

Building the ALASKA HIGHWAY

1 x 60



International

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AMERICAN EXPERIENCE presents *Building the Alaska Highway*, the story of nearly eleven thousand Army engineers who battled freezing temperatures, ice and snow, mountains, mud, muskeg and mosquitoes to blaze a 1500-mile road through one of the harshest landscapes in North America, and take a huge step forward in defending the nation from threats in the Pacific.

When the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor in December of 1941, Americans lost a sense of security that they had been granted by virtue of isolation. The Japanese held a military base just 750 miles from Alaska's Aleutian Islands. The highway would serve as a vital supply corridor and a line of defense in World War II.

When nearly eleven thousand military engineers, most of whom had never left the lower forty-eight states, arrived in the far North, they were met with temperatures that dropped to fifty below zero, machinery that most had never seen, and the challenge of completing an unprecedented engineering feat that many said was second only to the Panama Canal. The project was to be finished within a year.

Construction of the highway was well underway in June of 1942 when the need for a speedy completion became even more evident—the Japanese had seized two islands at the far reaches of the Aleutian chain. With Japanese troops encamped on Alaskan soil, the war in the Pacific had come to the doorstep of North America, which moved these engineers from a remote corner of the globe, to the front lines of the war.

The challenge, however, was not simply a race against time. It was a battle against the elements. “Minor mistakes can be deadly,” explains engineer Billy Connor in the film. “If your vehicle breaks down in the Arctic, walking a few miles can actually cost you your life.”

Despite seemingly endless obstacles, the US Army Corps of Engineers conquered a forbidding wilderness and built the first overland route from the United States to the Alaska Territory. It was completed in under eight months, faster than anyone had imagined possible.

News of the Alaska-Canada Highway—“Alcan” for short—reached across America. The engineers were heralded as heroes who waged a war in the woods to defend a nation. And while the Japanese never did advance to Alaska's mainland, the highway did play a vital role in World War II, lending a route to nearly 8,000 aircraft that were flown from Alaska to aid the Soviet Union in its battle with Germany.

For a brief moment, the heroic efforts of a group of engineers uplifted a nation in need of some good news. But the triumph would soon be overshadowed by war news from Europe and the South Pacific.

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AMERICAN EXPERIENCE™

CREDITS

Executive Producer: Mark Samels

Series Producer: Sharon Grimberg

Producer and Director: Tracy Heather Strain

Writer: Randall MacLowry

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