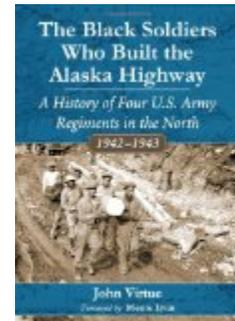


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

John Virtue. *The Black Soldiers Who Built the Alaska Highway: A History of Four U.S. Army Regiments in the North, 1942-1943*. Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2013. 228 pp. \$45.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7864-7117-1.

Reviewed by Christine Knauer
Published on H-War (January, 2014)
Commissioned by Margaret Sankey



Over the last ten years, historians have developed a renewed interest in the experiences of African Americans in war and military service in the twentieth century. These studies range from overviews like Kimberley Phillip's *War! What Is It Good For? Black Freedom Struggles and the U.S. Military from World War II to Iraq* (2012), to studies on specific units like Robert F. Jefferson's *Fighting for Hope: African American Troops of the 93rd Infantry Division in World War II and Postwar America* (2008). John Virtue adds another layer to this growing field of research with his study on the black soldiers who built the Alaska Highway during the Second World War. These soldiers, as Virtue puts it, "received scant mention in the mainstream American press, as opposed to the four white regiments" (p. 8). In his detailed account, Virtue uses interviews with veterans to enrich the story of their work on the Alaska Highway with many details and tales that otherwise would have fallen through the cracks of history.

The topic of the book is especially important in light of the fact that the majority of African American soldiers were still confined to serving in service units during the Second World War. Despite its essential nature, this service often remains underestimated and undervalued. While soldiers along the Alaska Highway construction did not have to endure combat with the enemy, they were exposed to serious dangers and provided an invaluable contribution to the war effort. In sixteen chapters, Virtue sets out to recover their experience, their work, and their suffering in what an army consultant quoted in the book called the "biggest construction program in the history of the world" (p. 8).

The first two chapters cover the inception of a plan to build a highway from the U.S. mainland through Canada to Alaska that the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941 made all the more pressing. Alaska had become a major issue in U.S. defense planning. "Less than ten weeks after the Pearl Harbor attack, the United States approved a pathway to Alaska, ending almost half a century of debate" (p. 17). In the following three, rather short chapters, Virtue retells a rather familiar story of the politics behind African Americans' involvement in the Second World War, black men's "rush to enlist" despite the persistence of segregation and discrimination, and their troubles and complaints about their experience in the army (p. 33). The majority of the black soldiers sent to Alaska were from poor, rural areas of the South and "ill served by the school system" (p. 35). Joining the military was a chance for blacks to "earn some money" and receive an education from which they would have otherwise been barred (p. 32).

The book's remaining chapters document the lives and struggles of African Americans while building the Alaska Highway. The army, as Virtue reports, was reluctant to use blacks in the Far North, afraid that it would result in the unwanted "'mixture of the colored race with the native Indian and Eskimo stock,'" a fear that persisted throughout the employment of black troops (p. 57). Canadian officials were also opposed to stationing large numbers of blacks in Canada. Moreover, the spread of derogatory rumors by white Americans made black soldiers' experience one of segregation and "isolation" (p. 141).

The most interesting parts of the book are the ones

when Virtue looks at the effects of discrimination and segregation, interracial contacts between black soldiers and Canadian and Alaskan locals, and stories of protest and revolt. The most promising in this respect are chapters 13 through 16. However, Virtue, unfortunately, often only scratches the surface and does not delve deeper into the analysis of the important stories that he tells.

Overall, the book would have benefited from a more profound introduction, clearer theses, and more thorough analysis. These additions would have pushed the book beyond a mostly descriptive account of the experiences, circumstances, and struggles of African American soldiers along the Alaska Highway. Virtue shows and celebrates their arduous work, living conditions, and their successes despite their often underprivileged and uneducated background, as well as the persistence of segregation and discrimination. Readers learn a lot about the black soldiers' struggle with the cold, mosquitoes, and the wilderness. However, the questions how black soldiers viewed themselves as black men and what they expected from their service are left unanswered. Since interviews with members of the division form such an important part and foundation of his work, Virtue should

have used them more effectively in order to analyze how these soldiers positioned themselves, for instance, in the overall context of the war, the military, and the struggle for civil rights. Studies and approaches like that of Adriane Lentz-Smith, *Freedom Struggles: African Americans and World War I* (2009) or Chad Williams, *Torchbearers of Democracy: African American Soldiers in the World War I Era* (2010), could have helped Virtue on his quest to tell the story of the black soldiers who built the Alaska Highway. Furthermore, it would have been interesting and helpful to learn more about the way that he conducted oral history. Readers could have gained a lot if the list of questions, with which Virtue started his interviews, would have been added to the book's appendix.

Ultimately, Virtue struggles with and fails to introduce the story and its soldiers into the bigger picture and relate them more clearly and profoundly to the larger issues of blacks during the war. However, readers who are looking for a detailed account of black soldiers' experience in the cold North and their tremendous work during the Second World War will not be disappointed with the book.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

Citation: Christine Knauer. Review of Virtue, John, *The Black Soldiers Who Built the Alaska Highway: A History of Four U.S. Army Regiments in the North, 1942-1943*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. January, 2014.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=38497>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.