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Roundtable discussion

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Unidentified moderator

Lael Morgan

Series: Lael Morgan Collection interviews

An unidentified person asked everyone to identify themselves before they started speaking. Someone next to the moderator asked about the stars and their representation. Someone said it is the big dipper on the flag.

Nehemiah Atkinson introduced himself and said he was from New Orleans and was a member of the 97th G.S. Regiment in Valdez, Alaska on the Alaska Highway. He was assigned to the medical detachment and was responsible for keeping the soldiers healthy. He said it has been very good coming there for the event. He regrets that it took the United States fifty years to acknowledge their contribution. He talked about leaving Alaska and going to New Guinea. He thanked those responsible for the event. The moderator asked about the reaction of the people in New Guinea. Atkinson said they didn't have any contact with the Native people. There were Dutch New Guinea. The two groups were separate. Atkinson said he didn't get a furlough. After getting out of the service he worked with students and tennis. He described his scholarship foundation and being on the senior tennis circuit. He also played baseball and softball player in the service. He was forced to play for the H & S Company. He said tennis opened the door for him.

Alexander Powell said he was also in New Guinea. He talked about being on the troop ship and getting to Valdez. He said they didn't have paper money there. They had silver dollars. It said it was a great learning experience for him to be in the Army. He said the cold there was dry. He was in good health at that time. They didn't suffer very much. He described their cold weather clothing and overshoes. He enjoyed the experience. He talked about his furlough from his work on the Alaska Highway. He said he was just another soldier on leave.

Ed Carroll talked about Nehemiah Atkinson. He said he hoped Nehemiah will take him on as his tennis partner.

Donald Nolan said he was from the 93rd Engineers on the Alcan Highway. He asked if anyone heard Secretary of Education Bennett and other educators discussing distorted American history. He said the younger people need to hear the truthful American history. The ethnic groups have been left out of American history. There were only a few men mentioned. The new curriculums will include a changed American history. The moderator said they can now start spreading the word and it is important to get the history now. Nolan said he was a company clerk. He was working on the road with picks and shovels. An officer came over to him and told him to report

to the headquarters since he was chosen as company clerk. He reported to the orderly room and got his papers. Sergeant Major Stewart showed him the ropes. He taught him how to record the information about the soldiers and make out the payroll. The soldiers were paid in cash. He had a lot of information to learn. He said there was a high illiteracy rate in his company. Since he had graduated from high school he was chosen to work as the clerk. Stewart put him in for PFC. He showed the soldiers that couldn't read or write how to write their names. In able to get new supplies like shoes you had to bring an old pair to exchange. There was a general inspection that was unannounced. They were not supposed to have more than what they were authorized to have. There was a discussion about how much the soldiers made each month. They went to the PX for food and used credit vouchers which decreased the amount of money they got. At the end of the month some people didn't have much money left in their pay.

An unidentified person asked them how they made their own entertainment. Nolan said they had a post band which was made up of the companies that had talented men. They went around and played a little music. They mentioned a few of the songs which were played at that time. In their company they had someone who played a washboard and another person who played the saw. One of the captains insisted that one of the soldiers bring their guitar. He said there were many talented men in the Army. They managed to amuse themselves. He said they ran a school to teach some of the soldiers to read and write. He read letters for some of the soldiers.

Ed Carroll talked about a court martial. He thought the charges were trumped up. As chaplain he was invited in to give a character witness for the man. He was able to discredit a fellow officer's story.

One of the participants talked about some of the men not knowing how to write. It was announced that everyone who couldn't write their own name would not be paid on the next pay day. When the next pay day rolled around everyone could write their own name.

The moderator asked if there were many conflicts between the people that had an education and the people who didn't. The men didn't think so. Richard Trent said in Wales one of his hometown neighbor's had relatives living there. He grew up in Crafton, Pennsylvania where his family was the only Black family in the town. He said a lot of the British girls wanted to get married to get into the United States.

One of the men talked about the soldiers who were not educated. He said they came out of the South. When it was harvest or plowing time the schools were shut down so everyone could work. He said they were used to hunting. They wrote letters for them. Irving Smith said he was a squad leader and they had one man from Mississippi who could not read or write. Smith said he would fill out the laundry slip for him. He talked about working on a flood in Arkansas. They worked on the flood for about two weeks and then returned to camp. The farmers patrolled their land with a rifle to prevent their next door neighbors from opening up the levees and letting the water out onto someone else's property. Another person talked about his experience at the flood. The people that were experiencing the flood were in terrible shape, but some of them still had a prejudice attitude.

Walter Parsons said he came there to see the young men from forty years ago and he sees a bunch of old men. He said he served with the 97th Engineers. All of the soldiers in the 97th Engineers were told they were in the unit and he volunteered. He had finished an officer's refresher course. They volunteered to come down to Florida. He plans to go to Alaska later in the year. He said he was going to talk about the payroll. He said while they were working on the highway they were stretched out fifty or 100 miles apart. When they first started building the highway they got all mixed up. The different companies were working on ¼ mile stretches. Their S Company was way at the end. That system didn't work. When you went through the area that had been built you'd tear up the road. They reorganized the regiment. They put the survey group up ahead. All the people they didn't need they put in F Company. He wound up with 600 people from all the different companies. When they got the payroll they had a lot of money. He would go all along the road and find the right envelope for each man. That night they got into a poker game and one guy got all the money. He said he wished he had known who the winner was because he would have just given him all the money to begin with. He was in charge of the second train that left to go to Seattle, Washington. About half way to Washington he realized that half the troops were drunk. He said there wasn't any liquor on the trains so he didn't know how they got drunk. It turned out that a bootlegger had sold someone on the train a whole bunch of half pints of whiskey and then he sold them to the troops. He made the buyer give back all the money and he collected all the bottles. He had the soldier throw the bottles off the end of the train. He said there were some problems with lack of education when it came to choose the corporals and sergeants. The most qualified man wasn't an educated man it was the older man who had worked on a job and supervised. The young boy who was educated may not be the leader type. So they had to put the two of them together. One of his best sergeants couldn't read or write he paid attention to everything he was told and could remember them. He said it has been a pleasure for him to be at the gathering. The moderator and Lael Morgan thanked the group.