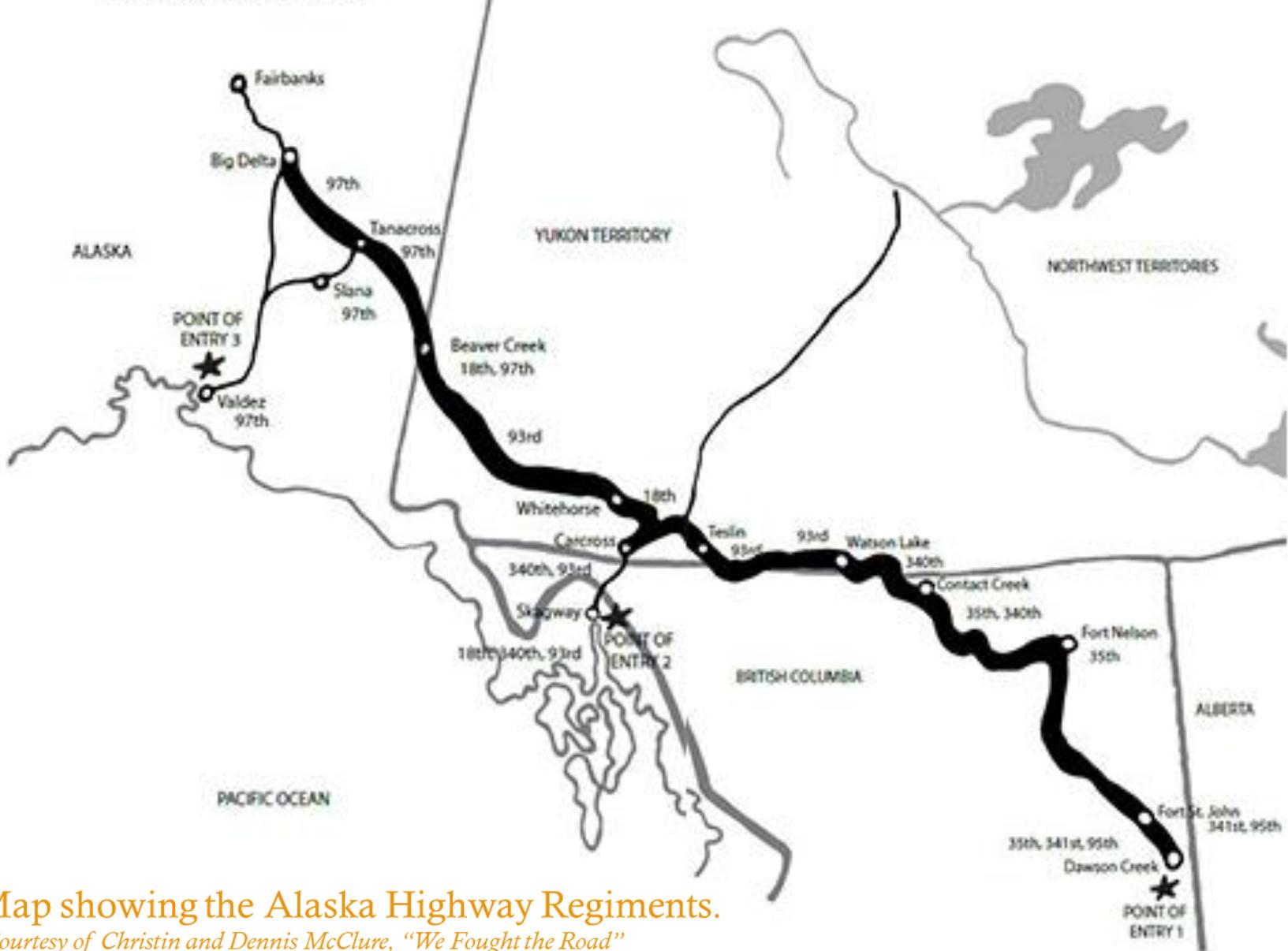




75th Anniversary of the Alaska Highway

Alaska Department of Transportation & Public Facilities

4b) Public Awareness Event



Map showing the Alaska Highway Regiments.

(Courtesy of Christin and Dennis McClure, "We Fought the Road")

A road is often more than just a road. Roads provide connection and opportunity, but roads can also facilitate change. This is the case with the Alaska Highway, the road that connects Alaska to the Lower 48 states. The year 2017 marked the 75th anniversary of the construction of the Alaska Highway, a road that is considered an engineering marvel and played a significant role in racial integration in the United States.



Surveying party marking centerline during the winter of 1942.

(Photo courtesy of Missouri University of Science and Technology 2014)

The Alaska Department of Transportation & Public Facilities (DOT&PF) was tasked with honoring the 75th anniversary of the Alaska Highway with no budget, no staff, and during a pending potential government shutdown. DOT&PF recognized the significance of the road and knew it was important to recognize this milestone. With no additional resources, staff relied on community partnerships and coordinating with existing events to highlight the history of the Alaska Highway.



Caterpillar tractor grading a section of the ALCAN highway, 1942.

After extensive research on the history of the road, and recognizing that storytelling is a method to get people engaged, DOT&PF public information staff strategically focused on the story of the people who built the road. DOT&PF partnered with private businesses, community and military organizations.



October 25, 1942, two sides met at Beaver Creek. Cpl. Refines Sims Jr. left, and Pvt. Alfred Jalufka, right. *(New York Times)*

The story of the Alaska Highway has two compelling aspects. First, it is considered an engineering marvel. In just over eight months, almost 11,000 troops constructed a pioneer trail 1,700 miles long, through the wild of Alaska and Canada, to connect Alaska to the Lower 48. The second marvel is that the construction of the road led to significant changes in our country, earning the Alaska Highway the nickname, “the road to civil rights.” In 1942, the army was still segregated, but a need for additional manpower led the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to utilize three black engineer regiments for construction of the Alaska Highway. The efforts of these engineers, though they had substandard equipment and accommodations, were a huge success, and set the stage for desegregation of the armed forces in 1948.

PVT LARKINS at attention. Larkins collection.

www.93regimentalcan.com

Through the nonprofit, Alaska Highway Project, DOT&PF identified a 96-year-old soldier who had worked on the Alaska Highway as a part of the Black Engineers 93rd Regiment. DOT&PF worked with Alaska Airlines to bring Mr. Leonard Larkins to Alaska to tell his story of constructing the Alaska Highway.



OBJECTIVES

- Tell Mr. Larkins' compelling story of building the Alaska Highway.
- Partner with communities and organizations to host celebrations of the Alaska Highway around the state.
- Garner media coverage that detailed the history of the Alaska Highway.

GOALS

- 1) Engage with communities along the Alaska Highway corridor and in 2017 host three major events in Alaska recognizing the 75th Anniversary of the Alaska Highway.
- 2) Pitch the story of constructing the Alaska Highway to major media outlets in Alaska, with a focus on media near the Alaska Highway corridor.
- 3) Establish formal partnerships with leading community organizations.



93rd Engineer catskinner soldier with D8 dozer crossing pontoon bridge.

www.93regimentalcan.com

Target Audience

Unfortunately, the history of the Alaska Highway is often lost on those who live near the road. DOT&PF specifically focused on the communities along the road corridor.

To engage with residents, DOT&PF hosted biweekly teleconferences starting in the fall of 2016 with the goal of coordinating efforts across the state. Representatives from communities along the Alaska Highway were invited, along with elected officials, the Alaska Governor's office, visitors' bureaus and military installations. Each meeting provided an opportunity for communities to share resources, brainstorm and ask for suggestions. It also created collaboration and coordination of events.

Mr. Larkins and three of his sons came to Alaska on May 28, 2017 and stayed for a week. During this time Mr. Larkins attended three major events where he was honored for his contributions. Community and military leaders attended, as did elected officials including Alaska Governor Bill Walker. Mr. Larkins also visited community and military bases along the route of the Alaska Highway.

GOALS

1) Engage with communities along the Alaska Highway corridor and in 2017 host three major events in Alaska recognizing the 75th Anniversary of the Alaska Highway.

- a. **Success: DOT&PF engaged with five established communities along the Alaska Highway.**
- b. **Success: Major events were held in Anchorage, Fairbanks and Delta Greely.**



Fairbanks



Anchorage

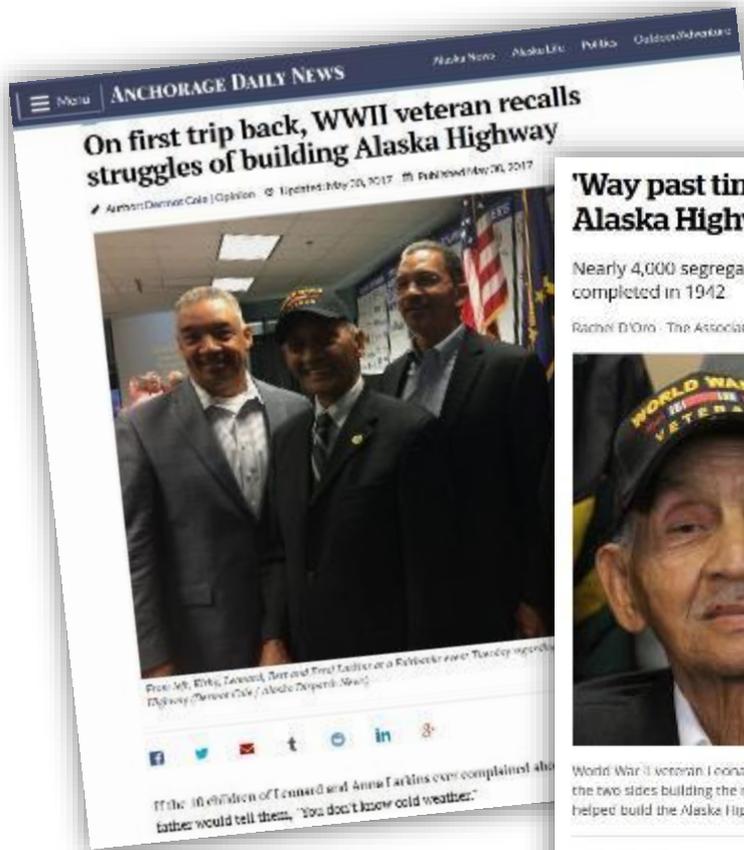


Greely Army Base, Delta

GOALS

2) Pitch the story of constructing the Alaska Highway to major media outlets in Alaska, with a focus on media near the Alaska Highway corridor.

- a. **Success:** Front page stories ran in Fairbanks, Anchorage and Delta Greely.
- b. **Success:** There were also extensive TV and radio interviews featuring Mr. Larkins.
- c. **Success:** Associated Press coverage of Mr. Larkins' visit in Alaska was published in papers across the nation.



In harsh conditions and tough terrain, it took the soldiers working from the north just over eight months to meet up with white soldiers coming from the south to connect the two segments on Oct. 25, 1942. The 2,400 kilometre route set the foundation for the only land link to Alaska.

GOALS

3) Establish formal partnerships with leading community organizations.

- a. **Success: DOT&PF partnered with private businesses, community organizations and the military, including Alaska Airlines, Westmark Hotels, Chambers of Commerce in Fairbanks and Delta, the Alaska Highway Project, Ft. Greely, Ft. Wainwright, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Explore Fairbanks and Vernon Nash Antique Auto Club.**
- b. **Success: Senate Bill 46 established October 25 of every year as “*African American Soldiers’ Contribution to Building the Alaska Highway Day.*” Alaska.**



Alaska Gov. Bill Walker signs SB 46, Oct. 25 is “African American Soldiers’ Contribution to Building the Alaska Highway Day”

NOTE

DOT&PF invited Mr. Larkins to Alaska assuming that he felt proud of his role in construction of the Alaska Highway, but that was not the case. The U.S. Army Corps Black Engineer regiments faced extreme adversity and Mr. Larkins never spoke of his experience with his family.

After Mr. Larkins visited Alaska an author working with Mr. Larkins on a book about the Alaska Highway reached out to DOT&PF and shared, “**His youngest daughter told me that she thought he was basically ashamed of the whole experience 75 years ago and that you guys in one fell swoop reversed all of that.**”

That is what all of us at Alaska DOT&PF are most proud of.