

# 25th. ANNIVERSARY OF ALASKA HIGHWAY

## Jokes, Stirring Events, Difficulties Recalled

Twenty-five years ago on November 20, 1942, the Alaska Highway, then known as the ALCAN, was officially completed eight months and 11 days after it was started.

Then considered one of the greatest undertakings in U.S. history, it was one of the pioneer roads of the world, comparable only to the Burma Road which was finished in 1938.

The Burma Road, linking Burma and China, was constructed for the same reason as was the Alaska Highway—to provide a means for hauling supplies so the Japanese would not destroy

A highway from Seattle to Fairbanks was not a new idea; such a road had been talked about by the miners in the Yukon Territory during the gold rush days.

Yet, it was not the gold that brought the highway to Alaska as some people might think—it was sheer military necessity.

Today everyone knows that the word "ALCAN" is a combination of the first two letters of Alaska and the first three letters of Canada. Oldtimers who worked on the road will tell you that they never liked that coined term.

They add that because of oil cans strewn along the road, workers called it "The Oil Can Highway" or "The All Can Highway."

Whatever they called the road, the men who worked on it will never forget the seemingly insurmountable challenges it presented.

Many problems resulted from the fact that you could never tell whether or not the permafrost would thaw. If it thawed, huge muskeg bogs developed, requiring tons of rock and gravel to be poured into endless holes. Often the road sank out of sight.

Workers used not only rock and gravel, but just about anything they could find. As late as 1950 you could find stretches of road corduroyed with logs.

Men fought on despite clouds of mosquitoes which attacked every roadbuilder. Even repellents and nets did not stop the swarms. The men were glad when it turned cold because that meant the end of the mosquitoes.

However, then a new

problem arose. It sometimes was as cold as 60 or 70 below—and even colder. At Snag, Y. T., near which the road passes, the all-time North American low of minus 81.4 degrees was reached.

The military men who were thrown into this battle were mostly fresh from civilian life and unused to the hardships of life in the far north. About 10,000 troops were from seven Corps of Engineers regiments; the 35th, 341st, 95th, 18th, 340th, 93rd, and 97th. Some 6,000 civilians, Americans and Canadians, worked for private contractors on the tremendous project.

One of the military men was SSgt. Ralph Dobbs, now a civil engineer designer with the Corps' Alaska District. As a mapping expert, Sgt. Dobbs first came to Alaska in early 1940 with the 29th Engineers. Two years later, the unit was working on the ALCAN between Whitehorse and Scotty Creek in Yukon Territory.

Released from the Army in 1945, Ralph Dobbs has been serving with the Corps of Engineers since 1947. Six times he has traveled the road he helped to build.

When completed, the road was 1,630 miles long from Dawson Creek to Fairbanks. It had been built at the incredible rate of eight miles a day! While many figures have been given as the total cost to the United States, probably the closest figure stated was \$135 million.

At the dedication ceremony of November 20, 1942, Alaska was represented by E. L. Bartlett, then Secretary of State and Acting Governor, who used gold shears to cut the red, white, and blue ribbon with Ian McKenzie, a Canadian cabinet minister. The Corps of Engineers was represented by Brigadier General James A. O'Connor.

Holding the ribbon when it was cut were two enlisted men of the 340th Engineer Regiment, Corporal Otto Gronke of Chicago and Private First Class Bob Bowe of Minnesota.

They had been selected to participate in the dedication ceremony by Colonel K. S. Bush, Chief of Staff of the Northwest Service Command, because of their outstanding work on the Alaska Highway.

Following the ceremony, they headed the procession of trucks which had come up the highway from Dawson City and continued on to Fairbanks.

In Washington, D. C., Brigadier General Clarence L. Sturdevant, Assistant Chief of Staff of the Army Corps of Engineers, was turning his attention from the road to another assignment.

The job was done as far as he was concerned, and it mattered little to him that he was called the "Alcan genius."

Not only in Alaska, but wherever stationed, the Corps of Engineers is proud of one of its greatest achievements—the building of the Alaska Highway.



Alaska Highway Through Canada Wilderness



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Road Adjacent to Teslin Lake

(U.S. Army Photos)