

The Alcan Highway

Stretching from Dawson Creek in Canada to Alaska, the Alcan Highway is one of the most picturesque roads in North America. But the story of this fifteen hundred mile plus road is one rooted in war and hardship. Built during World War II, the Alcan Highway is one of the major engineering feats of the twentieth century. Over ten thousand American soldiers built the highway, of which almost four thousand were African-American. The African-American soldiers faced the trials and tribulations that the white soldiers faced, but had to contend with the racism and segregation of the era that mandated their isolation and relegated to them inferior tools and supplies. *The Alcan Highway* is the story of the triumphant effort of these soldiers. *The Alcan Highway* would be useful for classes on American History, African-American History, Military History, Geography and Science and Technology. It is appropriate for middle school and high school.

Objectives

Students will learn about the building of the Alcan Highway during World War II. They will explore the contributions of the almost four thousand African-American soldiers who, along with white soldiers, battled frigid conditions to build this remarkable highway in record time. They will also examine the role of racism in the building of the highway that forced African-American soldiers to face harsher conditions, liberty limitations, and poor equipment during the building of the road.

National History Standards

The Alcan Highway fulfills the following National Standards for History for grades 5-12: Chronological thinking, historical comprehension, historical analysis and interpretation, historical research capabilities, historical issues-analysis and decision-making for Era 8.

- [concurrent](#)
- [culvert](#)
- [flourish](#)
- [foothold](#)
- [grueling](#)
- [placate](#)
- [pristine](#)
- [psyche](#)
- [regiment](#)
- [respite](#)
- [signify](#)
- [swathe](#)

Discussion Questions

1. American soldiers, including almost four thousand African-Americans, build the Alcan Highway during World War II. Where is this highway? Where does it begin and where does it end?
2. What is the original length of the highway? What is its length today? Why do the lengths differ?
3. The Alcan Highway is considered to be an engineering marvel. Why?
4. The purchase of Alaska was known as "Seward's Folly?" Who was Seward? Why was the purchase of Alaska considered a "folly?"
5. In 1896, prospectors discovered gold in the Yukon Territory. How did the following "gold rush" change Alaska?
6. What are the "lower 48?" Why are they called this?

7. Both Canada and the United States preferred the “C” route over the “A” and “B” routes. Why? How did the routes differ?
8. On December 7, 1941, Japan attacked the US naval base Pearl Harbor. How and why did the attack at Pearl Harbor push the US into the project?
9. The Army Corps of Engineers built the highway. Who are the Army Corps of Engineers?
10. President Franklin D. Roosevelt assigned three African-American regiments to the project. Why did he do this? Why was this action so significant? What was the response to this action?
11. The African-American soldiers who built the Alcan Highway, as well as all African-American soldiers before 1948, served their country under Jim Crow laws. What are Jim Crow laws? How do these laws conflict with the ideals of American freedom and the Constitution?
12. Many of the soldiers suffered from frostbite. What is frostbite? How do you get frostbit? How can you prevent it?
13. Discuss the process of building the Alcan Highway.
14. The soldiers nicknamed the Alcan Highway “Oilcan Highway.” Why did they give the highway this name?
15. Discuss the differences between the equipment and conditions of African-American soldiers and white soldiers.
16. Discuss some of the difficulties the soldiers faced in building the Alcan Highway and the ways in which they overcame those difficulties.

Extended Activities

1. Locate the Alcan Highway on a map of North America and trace its path.
2. Create a timeline of the building of the Alcan Highway that illustrates the highlights of its construction. Investigate what else was going on during this time period, and add these significant dates to your timeline.
3. Research frostbite on the Internet and use your data/information to create a report.