

MOCCASIN TELEGRAPH – Special Edition – Aug. 1, 2003

ARMY DAYS

By Bill Weigand

OCTOBER 13 – 1947

Army Fire Service – Fire Hall # 1 - 17 Wks Coy RCE Whitehorse Yukon

The crew of *A Platoon* was sitting around the “ready room” shooting the breeze, reading or dozing. It was close to 11 AM when Chief Dunlop strode in, paused, looked around, and eyed us one by one. The chatter died away and we knew something was up because the Chief seldom popped in, usually the crew chief or one of us would be “called to *the office*” down the hall.

His eyes focused on me for a few seconds and I thought, “Oh, Oh,” thinking back on what I might have done to be singled out for the “stare.”

“Red,” he said, “the Major just called, he’s got a problem around Mile 48 on the Haines Road. A culvert under the road is plugged with gravel and the road is washing out. He thinks it can be flushed out with one of our pumpers, so get over to Stores and draw a sleeping bag and cold weather gear. Crew Chief Coles will get the Ford front mount pumper truck ready with 500 feet of 2½-inch hose. There won’t be any gas after you leave Camp 1016 so go over to the fuel point and draw a 45 gallon drum, it’ll ride up top ok. Just secure it good—and don’t forget to take a wobble pump. I want you away by 6 AM; there will be a highway maintenance guy waiting for you at the camp. He’ll go with you to handle the hose and flushing. You should be back to the Haines junction camp by tomorrow night. The mess hall at camp will fix some rations to take with you. Any questions? No?” The Chief took another drag on his cigarette, “the weather looks good so if you get a chance to go into Haines try and get me a bottle of *Everclear*. Ok?”

It was October 14, my eighteenth birthday and just as dawn was breaking I pulled out of the Dowell Area (present location of Qwanlin Mall) and headed up the Two-Mile Hill; my sleeping bag and cold weather sheepskin coat and mitts tucked under the tarp. The drum of gas was synched down tight along with the wobble pump, riding high on top of the hose bed. In the rear view mirror I could see the cloud of white dust rolling up from the road behind me and hear the constant ping of loose gravel bouncing off the silver running boards. The curves and hills of the Alaska Highway passed quickly under the wheels of my fire truck and the miles slipped by. It felt good to be on my own; away from the crew, alone on the open highway heading west 100 miles to Camp 1016 (Haines Junction, where the Alaska Highway splits, north to Fairbanks and south to the seaport of Haines, Alaska.)

The sun was highlighting the great snow capped Kluane Range mountains when I reached 1016. The camp foreman was waiting for me when I climbed down from the cab.

“You made good time coming from Whitehorse. This is Ron,” he said, pointing to a tall handsome young guy about my age, with sandy hair and a broad smile. “He’s going with you, he knows the road real good. You guys better get going soon if you want to get back by tonight.”

“Hi Red,” Ron said, “we better gas up your truck and get going, the foreman says the weather forecast is calling for snow later today. We’ve got to get back tonight and it’s almost 150 miles each way. I see you have some extra gas up top, that’s good in case we have any problems—Camp 75, the last place this side of the border where we could have got gas is closed now. You gas the truck and I’ll run over to the mess hall and pick up the rations.”

I told Ron to grab his sleeping bag ... just in case!

We pulled out of camp about 10:30 and headed south towards Dezadeash Lake at Mile Post 125.

I had never been up the Haines Road. I had only heard stories about it. But as we drove along Ron told me about the road ahead, 160 miles of beautiful scenery along the St Elias Mountains bordering Yukon and Alaska. He knew all the names of the creeks and rivers and pointed out the emergency shelters and maintenance camps already closed for the winter.

“In 1943 the American army punched through an escape route from the Alaska Highway to the Port of Haines in case the White Pass Railway was closed,” said Ron. “They say it cost them 13 million Yankee dollars.”

The road followed the Old Dalton Trail from Haines, Alaska to Klukshu Lake and from there proceeded along the Western shore of Dezadeash Lake to Mile 125 and on to Haines Junction.

The sun was bright and we were making good time. Ron was telling me about his job at the camp and was asking me about my job in Whitehorse.

We passed the closed camp at Dezadeash. The sun had faded into gray skies and the first big snowflakes came drifting down. Big soft, velvety flakes. Ron said we should pull into Million Dollar camp at Mile Post 103 and take a break. As we walked about the empty camp ... the white painted buildings, mess hall, barracks and workshops looked out-of-place and strange to me. I compared them to the drab brown army lock-stave buildings of the highway camps and the Headquarters Buildings in Whitehorse. No wonder they called it “Million Dollar Camp.” Ron told me when the US guys left the camp; they left everything ... the dishes and cutlery were still on the mess hall tables.

He laughed. “They must have been in one big hurry to *get gone* back home to the States,” he said.

We climbed a long steep hill navigating the sharp “S” curves. By now the snow was really coming down and those big soft lovely flakes weren’t looking so *lovely* anymore. I could hardly see to drive. Ron was getting concerned too ... we still had a long way to go. We were now creeping along with Ron standing outside his door on the running board calling for me to “steer left, straighten up, steer right” ... sometimes he would get out and walk ahead in the middle of the road which was now covered by a foot or more of snow. It was eerie and scary and we knew there was no way we would get back to Haines Junction that night.

As we passed each emergency shelter, (the small metal Quonset Huts equipped with bunks, stoves, and wood, situated at intervals along the road,) I was thinking, we had better make a decision soon to *hole up* for the night and wait out the snowstorm. But Ron said, "Since we're on the plateau now, we should keep going to Camp 75 ... after that, we'll start down a steep hill with a few dangerous curves then we'll be into the heavy rainforest valley ... be easier going once we get into the trees. We can bunk down at the old Canada Customs House for the night ... what do you think?"

I clenched the steering wheel and tried not show my absolute panic at his words. "How steep? How dangerous? There's a foot of snow on the road!"

Ron didn't bother to answer. He ignored me and kept shouting directions, "... I didn't have time to think ... I was too busy trying to keep the fire truck in the middle of the road.

Ron was right. We could barely see the outlines of the buildings through the heavy snowfall as we passed Camp 75. Soon we were creeping down the long, curving road into the valley and the snow seemed to lighten up.

The Canadian Custom House, an old log building, loomed out of the dark. There were no lights in the windows and no tracks in the deep snow leading to the building. And no vehicle tracks ahead of us on the road to Haines. We stopped and trudged up to the door and were surprised to see a scrawled note "Road closed – Gone to Haines."

The door was unlocked. We packed in our sleeping bags, spread them out on the floor and crawled in.

We were two exhausted young guys.

The morning was bright and clear. We stood outside the old log building looking at a winter wonderland. The thick forest of tall firs and spruce trees were laden with new snow. Not a track anywhere. Not a sound, just stillness.

"I think we're stuck here," Ron said. "What'll we do?"

"How far to Haines?" I asked.

"About 40 miles, but it'll be tough going if we can even get through at all."

"Let's give it a try," I said. "We need gas after plowing through all that snow ... and we need to buy some food. Looks like we're going to be around here for a while. And on the way you can locate that plugged culvert and look for water to pump."

I climbed behind the wheel. "Oh yes, and, don't forget ... the Chief wants a bottle of 190 proof *Everclear*."

Ron was right again, the heavy wet snow made it hard going. We crept along, trying not to get too close to the edge of the road, especially on the hills. As we came down a long slope onto a level stretch Ron said, "Stop, here's the culvert!" Ron slid down the bank to take a look. "Yeah," he yelled, "It's plugged alright ... you drive the truck ahead and I'll stand on the running board and see if I can see a place for you to lay the hose line to some water."

"It better be close, we only have 500 feet of hose," I said.

"There's usually a good low spot or a hole that the engineers dug at the bottom of the hills near the culverts."

Ron found his water hole at the bottom of a steep slope, and with a foot of fast melting snow on the ground it looked pretty slippery. I knew I would have to "chain up"

and back the truck up the slope to the highway when we were done. I was worried.

We decided it was not a good time to start work; it was getting too late in the day. We would go into Haines and on the way we could spot an emergency shelter to camp for the night.

We drove into Haines by late afternoon and Ron directed me to the only gas station in town. The guy at the pumps was surprised to see a Canadian Army fire truck pull up. He told us that he heard the Haines road was closed and wanted to know what we were doing here anyway. We gave him a run-down about the road washing out over the culvert near Mile 48, about the scary drive after the snow started coming down and how we finally got to the Custom House. He said the road would be closed for a few days. He said that Clyde Wann had fuel trucks waiting in Haines Junction for the road to re-open to haul as much gas and oil to Whitehorse as he could before the road closed for the winter. (It wasn't until the mid-sixties that the Haines Road would be opened year-round.)

We didn't have much cash with us, not expecting to buy gas or food. We bought bread and canned beans; picked up a 26oz of Rye (or was it Bourbon?) and a bottle of *Everclear* for the Chief, and then over to Blanche's Bar for a couple of bottles of Ginger Ale. It was pretty quiet at Blanches, I thought, just one lady behind the bar.

"What do you think, Red? We pick up a couple of girls I know and take them for a ride in your fire truck? Maybe park somewhere and have a few drinks, it'll be fun."

"Are you kidding?" I said, "not in *my* army fire truck ... where are you going to get these girls anyway?"

"Over at the Catholic convent. I've done it before. After 9, they'll be in their dorm. I'll throw some stones at the window to get their attention and they'll sneak out down the fire escape."

Hoping my red Canadian Army fire truck would never be spotted I parked it down the street from the Convent.

Ron was right for the umpteenth time. It worked. I had a new respect for this guy. The girls were excited about getting a ride in the fire truck and the four of us squeezed into the cab. We drove a little way out of town, parked and passed the bottle around, taking a swig of whiskey and then a round of ginger ale. It was fun and every so often one of the girls would step on the siren button and we would all giggle and laugh. After awhile we decided to drive over to the other side of town to where the girls knew another good parking spot. One of them gave the siren a short blast again as we passed through main street.

The ginger ale soon ran out but the girls didn't want to go home so Ron suggested I drive back into town for another bottle.

I parked across the street from Blanches Bar. I could see through the windows that the place was jammed, a lot of guys drinking up a storm I thought. Lively place!

Stepping up to the bar, I asked the lady (probably Blanche) for ginger ale. It took a minute to realize it was suddenly quiet. Dead quiet. This big guy in a plaid shirt was standing at my elbow. My eyes focused on a large silver star pinned to his shirt ... SHERIFF! All I remember thinking is Oh! Oh!

He was big. He was over 6 foot tall ... I know, I was looking up ... and he was looking down. "Hi Sonny," he said, "is that your little red fire truck out there?" I glanced

around the room. No one was smiling. These guys staring at me were definitely not friendly.

“Yes sir,” I mumbled.

“And what are you doing here in Alaska with a Canadian Army fire truck?”

“I got orders to flush out a plugged culvert near Mile 48,” I stammered, “the road is washing out. We got over the road as far as the Custom House and we’re snowed in ... I needed gas and food so I came in to town.”

“Well, Sonny, do you know who all these guys are?” And he swept his hand around the bar room.

“No, sir,” I said, with a dreadful feeling. I was in trouble. Deep trouble.

“Well Sonny,” he emphasized the Sonny with his big finger as he tapped my chest, “these guys are the Haines Volunteer Fire Brigade, and every time you went through town and tooted your little siren, they rushed down to the fire hall. Three times! We’ve been waiting for you.”

The axe was about to fall. I was a dead man ... I would be heading back to Edmonton as soon as NWHS Headquarters in Whitehorse got word of this night. What do they do to Canadians in trouble in Alaska? And the girls in the truck? A Canadian Army truck ... and Ron? My truck? It was only a minute but a multitude of horrible thoughts were going through my mind as I stared up at the big guy with his finger making dents in my uniform jacket.

“Tell you what, Sonny,” he said, “you get back in your little red fire truck and get the hell out this town ... get that culvert flushed out and get home. If you’re not out of town in five minutes, I’ll throw you in jail.”

“Yes sir,” I said hurriedly and moved towards the door, not daring to look back at all the guys, who, by now appeared to be having a party of their own.

As I made a dash for the truck across the street, Ron and the girls were watching me and wondering what was taking me so long to get a bottle of ginger ale. When I was about 20 feet from the truck one of the girls pressed the siren button. “No, no, not now,” I shouted as I flew into the cab, rammed the gearshift into place and tore out of town.

We parked just outside of town, and I told them about my encounter with the Sheriff and volunteer firemen. Now we had a real problem. We had to get the girls back to the convent before they were missed and I wanted to get as far away from that Sheriff as fast as I could. I kept thinking about the disastrous reception I was going to get in Whitehorse.

I think it was about one in the morning when we stole back into Haines, stopping a short distance from the convent. We said goodbye to the girls and watched them scoot up the fire escape and into their dorm.

We found the shelter we had spotted earlier on our way into town and were surprised to see a light in the window and smoke rising from the chimney.

“Strange,” said Ron, “no vehicle around.”

As we approached the door it was opened by two rough looking guys, one big and tall, the other short and wiry.

“Come on in, lots of room,” they said. “What are you guys doing out here at this time of night?” the tall guy asked.

We exchanged names and looked each other over. I noticed they had a lot of gear, including a couple of rifles by one of the bunks. It looked like they had been living in the

shelter for some time. They told us they were from the states and were going prospecting as soon as the snow melted. In the meantime, they were trapping and hunting in the area.

We told them our story and they thought it was funny, especially the part about the Sheriff and volunteer firemen.

“Have you got any booze left?” the short guy asked, “we could sure do with a couple of drinks.”

We finished off the last of the Bourbon while we swapped stories. Then we made a big mistake. We opened the bottle of Everclear. The one the “Chief” would never get to see. With the Everclear the stories became exaggerated and the little guy bragged about his past as being a champion *pugilist*.

Watching the little guy toss back another slug of Everclear, I said, “what’s a *pugilist*?”

“Means boxer ... come on, Red.” He motioned me closer, dancing around and punching the air, “try and hit me, I won’t hurt you ... come on, give it a try.”

I had a bad feeling as I put up my fists and took a fighters stance in front of him, he looked wild-eyed and a little crazy to me.

I made a half-hearted jab at him.

Ron and the big guy picked me up and helped me to a bunk. The little guy was still dancing around making jabs in the air, no doubt believing he was still in some championship fight somewhere in his past. Me, Ron and the big guy climbed into our sleeping bags. I was hurting.

In the morning, the prospectors made a big batch of bannock, stirring the mixture in a tin can. Besides having a *doozer* of a hangover, my ribs and shoulders were hurting from the slamming the little guy gave me.



Mixing the bannock .. the two prospectors.

At the culvert we laid the hose line along the road and eased the truck down the slope close enough get the suction hose in the water hole. We pumped water most of the day, with Ron flushing gravel and boulders until the culvert was clean. Then came the hard job of picking up the long hose line in the wet slippery snow, breaking it into 50 foot lengths and rolling it up and stacking them by the roadside. My great fear was that the truck would spin out in the slush and mud as I backed it up the steep slope to the road. But we made it with the help of our tire chains.



Fire truck pumping.....near MP 48

Later that night in my bunk at the emergency shelter, I shuddered as I thought about the fire hall, the Chief, the Major ... “and oh no, we drank the *Everclear!*”

Maybe the Sheriff wouldn't report me to Chief Dunlop.

Next morning I was feeling better and after another batch of bannock and beans for breakfast, made by the *pugilist* and the big guy, we went outside to sit in the morning sun for a smoke. We could hear a truck coming from the north and a fuel tanker came into sight. The driver pulled over and rolled his window down and said, “Hi Red, thought it was you when I saw the fire truck ... the camp foreman said to keep an eye out for you. They were worried when you guys didn't get back and sent a crew out with some grub the next day but they only got about half way to Camp 75 then gave up. The snow was too deep. They left the grub in one of the emergency shelters; you'll see a sign nailed to the door. The plow just got through to the border this morning and I was following it.”

Ron & I said “so long” to the two prospectors, loaded our gear and started for 1016. The little guy waved from the door and said, “Sorry about the boxing lesson, Red.”

We stopped at the shelter with the “*Sandwiches Here*” sign. The cook at camp had made some good sandwiches but after three days they were all dried up.

All the way to the junction I went over and over what I would say when the time came to face the music. Not only to the Major at Headquarters, but the Chief, too.

We pulled into Haines Junction, reported to the camp office. The foreman said everyone was relieved when they got word we had made it to Haines. I waited to hear “*what word.*” Nothing followed. He said the Chief called every day for news about us.

Next morning, feeling maybe, just maybe, I was ok ... I decided to have breakfast at the “Kuskanaw,” Sally Backe's restaurant. I could smell the bacon and taste the coffee before I even sat down. After the bannock and beans this was heaven! Sally was busy behind the counter, she looked at me, “you must be Red,” she said, and I could see by the smile on her face something was coming, “we heard you and Ron really stirred things up in Haines a couple nights ago, you guys sure did it up good.”

Breakfast didn't taste so good but it wasn't Sally's cooking; it was my conscience ... I began to worry again. The word was out and I was in trouble. I waved goodbye to Sally and started for home.

The Chief accepted my report, listened to my description of driving in the blizzard and said he was glad we made it back safely. I waited every day for the axe to fall but the days went by and nothing happened.

I began to think the Sheriff was not such a bad guy after all.

Spring, 1948. The crew of *A Platoon* was relaxing in the Ready-room. Chief Dunlop came striding in, “Coles,” he said to the Crew Chief, “we need to send the Ford front-mount pumper up the Haines Road.” He turned to me, “but you’re not going Weigand.”

I could see what looked like a grin on his face.

I never saw Ron again, or the girls, or the Sheriff. It was many years before I visited Haines again. I often wondered if the Sheriff and the Chief had a few laughs over making me sweat for a long time.

Bill (Red) Weigand - Army Fire Service - NWHS & DPW - 1946 – 1965
Firefighter (all ranks) - Fire Lieutenant – NWHS Fire Inspector (Army facilities) Alaska Highway)



Left - Harvey Brandon – Right- Bill (Red) Weigand – Army Fire Service 1947



Front Row Left to Right
 Bill (Red) Weigand – Lt. Gillespie – Chief Dunlop – Major Paris - ? Baily – Reg Walsh
 Top Row Left to Right
 ? – Fred McLaughlin – Earl Jensen – Donald MacDonald – Stan Walsh – Steve Korbutt –
 L. McLaughlin (Fred’s Father) – Joe ? *I need a little help with some name.*

*If you can help Bill with any of the names in the photo, drop a note to him at:
bweigand@novus-tele.net*

Army Fire Hall No. 1 – R.C.E - NWHS

Whitehorse, Yukon - November 1946

Fire Chief – R. (Bob) Dunlop

A – Platoon

Capt. (Crew Chief) Wm (Bill) Cole

Firefighters

A. P. (Paul) Trottier

D. (Don) Barth

B - Platoon

Capt. (Crew Chief) H. (Harold) Neilsen

Firefighters

S.(Steve) Korbutt

R. (Reg) Walsh

J.E (Joe)Ragan

E.M (Earl)Jensen

A. (Al) Tomlin

A.M. Burghardt

W.J.(Bill)Weigand

H.O.(Harvey)Brandon

D. (Donald) MacDonald

F.(Fred) McLaughlin

L.M. McLaughlin (Fred's Father)

S.F.(Stan) Walsh