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Walter Mason, Lael Morgan, and Fred Spencer

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All things considered radio program

Robert Siegel, moderator

Series: Lael Morgan Collection interviews

Robert Siegel said fifty years ago the Alcan Highway was built up through the Yukon to Alaska. Many of the troops were Black and from the South which was a complete surprise to the Native population. Lael Morgan said one morning they woke up at Mentasta Lake and heard the bulldozers coming. They had no idea what to expect and then they saw this crew of Black engineers coming in. One old timer made a statement about the first white men they ever saw were Black.

Robert Siegel said fifty years ago there was need of a highway. It was a daunting idea – up through the Yukon and into Alaska. It had to be done fast. It was war time. The road was built.

[Recording of the opening of the highway is played with Brigadier General James O'Connell speaking] This highway stretching from Dawson Creek in British Columbia to Fairbanks in the core of Alaska is a real and unique tie between our countries. This project was born in the [hour of peril?] and produced for military purposes. Robert Siegel said that was Brigadier General James O'Connell speaking. The ceremony for opening the road was held November 20, 1942 and was recorded by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. [excerpt from the ceremony recording is played] The announcer at the dedication said the ends of the ribbon are held by four of the American soldiers who built the highway. The soldiers are Corporal Major Sharp, Private Alfred Jalucka, Master Sergeant Andrew E. Doyle, and Corporal John T. Riley. Private Alfred Jalucka is the last man who completed the road. He knocked down the last tree. [music plays] The announcer said they cut the ribbon and the Alaska Highway is officially open. Robert Siegel said that was in November of 1942. As an engineering challenge it was compared to the Panama Canal. The highway was 1500 miles long, ran through unmapped mountainous territory, built on earth that turned to treacherous mud in the summer and frustrating ice in the winter. The road had been talked about for many years -- the idea of connecting Alaska to the lower forty eight. It was the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the sighting of Japanese submarines in Alaskan waters that convinced the U.S. and Canadian governments to get started. The United States was sending aircraft to Russia under the Lend-Lease plan -- eight thousand American planes. There was already a string of airfields from Montana out through the Aleutian Islands. A highway was needed to connect those airfields and for trucking in supplies to Alaska military bases. The United States sent seven regiments from the U.S. Corps of Engineers. They were joined by thousands of civilian workers and contractors from the United States and Canada. Walter Mason was a lieutenant with the 97<sup>th</sup> Regiment A Company. Walter Mason said they had just come off of a troop train from Pensacola to Seattle. They boarded a ship and went up the Inside Passage. It

was a beautiful trip with the mountains and forests. It was an uncertain period for the soldiers. They were on the boat with hundreds of men who did not know where they were going. They went up the Passage and crossed the Gulf of Alaska on a ship that had marks from a previous encounter with a Japanese submarine on a previous trip. There was some nervousness, but it was a great adventure.

Robert Siegel said the 97<sup>th</sup> Engineers landed in Valdez at the end of April 1942. They had to wait a month in camp for the snow to melt before starting the real work on the road. Walter Mason was a mechanical engineer and motor officer. He helped to train the men to operate the heavy equipment. They used big D8 bulldozers. Everyone had to relearn building techniques to meet the special demands of the Alaskan terrain. Walter Mason said after they were out about twenty miles when they began to hit muskeg. It is frozen ground covered with moss. If you uncover it the sun will melt the frozen earth which becomes soup and mud. Their first inclination was to uncover it. They just gradually built a canal across the tundra. They were eventually told to cut trees and lay it down across the tundra. They would cover it with gravel. Robert Siegel said the soldiers called the muskeg quicksand because it sometimes swallowed trucks and heavy equipment. In some places the road was forced into consecutive hairpin turns to avoid the soggy ground. As they grew accustomed to the terrain the 97<sup>th</sup> Engineers built up speed. The A company would lead the way breaking trail. Other companies followed building culverts and ditches. Eventually they were building five miles of road a day. The soldiers faced other difficulties. Walter Mason said it was really rough. Robert Siegel said Fred Spencer was a private in the 93<sup>rd</sup> Regiment D Company. His company was working on the Canadian side of the border near the town of Whitehorse. He spent eight months on the highway. Fred Spencer said there were mosquitoes and blackflies. With the little summer they had was full of insects. They didn't have mosquito nets and they suffered until they could get that stuff. Robert Siegel said Fred Spencer and his company worked twelve hours shifts seven days a week. They felled trees with saws and axes and sometimes used hand tools to break the ground. Spencer said the work was so exhausting that the only good times were when he went to sleep. At first the soldiers had no radios and no news of the outside world. Then they began receiving the Yank an Army newspaper which told them that the Japanese bombers had attacked the naval station at Dutch Harbor and that thousands of Japanese troops had invaded the Aleutian Islands at Attu and Kiska in July. By October cold was setting in and that winter would be the worst on record. It reached 70 below zero on some parts of the highway. For Fred Spencer who had spent all of his life in Florida it was a new experience. Spencer said you had to wear protection all the time. They wore mittens over their gloves. They wore gloves when they ate and were completely covered all of the time.

Robert Siegel said Fred Spencer was one of the thousands of Black soldiers who made up a third of all the soldiers who were sent to work on the highway. They were at first a matter of debate in the military command. Siegel said Lael Morgan has researched the history of the highway especially the role of the Black soldiers. Lael Morgan said a good number of the Black troops had no chance of education. They were resigned to what was called housekeeping duties stateside. The records showed that they were not to go into active duty. When the Alaska Highway came they needed manpower they didn't have because the death toll in Europe had been higher than expected. They decided to send in the Black regiments. They did so over the protests of the commanding general in Alaska – Buckner. Buckner's father had surrendered to

Grant during the Civil War. Robert Siegel said General Buckner was persuaded that the highway could not be built without the Black soldiers. He allowed them into Alaska under one condition – they not go near any cities or towns. The highway pushed through parts of Alaska and Canada populated by Native Americans. Some of them had never seen outsiders before. Lael Morgan said one morning they woke up at Mentasta Lake and heard the bulldozers coming and had no idea what to expect. They saw this crew of Black engineers coming in. One of the old timers made a statement about the first white men they ever saw were Black.

Robert Siegel said some of the native communities were devastated by diseases brought by the outsiders. Disease for which they had no immunity. In the Native village of Teslin eight successive epidemics killed half of the children under five years of age. Elsewhere the highway was welcomed. Lael Morgan said there was a fellow who runs the Native network station in Whitehorse, Ken Cain, who said that anybody who is anybody in their Native community lived on the highway because it gave them a chance to get out and mix and mingle with the rest of the world. Robert Siegel said stories of the Alcan Highway put military death toll from accidents and cold weather as high as two hundred. Walter Mason does not believe that. Mason said that in his regiment of 1200 men only two lost their lives. One of them was a shooting by a harassed man. Siegel said another member of Mason's regiment died of hypothermia after his pickup truck broke down. The man had violated a cardinal rule – never go on the road without survival equipment. He froze to death trying to walk back to camp. Despite the adverse conditions the road was finished in just eight months. Bulldozers coming from the north and the south met in the forest outside of Beaver Creek in the Yukon on the 29<sup>th</sup> of October. The Alcan Highway is still the main road to Alaska. The gravel is now pavement and the worst curves and steepest grades have now been smoothed out. Drivers still consider it a challenge to negotiate the long desolate stretches of road with few services. Siegel said Walter Mason has returned to drive the Alaska Highway four times. He now has two children living in Alaska. Mason said he finds it quite difficult to travel back. He sees landmarks and sites that he distinctly remembers. He said he went down in the summer of 1960. His son took pictures of him holding photographs that he took in 1942 on the exact same spot. Mason said it is difficult to carry himself back that far. The whole adventure is still fresh in his mind. He said he can't realize that fifty years has gone by since then. Robert Siegel said [this has been] Walter Mason, motor officer of the 97<sup>th</sup> Engineers Regiment A Company recalling the building of the Alaska Canada Highway in 1942. [Excerpt of the recording of the opening of the highway is played] The announcer said "the signal has been given from the speaker stand for the huge trucks to start rolling down the steep incline behind them here, across the boundary line, and roar on down to Fairbanks – the first convoy to push through. Here they come now and as they pass our truck here I'll let you hear them. [truck noises] And there they go roaring of into the snowy distance. The first convoy of Fairbanks freight, symbolic of the hundreds of thousands that will follow along on this trail carrying to the strategic bases in Alaska the weapons of war that will surely smash our enemies in the Pacific. This broadcast from the official opening of the Alcan Road originated at Soldiers Summit near the international border and was recorded by the CBC's features department. The broadcast was heard by listeners in the United States ..." [recording fades out]

Listener's letters

