. There wasn't any way to get into area. They had orders to get the 341st through. They were supposed to build a pioneer road. They had to rebuild the trails. They were happy to get them through.

Morgan asked about the living conditions. Dubrow said the living conditions were tents. They were moving fast. They had eight people in a tent. They weren't winterized. In the summer it didn't make any difference. The food was shipped to the railhead and then shipped through them. Sometimes they had the fresh meat. They had a lot of mutton. The cooks tried to make it taste good. The Mounties told them that they could shoot moose if it was for food. They would send a detail out to get a couple of moose. By September they could hang the moose out for a while and then it would taste like beef. They could send a detail out to fish the streams and feed the whole company. There was a bird that was a partridge (ptarmigan or grouse?) that they could hunt. It was pioneer conditions. He talked about Christmas in 1942. They were at Robinson which was a railroad crossing in the Yukon. There was one cabin there. Charlie McConnell lived there with his wife. He had gone to the area during the gold rush. He would visit them with his dog team. McConnell let them run the dog team. It was so cold during that time of year that cooking was an all day job. The only roadwork they were doing was grading and keeping the snow off the highways. They were on the road between Carcross and the Whitehorse. It was a connecting road to the Alcan. It wasn't very warm in the tents. On Christmas it was -73 or -68 below 0. He said germs didn't live in those kind of temperatures and they stayed healthy. After they left they went to the Aleutians and he was sick a lot of the time. Morgan asked if their unit had any injuries. Dubrow said one man was in a car accident and was sent back to the states. He said the doctors became alcoholics because they didn't have anything to do. They did buy Canadian beer at Carcross. They tried to stay away from alcohol because of all the heavy equipment they were operating.

Morgan asked how people in Carcross and other places treated them. He said he never saw any reactions to the Black troops. There were a lot of Indians around and everyone got along really well. They did have one occurrence. Their company was censoring mail. One of the members of the troop sent his mother a note explaining where they were. He said they were in the Yukon which belonged to the British, but he told his mother not to worry they would get it back.

Morgan said a lot of the troops were away from home for the first time and asked how did that work? Did they get regular mail? Dubrow said they got regular mail, but some of them had folks that couldn't write. Some of the guys were Cajun. When they would write to their folks they were writing in Cajun French. They couldn't read it so they let it go through. The guys were used to hard, physical work. They could hunt and fish on detail. Morgan made a comment that they were savvy about living in the woods. Morgan said when they first came up they wore all of their issued clothing all at once. They learned a lot from the local people. They arrived in April and they were told how to handle the cold weather. They told them to wear layers. He talked about the footwear they were issued. They were later issued moccasins. They were told to wear several

layers of socks with them. There were a few minor frostbite problems. He talked about having to deal with the cold temperatures. They were in tents the whole time.

Morgan asked Dubrow how long he stayed up north. Dubrow said he went in in April 1942 and pulled off the highway in January 1943. They were moved down to Chilkoot barracks in Haines. Some of the men got leave. They were then moved out to the Aleutians. When they got down to Chilkoot they were in steam-heated barracks with different movies every day. When they were in tents they used a heated bucket of water to bathe. They thawed the snow and ice for water. They had men who supplied the wood for the mess hall and an orderly would supply their tent. Morgan asked about keeping vehicles going. Dubrow said they kept a small caterpillar idling all night so they could pull the trucks. They would heat all the wheels with a torch to get them turning.

Morgan asked if he spent the rest of WWII in the Aleutians. Dubrow said they went to Umnak. In August of 1943 he was transferred to the 101st Engineers and they were out on Amchitka. They went out there from Kiska. They had Japanese fly over them until they got planes there. They were there until June, 1944. They then came back to the states in Missouri. When they got back there they got leave. He went back to Harper's Ferry. An article in the local paper said he was home on leave after building the Alaska Highway. After getting out of the military he returned to work for Owens Glass Company. He was stationed in Toledo and was a packaging consultant.

They trained in Missouri for several months and became the 1149th Engineers. They were in France until the end of the war. They were ordered out sooner than they were expected because of the Battle of the Bulge. They needed engineering troops. They shipped them out on Christmas Day. When they got there the battle was under control and they went around and repaired bridges and roads. After the war they were sent to California for further training. After their orders were declassified he found out they were to be part of the engineer support for the amphibious invasion of Honshu. He was glad that he missed that.

Morgan asked what happened to the 93rd that he started with on the Alcan. Dubrow said he lost touch with them after he left them for the Aleutians. Morgan asked about office detail. Dubrow said he was an officer and worked with the troops on the highway. He talked about the road to Carcross which was a pack trail in the summer and a dog trail in the winter. They wanted them to make the road able to handle loaded 1 ½ ton trucks. It was about thirty miles long and they were given ten days to complete the job. Their platoon had forty-two people in it. Morgan asks him to read what exactly they accomplished. He reads a report for his commanding officer about the work done on the Carcross Whitehorse road. They built or repaired seventeen bridges, ten culverts, they drained 1 ½ miles of low ground, they widened side hills for trucks, filled up ruts. The platoon had to move five times during a ten day job. Each move was approximately ten miles. Moving was done by cooks, orderlies and three men from the units while the rest of the platoon worked on the road. The trip from Carcross to Whitehorse could be done in three and a half hours by loaded trucks and two and a half hours by loaded jeep. The work was done during the summer. He briefly talked about mosquitos.

Dubrow said he worked for the government during the Korean War and worked on industrial controls. He worked for the Taylor Wine Company in New York State for thirty years. He was senior vice president and has been retired. He has returned to the Alaska Highway.

They look at a map and Dubrow identifies places. The swamp he talked about was near Tagish. Johnson's crossing was a crossing of the Tetlin River. It was named after the commanding officer. He talked about Captain Jacobson. Dubrow said one time he had to fly from Tagish to Whitehorse. He flew in with one of the bush pilots. Dubrow said he was the railhead detachment commander. Dubrow comments on the wildlife. He said they moved into areas where the moose had never seen people. They were fairly tame. Sometimes they had to use the bulldozer to move moose out of the way. He told a story about a bear coming close to the tents. They did shoot a bear one time that was coming into the camp.