

2015-07-28 SIDE A

Walter Mason

Lael Morgan, interviewer

1972

Fairbanks, Alaska?

Series: Lael Morgan Collection interviews

Walter Mason said they were talking about when the cats [tractors] met on October 25, near Beaver Creek. He said Andrew McMeakon who was the CEO of A Company and was present at the occasion declared it was twelve miles beyond Beaver Creek. It wasn't very far from where the road takes off from the main Alaska Highway. When the cats met George Jones who was attached to A Company was present with Sims. There was a lieutenant from the 18th Engineers there. Harold Richardson came up shortly after from A Company and took a picture of the two cat drivers shaking hands. After that there was to be a photo of the officers. Walter Mason wasn't present at the occasion because he was up the line several miles from Beaver Creek trying to get a cat fixed. They waited for Mason and then finally took the photo without him. He pointed out that the whole group of A Company officers in the photo and only one officer from the 18th Engineers along with their cat driver. There were 97th officers present, too and Bloom who was a representative of the Caterpillar Company. He said the 97th was building the road on past Beaver Creek and the 18th had put in a small detachment at a river to find the 97th. He said the 18th was back about five miles and they heard a cat running up ahead. Instead of clearing trails they took off across country to find a 97th cat. Jones and Sims were surprised to see an 18th cat show up. He said this proves that the meeting incident took place farther than Beaver Creek. Colonel Pollick was the original CEO of the 18th Engineers. He was in charge of the northern division from White Horse to L Company. Pollick gave no credit to the 97th Engineers for having done anything on building the road beyond Beaver Creek. Mason said they worked almost to the White River. Colonel Pollick gives credit to the Dussenbergs brothers who were contractors.

00:08:00 Walter Mason introduces himself. He is from Lexington, Virginia. He said in 1942 he was a lieutenant for the A Company of the 97th Engineer Regiment when their regiment came to Alaska to build the northern section of the Alaska Highway. All the highway was built by the Army and the Corps of Engineers.

Lael Morgan said she was interested to hear that Mason had been in the Navy also. Mason said in 1932 after high school he enlisted in the Navy. He served until his 21st birthday in 1936. He was a seaman on the U.S.S. North Hampton. He later was an airplane engine mechanic on a carrier. Their squadrons were flying in the Pacific. They did go to Midway Island. He talked about fortifying Midway. When he left the Navy in February 1942 he worked in construction. He attended Virginia Polytech as an engineer student and was in ROTC. He was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the Corps of Engineer reserves.

Lael Morgan asked when he got married. Mason said he and Janet were going together for two years when he graduated. He went to work in New Jersey for Wright Aeronautical Corporation who manufactured engines for the Air Force. This was in July 1940. They were married in November 1940.

They lived in New Jersey. Janet Mason worked for the telephone company. He was at Wright until Pearl Harbor. His deferred status was cancelled. He went on active duty on March 5, 1942.

Morgan said he had very little time on the ground before he was shipped out -- about five weeks. Morgan asked him when the enlisted men began to understand where they were going when they were on the trip to Alaska. Mason said they knew and some of the sergeants knew. He said in general the enlisted men didn't know. They knew they were going north. In the military you are conditioned to whatever comes along. Mason said he had a roster from December when they returned to the states. Most of the men enlisted from February-April 1941.

Morgan asked him to describe the general make up of his troops. Mason said 15-20 percent were high school graduates. Mason said the men were from places like Clinton, North Carolina which was just a wide place in the road. The men were also from small farms, too. There were a few who were volunteers. Sergeant Hill was an old time Army man. Morgan said some of the men told her that the career Black officers were worse than the white officers. Mason said he is talking about a sergeant and not an officer. Hill was hard as nails on the men. Mason said they needed discipline. Mason talked about the upper non-coms (non-commissioned officers). He said there was a lot of natural leadership. They are the ones that become the sergeants and colonels.

Morgan asked if any of the black soldiers went on to officer's training school. Mason said they had one go to school from their regiment. He said it was difficult for them at that time. Morgan said Reverend reported that the applications weren't forwarded by the white officers. Mason said he doesn't remember any resistance in the 97th. In general the company officers had a very good attitude.

Morgan asked what their attitude was to commanding Black troops. Mason said when he went on active duty part of the orientation was filling out a paper that analyzed preferences including working with Black troops. He was already assigned to Engineering Replacement Training Center and was assigned to a Black training battalion. There were Black non-commissioned officers in the battalions. He explained what cadres were. Segregation was still going on in the military at this time.

Morgan said in early records from Washington, D.C. it was clear that the Black troops were supposed to stay at home. Mason said in Richard's book (?) he deals with this. When the Alaska Highway was set up in 1942 there were four white regiments assigned to build the Alaska Highway. The original plan called for two years to build the road. With the build-up of the Japanese in the Pacific it was decided to do build the road in one year. They looked around for more white regiments to work on the road and there were none available. The 97th, 95th and 35th regiments were assigned to work on the highway. White officers in the 97th did question how the Black troops would make out in arctic conditions. They didn't know what the conditions were like. The 97th was the last group assigned to the project. He didn't think the 97th was finalized until the CEO went to Washington in the latter part of March 1942. There was no road to Anchorage. The Richardson Highway was the only road. They thought there should be a connector at Glennallen. They put the 97th at Slana to build to the border. When they came up there the junior officers did not know the attitude of the top officers in Alaska. He said Buckner didn't have all the influence. They had a fight with Buckner while building the highway. O'Connell was also a problem. They weren't that much help to them. They were under the chief engineer's office. They were in Buckner's territory but he didn't have control over them. Mason said they knew when they assigned the 97th up here it was a tough assignment.

Morgan asked if any Black regiment had that much responsibility at that point in the war. Mason said he didn't think so. He thought they had more responsibility than the outfits down the line. The other regiments had a different line of supply and they were close to the center of operations. The 35th had a tough assignment, but they had more contact. The 18th didn't hit permafrost until they hit the border. They had started out from Whitehorse and paralleled an old road they used for supplies. The 97th had problems getting in supplies. The generals came up and landed on Lake Mentasta and Mason drove them up and down the road. Colonel Robertson took over and they had a turnabout. Mason and another man drove up to the Little Tok River on a caterpillar tractor with a sled. They were told to head for the Tanana River. Major Mitchum was out front locating the road. They made such a big jump that they started to override him. They also didn't have any supplies. They put a boom on the river and floated down supplies for them.

Morgan asked if there was any way to get from Delta to Tok at that point. Mason said there was to Delta. The riverboat came up later. There was no road from Tok to the river. He didn't think the Dussenbergs had started at Delta Junction because they were just moving in. It wasn't until they crossed the river that the Dussenbergs moved in. They came up their road. One brother was in Delta and one of them was behind them. They came in on the 25th after Mason was headed up the river. They set up a camp at Tok and started working toward the other group coming from Delta. There was an airfield at Tanacross.

Morgan asked how they traveled across country to Alaska. Mason said they boarded the train on the night of April 15. His wife saw them off at the train. When they got on the train they converted a train car into a kitchen. The men were given bunks. They took off on the L and N across Alabama, Tennessee and Kentucky and then into Indiana. Their cook train was turned over to the Union Pacific Railroad in St. Louis and they headed west. It took them four days from Pensacola to Fort Lewis. Morale on the train was good. They had pretty good food on the train. He was mess officer. They would get fresh rations at different stations. No one left the train. He thought the men enjoyed the train. It was an adventure. He said the men knew how to adapt. He thought Black people at that time knew how to make themselves happier under adverse conditions better than white people. He said the men grew up under very poor economic conditions. The depression finally ended when WWII began and things still weren't good. It was a step up for most of the men to be in the Army. They had something to do and were increasing their skills. He thought the position of the soldiers in the Army was lifted. He is sure that the economic level was lifted by being in the Army.

Morgan said being from the South she thought he had worked with Black men before. Mason said he grew up in a village in Virginia. His father was a building contractor. They lived in the country and there were a lot of Black families in the area. His grandfather had a farm which adjoined another farm owned by the Franklin family. He had been exposed on this basis. His father employed a number of Black men in his business. There was a mutual respect in their families. He thought there were good race relations. When he attended schools there wasn't that much contact.