

2015-07-28 SIDE B

Walter Mason

Lael Morgan, interviewer

1972

Fairbanks, Alaska?

Series: Lael Morgan Collection interviews

Walter Mason talked about his background affecting his attitude towards Black people. Morgan said he came into this as a familiar experience. Mason said the majority of the officers of the 97th were ROTC graduates. You had to be an engineering graduate. They started to get OCS people after they got to Alaska. Most of them were from the south or the west.

Morgan said she heard the white officers who did the best were from the South. Mason said yes, but one of the best officers was from Washington State. The soldiers in A Company had a tremendous respect for him. Mason said Coleman was from West Virginia and was the same kind of person. Vic Wirth was from Emory University and from Greenville, South Carolina. They had four surgeons. The Army had a regimental hospital with well-trained corpsmen. They never had any medical problems. There was very little illness.

Morgan said he will return to their train trip. They crossed the United States in four days. They unloaded at Fort Lewis. They had all of their equipment with them. They got on the ship, the David W. Branch, in Seattle. He had spent the summer of 1933 in Seattle. Morgan asked if they had any leave in Seattle. Mason said no. The colonel's wife showed up in Seattle. Mason gave his wife a map so she could see where he was working on the road. He said there was unnecessary secrecy on this project. They didn't have any thought of fighting the Japanese, but there was that possibility. All the men had rifles in their tents. They got on the ship and got up to Puget Sound. They stopped at Port Townsend and they tested devices because of the possibility of Japanese mines in the water. The accommodations on the ship weren't everything they could be. Some of the men did get sick and the officers had to get the men out from their bunks to go topside for exercise and fresh air. He talked about the good food on the ship. The ship had a Navy gun crew on the aft of the ship. They crossed the Bay of Alaska. There had been Japanese submarines in the water in Alaska before they came up. They got through Prince William Sound and started to see land again. They landed at Valdez. He described Valdez at the time. When the colonel went ashore they found out their orders were to go to Slana. The pass was closed in with snow at the time. The Alaska Road Commission gave them their camping spot on public land. He talked about the history of the railroad gun battle at Keystone Canyon. They camped until early June. They talked about photos of bridge building. He wanted photos of laying the corduroy road included (in a display?). He wanted to show the efforts of the men. He talked about the hard work by the men constructing the corduroy roads.

Morgan asked about the man who was shot. Mason said that took place at Mineral Lake about ten miles from Tok. They stayed in Valdez until the end of May. Morgan asked about the man who was frozen to death. Mason said that didn't happen until the following February. Mason was in Delta when that took place. They lost no men relating to the construction of the highway. He said the man who froze to death

went out in a pickup without any survival gear. The officer walked back. It didn't have anything to do with building the highway. Mason talked about what they did while they were in Valdez. He said the heavy equipment did not arrive until between the 15th and the 20th of May. That was another reason they weren't able to start the road.

Morgan asked if any of the men had heavy equipment experience. Mason said there was only one man in the regiment with experience. He was Justin Hodge. Mason said there were two men from the Caterpillar Company who were there to help. He talked about losing a road and having to rebuild. The cat was on frozen sand and almost went over the bank and lost the treads. He ended up having to put the tracks on himself. It took them a long time to free the treads. The Caterpillar men didn't know how to help. There were days lost over the next two months having to put the treads back on the tractors. He described the way they had to put treads back on. They had to do it on level ground.

Morgan asked about the permafrost problem. Mason said they ran into permafrost when they crossed the Slana River near Mentasta Lake. They hit it early on. They were told not to touch the moss covering and just build the road over it. He described making corduroy road. He figured they worked on 235 miles of road between Slana and the Tanana River and then to the White River. Of that there was approximately 85 miles of corduroy road.

Morgan asked when they got up to speed how many miles a day were they completing. Mason said they made five miles a day, sometimes a little more even in the Tanana Flats. Sometimes they would slow down. They crossed the Tanana River on the 18th of August and they were approximately 100 miles from the border. They crossed the border on the 14th of October.

Morgan asked about the accident that happened at Mineral Lake. Mason talked about what happens when everyone starts picking on one person. He said the person involved was in B Company. It was known that one man was being picked on. The man sat on the side of his bunk and had a loaded gun. He told someone else in the tent that the next person to enter the tent would be shot. The man who came through the tent happened to be his best friend and he still shot him. Mason said he came up the trail shortly after this all happened. One of the doctors gave him first aid. They were thirty miles from the regimental hospital. They carried the injured man a mile or two to get to the ambulance. The doctors worked all night on him. The man guarding the injured soldier fell asleep and the injured soldier hurt himself and died. He is sure the man who did the shooting was court martialed. It was recognized that the man had been mistreated by his fellow soldiers.

Morgan asked how often they moved camp. Mason said every day sometimes every two or three days.

Morgan asked about them getting to the border and meeting up with members of the 18th regiment. Mason said Twichell reported when they got across the Tanana they were equal distance from the border at the 18th regiment. Mason said they had told the men if they built the road this summer the men would be able to go home. He said the 18th hit a lot of big rivers that they had trouble getting across and built bridges. The only river they couldn't ford was the Tanana River. A riverboat came up and hauled some of their equipment. The Regiment also built rafts and they ferried material across. The Dussenberg brothers came over on the 25th of October and built a bridge across the Tanana. He talked about the word pontoon. From the 18th of August to the 14th of September they were heading for the border. They went by Northway and the 2nd Battalion built the road into the Northway airport. The road is still there. They had a camp at Midway Lake. They didn't have an official day off from the time they

started the road until late October. Colonel Robinson called all the men back in and issued them their supplies and winter equipment. One of the problems they had with the enlisted men whenever they got in contact with civilization was alcohol. Some of the civilian drivers hauled alcohol up the road and at times caused problems. Nothing ever got completely out of hand. After they got the road open and traffic started to roll up the road some liquor made its way into the camp. It was a problem, but they dealt with it.

Morgan asked him to give a little sketch of their progress. Mason said they crossed the border on the 14th of October. They worked toward Beaver Creek. It was eleven days from when the cats would meet. They had a camp about five miles from Beaver Creek. On the 24th Harold Robertson came into their camp. Mason said there was a lot of politics involved with the highway. Robertson had dinner with them. They knew what he was there for. Robertson was a reporter for the Engineering News Reporter. They knew they would meet up with the 18th sometime. They had three cats pushing trail in A Company. Contractors rebuilt the road in 1943. The last part to be rebuilt was the section from Beaver Creek to the White River. It was almost solid permafrost. Mason said they were there in Beaver Creek until the last day of the year. The A Company built the cabins at Beaver Creek. The trees were frozen on the outside. They built log cabins. They drew up the plans and had the plans approved. They set up a saw mill at the Beaver Creek Bridge. He talked about cutting the wood for the different parts of the cabins. He framed the first roof. All the work on the cabins was at ten below. It reached 67 below zero while they were there.

Morgan asked Mason to tell the Christmas story. Mason said planes flew over their camp. They dropped turkeys in wooden boxes. It took two days to thaw out the turkeys. He never lived in the cabins. He stayed in a tent. Lt. Jones relieved him. Jones and his men moved into the cabins. He moved on the last day of the year. They weren't working on the road at the time and they had all the men stationed at all the different way stops on the road all the way to Delta. They were keeping the bridge sites open. He said Mac and he went up to Tok and he never went back over that road until 1985. They went to Delta and he went on leave in January. He came back and they were in Delta until the 17th of March. They were in the CCC barracks. He said some of the men in the 97th wintered in tents. He talked about the food they had and said they had some good meals at Rika's Roadhouse. On the 17th of March they moved up to Livengood. There were big barracks there and it was a gold camp. There was a big dredge there. They lived in the barracks until April and then moved to tents. They made preparations to build the road onto Nome. End of recording.