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Unsung heroes built WWII lifeline through Canada

By CHRISTOPHER CUSSAT

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PITTSBURGH -- Although it's more than 4,000 miles from Pittsburgh to Alaska, a visit with resident Henry Geyer bridges that distance easily. In 1941, Geyer was one of the first men to be drafted by the military, but his call to duty wasn't to fight during wartime. By 1942, after training in Maryland, Missouri and California, he was assigned to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers as one of thousands of soldiers who would assume the monumentally historic task of building the Alaska Highway.

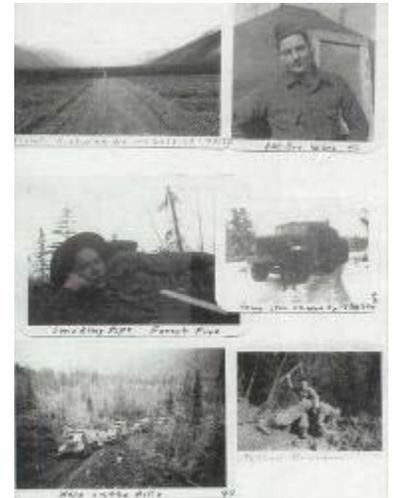
President Franklin D. Roosevelt stressed the need to construct the highway after Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor. The Alaska Highway was, in fact, one of America's earliest and most dramatic efforts to increase national security. With reasonable fears of a Japanese invasion through Alaska and Canada, the United States felt that our distant military contingent in the northern territories desperately needed a highway to connect air bases to one another and to fundamental resources.

The Alaska Highway, at its birth and for many years afterward, was a highway only by the loosest definition.

Geyer explained: "We cut down the trees and leveled off the road; it was only a 30-50 feet-wide (dirt) road." Starting in Dawson Creek, British Columbia, Geyer's Army company opened up 305 miles of "dirt" highway in record time.

His expanse of roadway connected Dawson Creek to Fort Nelson (also in British Columbia). The

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section of road that Geyer and his fellow servicemen cleared pretty much stayed the same for more than four decades.

"They kept that road that way (and just maintained a dirt road) clear up until the 1970s before they paved it," he said. "Now it's as nice as any two-lane highway in the United States."

But the 18 months he spent in British Columbia building the Alaska Highway did not necessarily leave all fond memories. It was a difficult job in an extremely harsh environment, as Geyer (now 85 years old) still vividly recalls: "I hated the doggone place. I mean, how could you love a place where you were working at 30-40 degrees below zero?" In fact, one of the coldest temperatures ever recorded in that region (70 degrees below zero) occurred while he was working there.

About three years ago, Geyer and his wife, Pam, returned to Fort Nelson to see the fruits of his hard labor so many years earlier. Immediately, those distant, bitter memories of the bitter cold melted into a warm appreciation of what he helped to accomplish.

Said Geyer, "When we got out of the airplane at Fort Nelson and after I looked around and saw what those people (who now live there) had made out of the dirt road we left them, I fell in love with the place." He was treated like a hero returning home by appreciative residents who recognized that his efforts made their current lives possible.

Today, the now more populated, but still relatively small, town of Fort Nelson is inhabited by 5,000 to 6,000 people. Along with all of the other World War II veterans who sacrificed so much during such a pivotal point of the world's history, Henry Geyer is a hero.

Christopher Cussat is a freelance writer in Pittsburgh, Pa. Henry Geyer appears in the recently released PBS film documentary, "American Experience: Building the Alaska Highway." For more information visit: www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/alaska/index.html.

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