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Nehemiah Atkinson; Corps of Engineers morning session 1/20/92

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Lael Morgan, interviewer

Series: Lael Morgan Collection interviews

Nehemiah Atkinson said he came from New Orleans, Louisiana. His parents moved from the state of Mississippi into the state of Louisiana. He was educated in the school system in Louisiana. His father was a minister and his mother was a housewife who raised ten children. His father became the bishop of the third district which consisted of Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas and Oklahoma. Atkinson said he was drafted into the military. He was twenty-two years old. He was in his second year of college at Louisiana Normal. He went to camp in Louisiana, Mississippi and Georgia. He was trained in the infantry. He was winding up his six weeks of training in Macon Georgia when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. His unit was transferred to Camp Claiborne in the engineers. His unit was then transferred to Fort Lewis Washington in Seattle. They then traveled by boat to Valdez, Alaska. He had engineering training, but was also sent to school for medical training. They also trained him in administrative work. This took place when he was in Alaska. He worked on the Alcan Highway. They left Alaska and went to Camp Sutton, North Carolina in 1943. He was there for about five months and was then sent to San Francisco. They were prepared to go to New Guinea. They went to the South Seas. They went through the Coral Sea. They didn't land on New Guinea right away because of the Japanese. They were there to build airstrips, roadways and to prepare in case the enemy struck. They didn't get into the actual fighting. They worked on various islands. He got out of the service on points. They were shipped to Honolulu and went over to San Pedro. He was shipped to Texas and discharged in December 1945. He returned to school after he left the service. He had offset training at the YMCA. He organized a tennis club in New Orleans so they could teach kids how to play tennis. This was in 1946. He worked with the YMCA and taught many kids. The schools were still segregated at this time. He organized a scholarship foundation. He has sent kids to school. They are in their fourteenth year of doing this. One of his students organized the Nehemiah Atkinson Scholarship Foundation. He still plays tennis and plays all over the country. He usually is in Florida this time of year for a tournament. He wanted to attend the reunion instead. He talked about the different tennis players he has played against and his awards.

Lael Morgan asked him about the man who froze to death while working on the Alcan Highway. Atkinson said he was with the 97th G.S. Regiment, Medical Detachment. He was a sergeant in charge of 37 men. They were spread out in different companies and Atkinson was in the headquarters. One unit had gone out for supplies in the evening near Valdez. On their way back to their camp their truck froze up. They couldn't get it started. Lt. Hart was the officer. The men got out of the car and were walking and the officer had to pull the soldier along with him. The officer made it back into the camp and had frozen hands and feet. They went out to recover the

soldier's body and thawed him out. The soldier was buried at Ladd Field. They had been about eight or ten miles from headquarters. It was extremely cold and a snowstorm came in. Atkinson talked about injuries from the cold. His unit worked from Valdez up to Fairbanks. They were stationed at Big Delta and all along the Alaska Highway. The units moved around all the time. [background noise] Lael Morgan asked about housing conditions. Atkinson said they lived in huts. They had canvas tops with wooden frames. They had a lot of heavy clothing to wear. They had fur lined boots and gloves. They had parkas. He said they had sleeping bags and ice formed on them. They cut down trees to supply each hut with wood. They constructed stoves out of 55 gallon fuel drums. Morgan asked about morale. Atkinson said it was good. They were young and didn't know anything about having a low morale. They played ball and that kept them happy. He played baseball or softball. They had a recreation department with equipment. They had leagues when they had time to play baseball or softball. Morgan asked about discrimination. Atkinson said he has never had problems. He didn't go into town when they were near a town. He stayed in camp and wrote and read for the people that could not read or write. He said they did have school for soldiers that needed it. Morgan asked about the working hours. Atkinson they worked from early morning to late at night. The cooks brought food out to the soldiers. They did have a time when they dropped K-rations to them when the Japanese were in Attu. Mail arrived late at that time, too. He said being in the Army was a great experience for him. He said it did take the United States a long time to recognize the people that did the Alcan Highway.

Unidentified person talked about the history of Black men in the military in the world and in the United States. He said he didn't have any idea about Black troops in Alaska and the troops working on the Alaska Highway. He thanked the people present for their work. He wants to have another reunion. Dr. Valerie Klephorn (?) talked about giving them an opportunity to talk about their experiences.