

# Engineers Restore the Northern Transportation Link

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The Department of National Defence assumed the responsibility for the Canadian portion of the Second World War-era Alaska Highway from the United States in April 1946. Among these new responsibilities was 1221 miles of the former Alaska Highway, 200 miles of access roads to seven landing fields, and 120 miles of the Canadian portion of the summer road to the port of Haines, Alaska. A new unit - Northwest Highway Maintenance Organization was formed and Royal Canadian Engineer units of this unit became responsible for the maintenance and upgrade of this northern transportation link.



The Peace River suspension bridge was the showpiece of the bridges on the Alaska Highway. Late on 16 October 1957, however, a shift of the northern anchor block caused the collapse of the bridge. This closed the highway and severed Canada's main road link with northern British Columbia and the Yukon.

Immediate action by the Northwest Highway System engineers quickly established a ferry operation that provided an emergency transportation link. As winter was not far off, planning was immediately started to provide a new all-weather road link. One of the first projects was to convert the deck of the upstream Pacific Great Eastern Railway bridge to provide a single-lane roadway. Also, seven miles of access road was built and a low-level Bailey Bridge crossing of the Pine River was completed to connect with the railway bridge and restore traffic. Unfortunately, this Bailey Bridge was destroyed by ice a few months later and this placed an immediate priority on the need for construction of a replacement high-level Bailey Bridge over the Pine River.

Planning for this bridge had already been underway and construction began the first week of January in the dead of winter. Construction of the timber piers and the access road was carried out by Plant Troop of the Northwest Highway Maintenance Establishment from January through March. A troop from 2 Field Squadron RCE in Chilliwack erected a five-span triple-single Bailey Bridge. Completed by the end of March, the new structure opened for traffic before spring break-up. With its six 100-ft spans, this was the longest Bailey erected in Canada by the Department of National Defence at the time.

The new bridge handled over 7000 vehicles a week until the bridge over the Peace River was re-opened on 9 July 1960 – some three years after the original collapse. Once again, with good planning and hard work, the Engineers had risen to the occasion and kept traffic moving.