

MILITARY SERVICE & ACHIEVEMENTS

97th Engineer General Service Regiment

From Camp Blanding to the Alaska Highway

African American Historical Society of Clay County, Florida (AAHSCCFL)

A downloadable history guide with active links for further exploration

A Camp Blanding Beginning

The 97th Engineer Battalion was activated for full military service at Camp Blanding, Florida, on June 1, 1941. The unit was later redesignated the 97th Engineer Regiment (General Service) and then the 97th Engineer General Service Regiment. Army historical records place the unit at Camp Blanding in 1941 and show its transfer to Eglin Field later that year. The regiment was composed of African American enlisted soldiers serving in a segregated U.S. Army.

CAMP BLANDING CONNECTION

Activated at Camp Blanding, Florida • June 1, 1941

Building the Alaska Highway

After the United States entered World War II, construction of a military road connecting Alaska with Canada became an urgent defense priority. The 97th joined other Army engineer regiments assigned to the Alaska-Canada Highway project. National Park Service and Army sources document the extraordinary conditions faced by the African American engineers: severe cold, mud, isolation, equipment problems, and the discrimination of a segregated military.

The 97th worked on the northern portion of the route. On October 25, 1942, Corporal Refines Sims Jr. of the 97th Engineers met Private Alfred Jalufka of the 18th Engineers near Beaver Creek in the Yukon. The well-known image of the Black and white bulldozer drivers meeting and shaking hands became an enduring symbol associated with the completion of the pioneer road and the broader story of African American military service during World War II.

A Legacy Beyond the Highway

The achievements of the Black engineer regiments demonstrated skill, endurance, and military value despite institutional segregation. The National Park Service describes their work on the Alaska Highway as part of the history that helped challenge discriminatory assumptions within the armed forces. After its Alaska service, the 97th later served in the Pacific, including construction work in New Guinea.

Quick Historical Timeline

DATE	MILESTONE
June 1, 1941	97th Engineer Battalion activated at Camp Blanding, Florida.
November 1941	Unit transferred to Eglin Field, Florida.
1942	Redesignated and deployed for Alaska Highway construction.
April 1942	97th arrived in Alaska and began work on the northern route.
October 25, 1942	97th and 18th Engineers met near Beaver Creek, Yukon Territory.
1943–1944	Continued northern service before redeployment.
World War II	Later performed engineering and construction duties in the Pacific Theater.

Explore the History

Use the active links below to continue exploring the 97th Engineers, the Alaska Highway, and African American military history. *Government and institutional sources are listed first.*

[U.S. National Park Service — Black History in the Last Frontier: Alaska Highway Engineers](#)

An accessible overview of the African American engineer regiments, working conditions, the October 1942 meeting, and the highway's place in the history of military integration.

[U.S. Army — The Alaskan-Canadian Highway](#)

Army history of the strategic need for the highway and the engineer units assigned to its construction.

[U.S. Army Corps of Engineers — Road to Alaska](#)

Corps of Engineers history describing the construction effort and the African American engineers who helped build the road.

[U.S. National Park Service — African American Trailblazers: Building the Alaska Highway \(video\)](#)

A short National Park Service video about the Black engineers who helped build the Alaska Highway.

[U.S. Army Alaska / Fort Wainwright — The Alaska Highway: Its Origins, Construction, and Impact \(PDF\)](#)

Illustrated Army publication with photographs, a timeline, and discussion of the 97th and other African American engineer regiments.

[Pacific Wrecks — 97th Engineer General Service Regiment](#)

A concise unit history tracing the 97th from Camp Blanding through Alaska and later Pacific service.

For Researchers

When using this guide for research, compare dates and unit designations across sources. The unit was redesignated during the war so that historical materials may refer to it as the 97th Engineer Battalion, 97th Engineer Regiment (General Service), 97th Engineer General Service Regiment, or 97th Engineers.

Historical Note

Some period records use outdated and offensive racial terminology today. Such terminology may appear in original unit designations or archival records and should be understood in its historical context.

Sources Used for This Guide

- U.S. National Park Service, "Black History in the Last Frontier: Alaska Highway Engineers."
- U.S. Army, "The Alaskan-Canadian Highway."
- U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, "Road to Alaska."
- U.S. Army historical order-of-battle material documenting activation at Camp Blanding and transfer to Eglin Field.
- 97th Engineer unit historical material and secondary unit-history references used to supplement the government sources.

Preserving the stories of service, sacrifice, achievement, and legacy.

African American Historical Society of Clay County, Florida (AAHSCCFL)

Historical Photograph Gallery

These verified historical photographs provide a visual record of the 97th Engineers and the African American soldiers who helped build the Alaska Highway. Select each gold link to open the photograph in its archival or government source.

PHOTOGRAPH 1

The Historic Beaver Creek Meeting — October 25, 1942

Corporal Refines Sims Jr. of the 97th Engineers (left) shakes hands with Private Alfred Jalufka of the 18th Engineers after their construction sections met near Beaver Creek, Yukon Territory.

Photo: Office of History, Headquarters, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Public domain U.S. Army photograph.

[Open Historical Photograph](#) | [View Source & Historical Context](#)

PHOTOGRAPH 3

97th Engineers Camp — August 1942

A view of the officers' and Walter Mason's tent at the 17 Mile Cabin Camp. Mason's notes describe homemade furniture and the rapid movement of the construction crews.

Photo: Walter Mason Collection, Office of History, Headquarters, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Public domain U.S. federal government work.

[Open Historical Photograph](#) | [View Source & Historical Context](#)

PHOTOGRAPH 4

African American Engineers Constructing a Log Bridge

African American Army Engineer soldiers construct a log bridge during the Alaska Highway project. The 93rd, 95th, and 97th African American Engineer Regiments all served on the highway project; this USACE caption does not identify the men in this particular photograph by regiment.

Photo: U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Office of History.

[Open Historical Photograph](#) | [View Source & Historical Context](#)

AAHSCCFL encourages visitors to explore the original archival and government sources for additional photographs and historical context.