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Walter Parsons, Jr. ; Donald Nolan

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Lael Morgan, interviewer

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Donald Nolan said he was from Baltimore, Maryland. He was attached to the 93rd Engineers on the Alcan Highway. He was one of the first from Maryland to be inducted into service. He finished high school in Baltimore and had been out of high school about three or four years before he went into the armed forces on October 13, 1941. It happened that the day Pearl Harbor was bombed he was AWOL because he came home. He was stationed at Fort Bellvue Virginia which was the engineer school. At that time they didn't have route 95 they had 301. A farmer took them into Baltimore. His mother woke him up the Sunday Pearl Harbor was bombed. He listened to the radio and it was stated that all military personnel had to go to their closest army installation and transportation would be provided to return to their base. There were several military installations on Pennsylvania Avenue. He got on a truck and went to Fort Mead. They put on army trucks to Virginia. From there they went to Fort Livingston in Louisiana. The 93rd Engineers had just been activated. After they got their gear and equipment they were loaded on a train. They were headed north. They didn't know where they were going. They arrived at Tacoma Washington. There they were put on a troop ship. He remembers the weather being bad, but the food was very good on the ship. Once they hit rough water he was sick. The commanders made them come out of their bunks and come up on the deck to get fresh air. Most of the men were sick. He said the fresh air and exercise helped.

They started work at Dawson Creek and worked their way north. They set up camp. It wasn't extremely cold when they arrived. They had a chance to adjust to the weather. When the fall came they didn't have access to good cold weather clothing. At that time the Japanese had control of all of the North Pacific. They had sunk quite a few supply ships. Some of the supplies came through Russia. He remembers that there were Russian women on the ship and working just like men. They were unloading lumber. He went down and loaded up the lumber and other supplies and brought them back to their outfit. He was working in the field with his company. At this time they were making good progress because the ground was dry and it wasn't frozen. A lot was accomplished in the spring and summer months. He said their platoon was made up of three squads of men. One squad consisted of nine or ten men. Nolan started to talk about his platoon leader, but is interrupted.

Walter Parsons said he was from Bryant, Texas. During the war he was with the 97th Engineers. He volunteered for that regiment because he was part of a group that wanted to be together. There were people from California, New York and Pennsylvania. He was in an officer refresher course in Virginia. He had an obligation to serve in the military and wanted to take care of his

year of obligation. He volunteered in May and Pearl Harbor happened in December. They canceled all the promises to let them out after one year. They were able to work together until they finished the highway. He started another project which was a petroleum construction job. He had worked ten years for the Exxon Company. He was put in charge of building the refinery. He was in the Northwest Service Command. They were in the Whitehorse District of the Corps of Engineers. There were a lot of enlisted men assigned to the project that were not located where they were. They were hauling pipe and construction materials. Most of the people working on the refinery at Whitehorse were civilian contractors. On the Alcan he was a regimental adjutant. He was put in charge of the second train. He was a train commander. They went from Florida to Seattle, Washington by train in the spring. It was snowing when they traveled through the Rockies. It was the first time some of them had seen snow. They arrived in Seattle and stayed there for two days. They camped in a football field. Everyone else went on to Alaska, but he stayed to keep track of supplies that would be arriving. He was the designated rear echelon. The next six weeks he got equipment shipped to Alaska. The longshoremen couldn't take things apart for shipping. He talked about the problem with the mail. The Army was keeping it a secret when the boats were leaving and they wouldn't tell the people at the post office. He had to go to the postmaster. He was getting telegrams asking where the mail was. After six weeks he had most of the equipment shipped off and had permission to join his regiment. He shipped up on a troop ship and since he was traveling on orders he had to pay for his own meals. He was with the 97th engineers which was a general service regiment. He was stuck in Valdez for another three weeks. He was put in charge of a company for a while. He had C Company at first then he was battalion advocate and then he had the F Company. He said all of their food and other items were shipped to them by civilian shipping. There were people along the highway that were charging a lot of money for cigarettes. He and other officers bought four hundred dollars worth of cigarettes for the soldiers in Fairbanks. They did this several times and used the surplus money to buy pencils, paper, radios, and lanterns. At one time their supplies did not come through for a long time. He sent a note telling them to cancel their supplies and sent 125 wooden caskets and that got their attention. When the enlisted men unloaded the supply trucks they would throw the things they didn't like into the snow. They didn't like Vienna sausage. It was the only meat they had unless they killed a bear or something like that. He said he killed a lot of spruce hens. He used to carry a rifle with him at all times.

After he left the regiment a detail was transferred to another company. They were supposed to return to their own company. At the time they were supposed to return it was thirty five below zero. The sergeant tried to get them all on the truck. The trucks had been outside and were full of snow and ice and the troops refused to get on the trucks. They were told by the lieutenant that they were committing mutiny by disobeying an order. He gave them a chance to cross the line or else they would be charged with mutiny. They were sent to Whitehorse and put in a stockade. By this time Parsons said he had been transferred to the project and he went down to see the soldiers. They asked him to be the defense for them. He worked with them. There was a trial and the soldiers were found guilty in certain degrees. They were sentenced from three to eighteen years. There were eleven soldiers involved. His argument for defense was this was against regulations to put people in trucks when it was below thirty degrees. This was a verbal order and not a written order. The people involved with the court had never been on the highway and didn't know the hardships of working out on the highway.

Parsons talked about the differences between the troops he commanded. He said he didn't command until he was a full colonel. He had ROTC duty and other assignments. He said some of the Black troops did not have much education. One of the criteria they had for electing non-commissioned officers was to ask them if they had been in the boy scouts. He said if they had been in the boy scouts they knew how to camp and cook. He said there were very few Black soldiers who had been in the boy scouts. He said it wasn't a large handicap for the men who couldn't read because they would pay attention to what was being said and they would retain what they heard. He talked about the morale of the soldiers. They were headed south. Their commander said as soon as they met the regiment to the south of them they were going to go right on down the road and go back home. Parsons said that wasn't a fair thing to do, but that is what he told them. They did meet up with the 18th engineers from the south. They were one of the last regiments to meet each other. The others had tied in. This completed the highway. He went down there when they met up. He described the photo of the two members of the engineer regiments meeting up and shaking hands. Parson said the photographer was Richard Howell who was a roving editor for the engineer news record. He also took a photo of two officers from the different regiments shaking hands as well as a photo of all the officers there. The caterpillar tractors actually met in the woods right after sundown. They moved the tractors to a place where there was more light.

Parsons said there used to be a Catholic priest that roamed up and down the highway. He would say mass wherever he went. He would stay in their camp. A Black sergeant asked for service for them. They wanted a Protestant service. Parsons told him how to conduct a Protestant service by reading the scripture and singing songs.

Parsons said he never heard any discriminatory remarks about the Black troop's officers. If there was a disciplinary problem they were too busy working so they put the person in a tent by himself. They didn't have time to deal with that kind of stuff. They might postpone the discipline. His company commander was from Long Island. One night they were called down to the stockade because of some trouble. They put the ring leader trouble maker in a box. The man in the box asked the commander why he was going to be like that. He said the Captain can't help it because he was from Texas, but the Lieutenant was from Long Island. He wasn't blaming Parsons because he couldn't help it just because he was from Texas.