

# ROAD WARRIORS

Black regiments helped build the Alaska Highway and pave the road to desegregating the US military

Black engineers played a key role in the U.S. Army's efforts to build the 1,387-mile Alaska Highway in 1942. SCALA NEWS/GETTY IMAGES

By **Ken Bernard** and **YUDD CANNETT**

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"The engineers' work, alongside that of some African American units fighting in World War II and other 20th century conflicts, showed that African Americans were more than capable, competent and every bit equal to white soldiers in performing their duties," says Eric Robert, curator of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Office of History.

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#### ALASKA HIGHWAY

Built March-October 1942

1,387 miles



BY KEN BERNARD AND YUDD CANNETT, USA TODAY/SCALA

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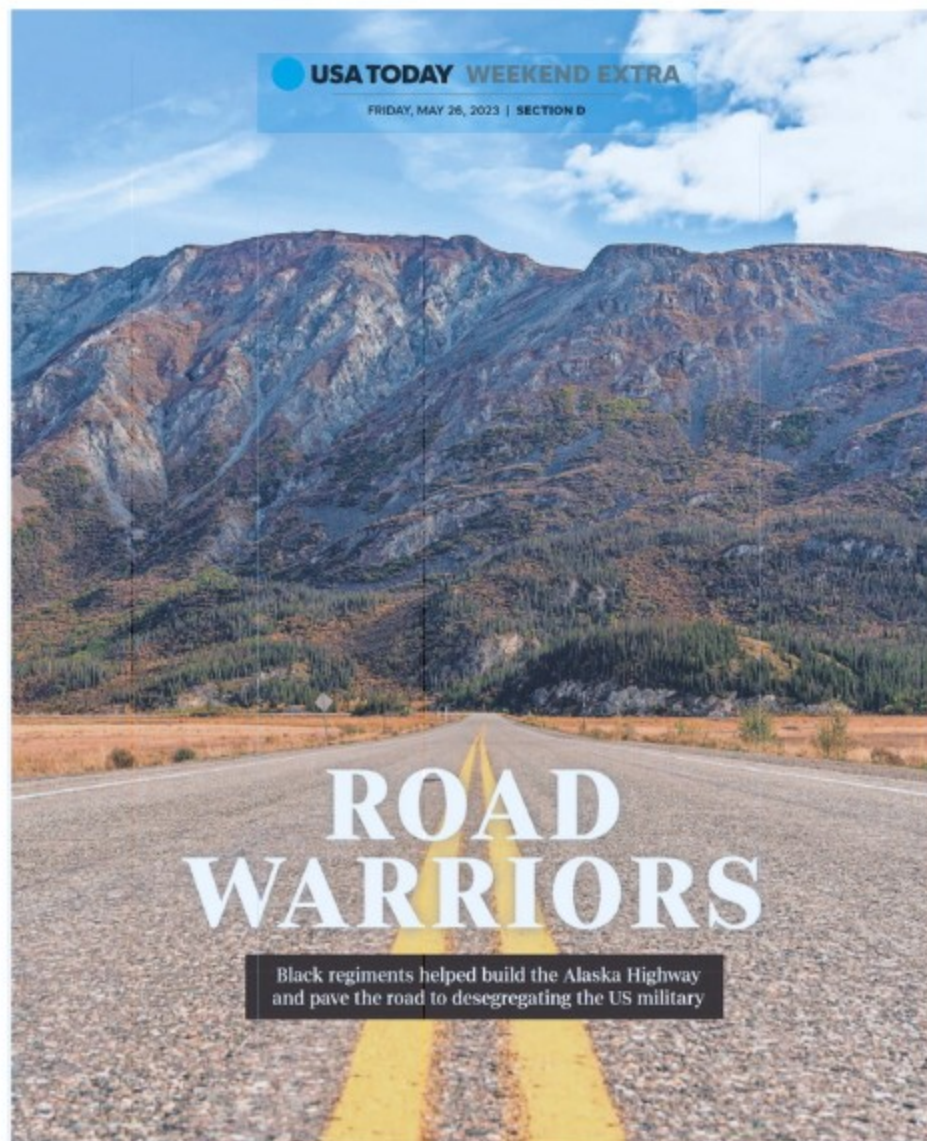
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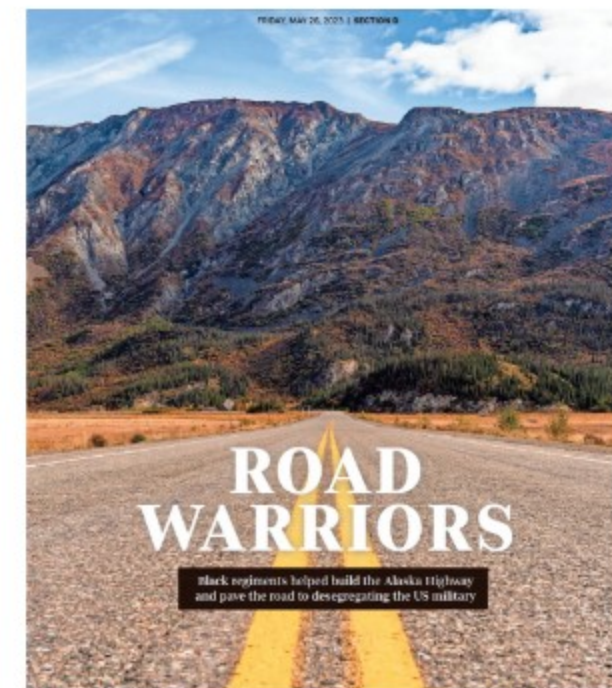
#### Japanese threat to Alaska

Prior to World War II, the only way to travel from the contiguous United States to what was then the Alaska Territory was by charter flights and ships.

But when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941, building a supply road to defend Alaska's coastline became a top priority. With the Japanese navy patrolling the Pacific Ocean and Gulf of Alaska, shipping war equipment by sea convoy was too hazardous.

"Immediately after Pearl Harbor, a series of military disasters in the Pacific heightened the sense of urgency among military and political leaders. The Japanese defeated American troops in the battles of Guam, Wake Island and Bataan in the Philippines and captured all that territory," Reinert says.

On Feb. 11, 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt approved punching a road through the wilderness to transport fighter planes, tanks, jeeps, trucks and supplies for Alaska's defense. In March, Canada agreed to allow the project in



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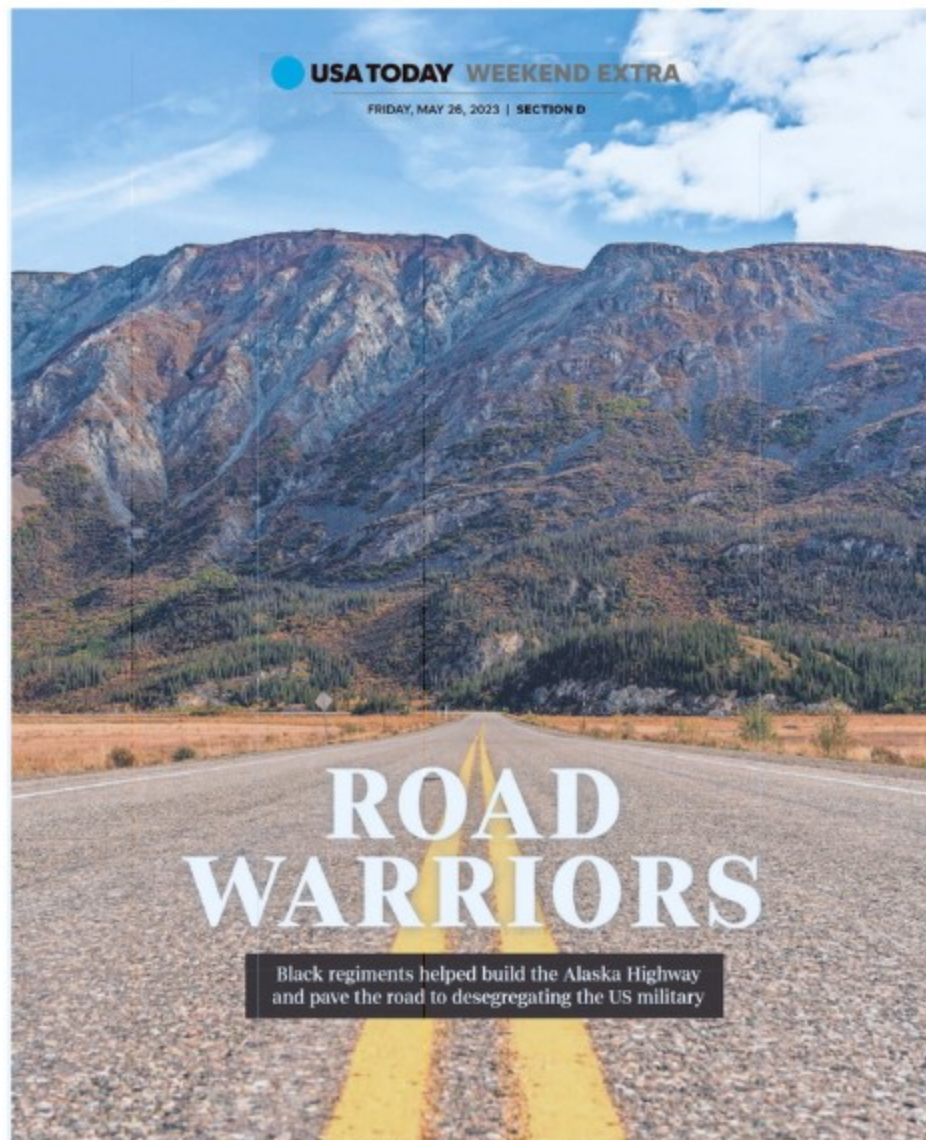
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**Engineers from the 95th regiment lay "corduroy road" – layers of logs and gravel so heavy equipment could drive across muddy areas – in the Fort St. John Sector of the ALCAN highway on June 2, 1942.** PHOTOS PROVIDED BY U.S. ARMY CORPS OF ENGINEERS OFFICE OF HISTORY





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through the wilderness to transport fighter planes, tanks, jeeps, trucks and supplies for Alaska's defense. In March, Canada agreed to allow the project in their territory.

With American troops committed to fighting in Europe and the Pacific, there was a dire shortage of manpower available to build the road. As a result, Black engineer regiments, mostly from the Deep South, were deployed.

On June 3, 1942, Japan attacked the U.S. military base at Dutch Harbor in the Aleutian Islands, a rocky archipelago stretching westward off Alaska's coast to Russia's border. Because of the Lend-Lease Act agreement with the Soviet Union, the road became critical for transporting war equipment that Russian troops used to fight Germany.

### Road through the wilderness

The road's inland route connected airfields in Alaska and Canada and supported the construction of the Canol oil pipe system project that provided fuel for the aircraft.

A Public Roads Administration report from the era described the harsh environment: "There were mountains everywhere, linked and overlaid with illimitable forests. Sprawling river systems, scores of glaciers, vast swamp areas and a multitude of lakes presented problems seldom encountered in similar undertakings."

The extreme wilderness conditions that road builders endured included blowing dust, deep snow, driving rain, mud, ice, frostbite, floods and insects. Seasonal temperatures dropped to nearly 70 degrees below zero and spiked to 90 degrees. Relentless mosquitoes and gnats swarmed construction crews.

"To build a road through this isolated wilderness under the fog of war and with no real military experience ... was simply staggering," says Ken Coates, Canada research chair in regional innovation at the University of Saskatchewan, who specializes in northern Canadian history and Aboriginal rights. "First Nations people helped American military cross churning rivers, hunted to supply them food and guided their surveyors on where to best locate the road in challenging sub-Arctic terrain."

Engineers at the north and south ends of the project worked in three shifts around the clock, building an average of two to four miles of road a day, depending upon the terrain. Right behind the surveying teams came bulldozers clearing a crude 12-foot-wide road. Army engineers followed, grading, leveling and constructing timber culverts and bridges. They built "corduroy roads" of



At the outset of World War II, approximately 3,700 segregated Black soldiers helped build nearly 1,400 miles of highway across Alaska and Canada. On Oct. 25, 1942, Cpl. Refines Sims Jr., left, and Pvt. Alfred Jalufka shook hands at the "Meeting of Bulldozers" in Beaver Creek, Alaska.

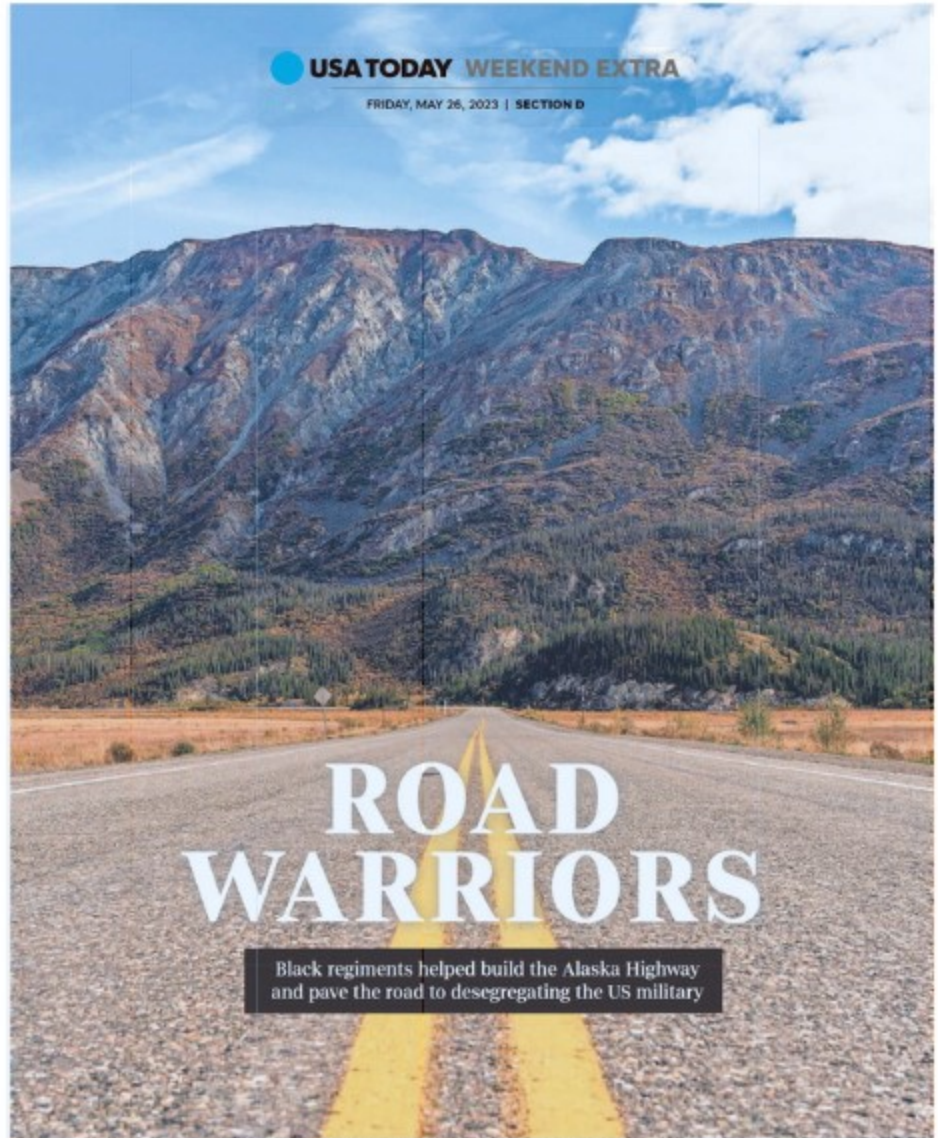


Soldiers at a makeshift bench work on the Alaska Highway in the northern sector of Alaska in 1942. The contribution of segregated Black soldiers was largely ignored for decades. In 2005, Congress passed a resolution honoring Black engineers for their efforts in the face of "indignities and double standards."

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and constructing timber culverts and bridges. They built "corduroy roads" of layered logs and gravel so heavy equipment could drive across muddy miles of muskeg, or bogs.

## Roadblocks, then recognition

In addition to enduring the environment, Black engineers battled systemic racism institutionalized in the military.

Gen. Simon Bolivar Buckner Jr., the son of a Confederate general, was commander of the Army's Alaska Defense Command. Gen. William M. Hodge oversaw the road-building project. They did not institute any change to existing military policies and procedures that could have given Black regiments treatment and advance training equal to that of white engineers.

Black regiments were led by white officers. They had segregated mess halls and latrines, inferior housing and lower-quality gear. To prevent interaction with locals, they lived in tent camps in the woods far from the region's few towns and outposts. Initially, they were not allowed to operate heavy roadbuilding equipment. To allay the American public's fears of Japanese invasion in Alaska, the U.S. government generated publicity around building the road. Some of the Black engineers' work was noted by reporters and photographers.

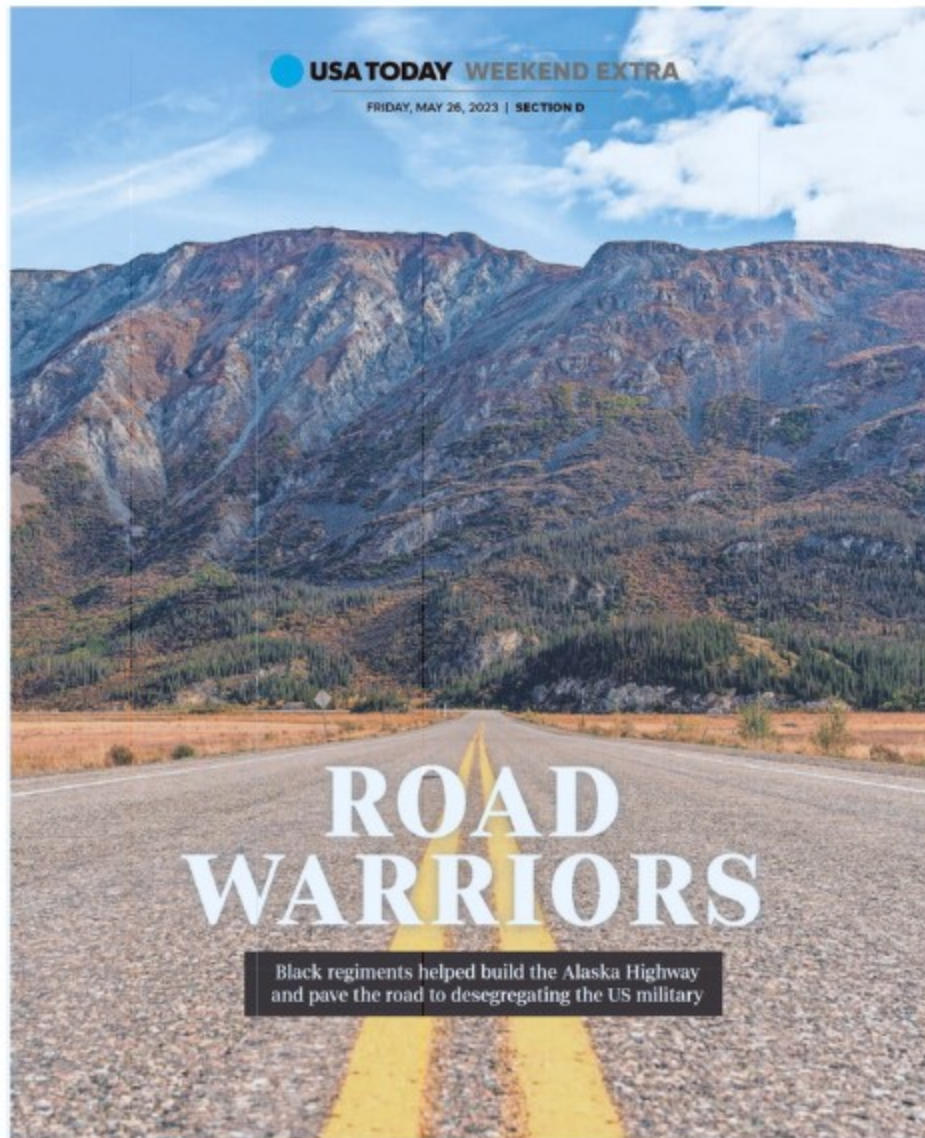
In August 1942, Time magazine published a photo of the 300-foot-long Sikanni Chief River Bridge in British Columbia built by the 95th's Black engineers. Toiling in chest-deep, fast-flowing, frigid water, they constructed the bridge in 72 hours when top brass had estimated it would take two weeks. The photo caption reads, "Bridged in two days by U.S. Negro Engineers."

The 93rd regiment built roads supporting construction of the Canol pipeline. The Jackson (Mississippi) Advocate published a photo of engineer Sgt. Robert Hayes and technician Hubert Massie, both of whom were Black, receiving the Soldier's Medal for saving Lt. Willis G. Gardener, a white officer from the 388th battalion, from drowning on June 28, 1942.

The 97th made national news on Oct. 25, 1942, when two bulldozers met in the forest 20 miles east of the Alaska-Yukon border. Coming from opposite directions, each toppling massive trees, 97th engineer Cpl. Refines Sims Jr. met Pvt. Alfred Jalufka of the 18th, a white engineer regiment.

Harold W. Richardson, a photographer from the Engineering News-Record, captured the iconic moment when the men, atop their bulldozers, shook hands over closing the wilderness gap. Newspapers and magazines nationwide published the photo.

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The 97th's Black photographer, Sgt. William Griggs, in 2002 published "The World War II Black Regiment That Built the Alaska Military Highway." His compelling black-and-white photography documents his regiment's daily life in the wilderness, their living conditions, camaraderie and construction accomplishments.

### Telling the whole history

Authors Christine and Dennis Mc-Clure wrote two books on African American engineers building the highway: "We Fought the Road" and "A Different Race." Christine's father, Lt. Col. Turner Timberlake, was a white officer in the 93rd engineer regiment.

"African American regiments were not expected to perform as well as white units. Frankly, it was a shock to many white officers when they executed their road-building duties so well. But not to my father. He was proud to serve alongside them," Christine McClure says.

Jean Pollard, a retired teacher and counselor and daughter of a Alaska Army veteran who is Black, says, "I was watching a PBS television documentary on building the highway, which mentioned the African American engineers. Here I am teaching Alaska history, and I had never heard about this!"

She and her friend, the late journalist Lael Morgan, founded the Alaska Highway Memorial Project, an Anchorage-based community education initiative dedicated to sharing the highway's Black history. The organization has created a school curriculum module, annually performs a free play staged at Anchorage's Alaska Veterans Museum and is raising funds for a memorial sculpture of a Black highway surveyor. Pollard's team spearheaded the effort to make Oct. 25 the state's Alaska Highway Day, commemorating the road's completion and honoring the Black engineers who helped construct it.

In 2005, Congress passed a resolution honoring the Alaska Highway's Black engineers. It says, "Despite enduring indignities and double standards, the soldiers of the Black Corps of Engineers contributed unselfishly to the western defense in World War II and these contributions helped lead to the subsequent integration of the military."

Today, travelers on the Alaska Highway are awestruck by the majestic, raw wilderness. Roadside memorials, small museums and historical markers trace the scenic road's World War II history and tell stories of the engineers who built it.

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