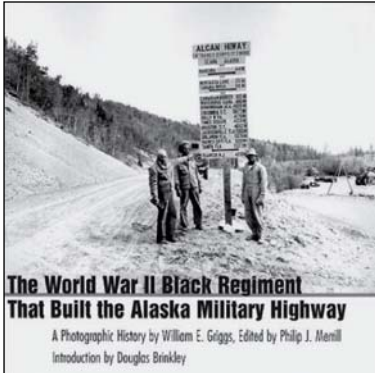


Book Reviews



The World War II Black Regiment That Built the Alaska Military Highway: A Photographic History, by William E. Griggs, University Press of Mississippi: Jackson, 2002, 112 pages, ISBN 1-57806-504-6, \$45.00 (hardcover).

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Often compared in its engineering difficulty to building the Panama Canal, construction of the Alaska-Canada (Alcan) Highway—covering 1,523 miles—was completed in just over eight months in 1942, in large part by four black regiments of the Corps of Engineers. William E. Griggs, regimental photographer of the 97th Engineers, has captured his journey in *The World War II Black Regiment That Built the Alaska Military Highway: A Photographic History*. His book pays tribute to the men whose efforts on the Alcan Highway went unrecognized for 50 years.

In what Douglas Brinkley hails in his introduction as the “greatest engineering feat of the Second World War,” the 97th finished its 194-mile section more than a year ahead of schedule, despite the severity of extreme weather; mosquitoes, mud, permafrost, and muskeg; segregation issues; and inadequate clothing and shelter—especially harsh for men who had entered the Corps in the Deep South.

The urgency in building this military road was due to the 1941 Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and later takeover of two islands at the tip of the Aleutian Chain. Since Alaska’s invasion seemed imminent, building a supply line became a priority. Even though the Japanese were successfully routed from the Aleutian Islands, the Alcan Highway was effectively used to transport thousands of airplanes to Russia via Nome and Fairbanks during World War II.

Each black regiment was assigned a portion of the highway to complete. The 97th constructed the northern Alaska section, with its sharper extremes in temperature: -70 degrees in winter and in the 90s during summer when, due to Alaska’s long days, work continued nonstop in shifts. The only two fatalities in the regiment involved a shooting and a Soldier freezing to death.

The engineers had surveyors working ten miles ahead of bulldozers that razed trees and cleared the path. In periods of thaw, vehicles got stuck in the mud constantly, requiring construction of corduroy roads (layers of logs, gravel, and sand) for traction. Boggy land—called *muskeg*, arising from permafrost conditions in Alaska—is moist soil laden with moss and dead plants, and in spring it behaves like quicksand for vehicles. This, coupled with the substandard equipment the black regiments received, made their achievement of completing the highway ahead of schedule a marvel.

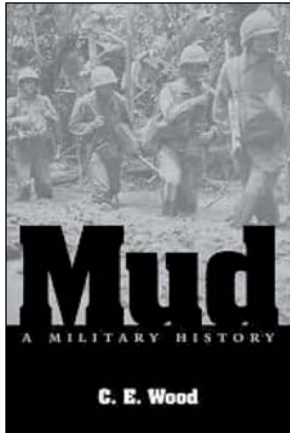
African Americans represented about one-third of the troops sent to work on the highway. The U.S. Army was finally racially integrated in 1948 by Executive Order of President Harry Truman. However, during construction of the Alcan, the Army’s black Corps of Engineers, always working under white officers, endured prejudice and substandard treatment. For example, they received unserviceable trucks destined for salvage and clothing unsuitable for the harsh climate, as well as cloth tents to be used only in the wilderness—unlike their white counterparts, who resided in Quonset® huts within air bases or populated civilian areas.

Griggs has written captions for his nearly 100 black-and-white photographs which, in addition to showing the camaraderie of the engineers, are understated testaments to their strong work ethic and tenacity to get the job done. One caption opines that these pictures of the 97th are the only *formal* photographs of *any* black regimental Soldiers who worked on the Alcan Highway. There are pictures of Soldiers on a troop train heading for embarkation from Seattle; sunken mud-bound trucks; a Soldier holding up fresh salmon for the regiment’s pet bear cub; engineers creating corduroy roads over mud and muskeg; bridge construction across waterways; and a penultimate moment of the author shaking hands with a bulldozer operator on the Alaska-Canada border—before the 97th continued 20 miles beyond their assignment, into Canada, to meet the oncoming white regiment.

As regimental photographer, Griggs managed to get himself into many of the photos. Though he was doing an assignment, his pictures are more elemental, and elegant, in their storytelling. As Brinkley observes once again, “None . . . [of the other extant publications on these men] offer what Griggs’s does: an honest matrix of memorable images documenting the raw, unfiltered experiences of black [S]oldiers at work in a segregated army.”

Consider: These engineers had to use pickaxes to chop away any glaciers they didn’t build around. They lived

isolated in tent cities in subzero weather. In winter, they left trucks running all night or placed torches underneath them so they would start. Supplies were dropped to them by parachute. More effective than any straight narrative can be, pictures like these leave one incredulous at the engineering effort required in such an environment. Consider the splendor of their ordeal, since you as the reader will—guaranteed—regard highly the men of the 97th Regiment by the end of this photographic essay.



Mud: A Military History, by C. E. Wood, Potomac Books, Inc.: Washington, DC, 2006, 190 pages, ISBN 1-57488-984-2, \$23.95 (hardcover).

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In military operations, mud can be—well, a quagmire. But its presence confers both hindrance and advantage, as C. E. Wood points out in his book *Mud: A Military History*. Alternating harrowing and humorous aspects taken

from interviews, memoirs, and historical records, the author explores the character of mud and its effects on warfare in North America, Europe, and Asia in the past few centuries, with archival photos accenting mud's significance.

It isn't just mobility that is affected by an oozing, slippery earth; the very morale of warfighters sinks too, in trying to gain some ground. As first-person accounts reveal, mud provokes anger and frustration by underscoring the general distress of staying wet and dirty. The author conjures images of combatants encased in heavy, crusty mud and has the reader consider not only their discomfort, but mud's deterioration of their clothing and boots as well. Basing his early chapters on how mud can assert itself during wars—permanent mud (marshes), seasonal mud (areas of excessive intermittent rainfall), and random mud (regions of thaw or unpredictable rain)—Wood devotes the remaining sections to mud's impact on engineers, health, morale, fatigue, and wear and tear.

Mud's *characteristics* include softness, adhesiveness, and slipperiness (which can even remove the advantage of tracked and all-wheel vehicles in staying on the road); mud's *effects* are churnability (how forces can make more mud by disturbing it), capacity to dampen explosives, and ability to create suction. In an example of this latter effect, engineers in Vietnam had to use explosives to loosen the vacuum under mud-bound retriever tanks. Helicopters also fall prey to the powerful suction of mud as they ascend from it.

But mud has its virtues: A sleeping soldier whose leg was run over by a vehicle was only bruised, due to the soft mud beneath him. An Army medic who jumped out of a helicopter in Vietnam lived, since he landed in mud. A parachutist in World War II survived when his airplane ran out of fuel over China and he fell into mud next to a rice paddy.

Counterbalancing the *hazards* of mud on a battlefield—such as its slipperiness and suction, soil bacteria (specifically, tetanus and anthrax) that can infect wounds, and gas gangrene (from soil containing bacillus of horse manure)—the author includes a surprising number of mud's *benefits*. It can serve as a poultice for wounds, a mudpack to discourage insects like red ants and gnats, a layer on clothing for warmth, a source of moisture placed on the tongue in inordinately hot weather—despite the bacterial content, which is especially virulent due to mud's plasticity. Additionally, stories of mud used for camouflage and concealment in Vietnam, the Spanish-American War, the Crimean War, and the war in Afghanistan are detailed by the author.

In the chapter "Mud and Engineers," Wood discusses the use of corduroy roads in muddy areas; these engineer-built log roads were used, for example, by Germans in Russian swamps. A variant of corduroy roads by the South Vietnamese, using banana fronds and laterite (a clay-like substance with heavy iron deposits), was put to good use by American engineers in Vietnam. The author points out that in muddy conditions additional engineers are always needed, and they must keep adding construction materials (such as bricks or logs) nonstop to the sloughy surface to assure mobility.

Mud in wartime hides elements that contribute to its fetid quality—human and other animal bodies in decay, waste materials, sunken military equipment with its toxic liquids, and warfighting chemicals. This side of war, perhaps unconsidered by the general populace, is part of Wood's environmental discussion. The difficulty of evacuating casualties, already an exhausting and slippery business in mud, can be compounded by treacherous elements just beneath it.

Trenchfoot (now called immersion foot)—a concomitant of water plus cold temperatures, and which can lead to gangrene—was rampant in World War II, when combatants often stood in water for hours on end. As doctors performed surgery while standing in bunkers, water seeped through the ceiling and rose higher on the ground inside, often up to their knees. Attempts to keep feet dry in the field included digging trenches around warfighters and filling entrenchments with stones to stand on. Many trials were conducted to produce a waterproof boot for prevention of trenchfoot, but Wood notes that most solutions were primitive or ineffective (rawhide), poor in quality (English shoes that fell apart), or impracticable (wooden boards strapped to boots) until a waterproof thigh boot was issued in 1915. Civil War Soldiers were often shoeless as they marched in mud and suffered many foot maladies.

The attributes and consequences of mud are quite shocking in their full delineation by Wood. How many people (before reading this book) would have considered that when mud is knee-high, extraction of oneself is possible—whereas when it rises to thigh level, mere suction often prevents escape? Wood cites accounts of men drowning in mud, with those around them helpless to assist. The author even discusses the awful associations the military have with dying in the mud, and how their compatriots will lift a fallen person above it to carry the corpse to dry ground; dignity issues abound in an environment fostering what might be called an ignoble death.

And yet, Wood's humor is pervasive, as in references to "mud's dirty tricks" and the weather's steel-trap tendency to change dirt to mud at the defining moment of an army's tactics. In an odd anecdote, Soldiers told of experiencing a thwarting "mud rain" in Iraq in 2003 as rain embraced sand-storm particles, producing slick mud that coated all as it fell.

What makes *Mud: A Military History* unusual is its easy readability along with technical relevance for military engineers and planners. Yet it is written with a literary flair and has a naturalistic quality in its unblinking realism.

This book may be the first to address mud's impact on the psyche—the morale, health, and sustained effort of war-fighters while their operations go forward. As the author points out, mud either prevents or offsets this forward movement in battle. Among his written sources, he cites as the "best" reference Harold A. Winters' *Battling the Elements*, a study of mud and mobility during the Civil War, World War I, and World War II. As a former Marine and Soldier, C. E. Wood has carefully crafted a book on an aspect of environment in wartime: the behavior of mud, and those individuals having to reconcile themselves to it.

Reviewed by Susan Stevens, currently a Department of the Army Intern in Instructional Design in the Maneuver Support Center Directorate of Training, Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. Her background includes a civil service career in various federal agencies and teaching English, literature, and creative writing at high school and college levels.

