Record Traffic From The Past

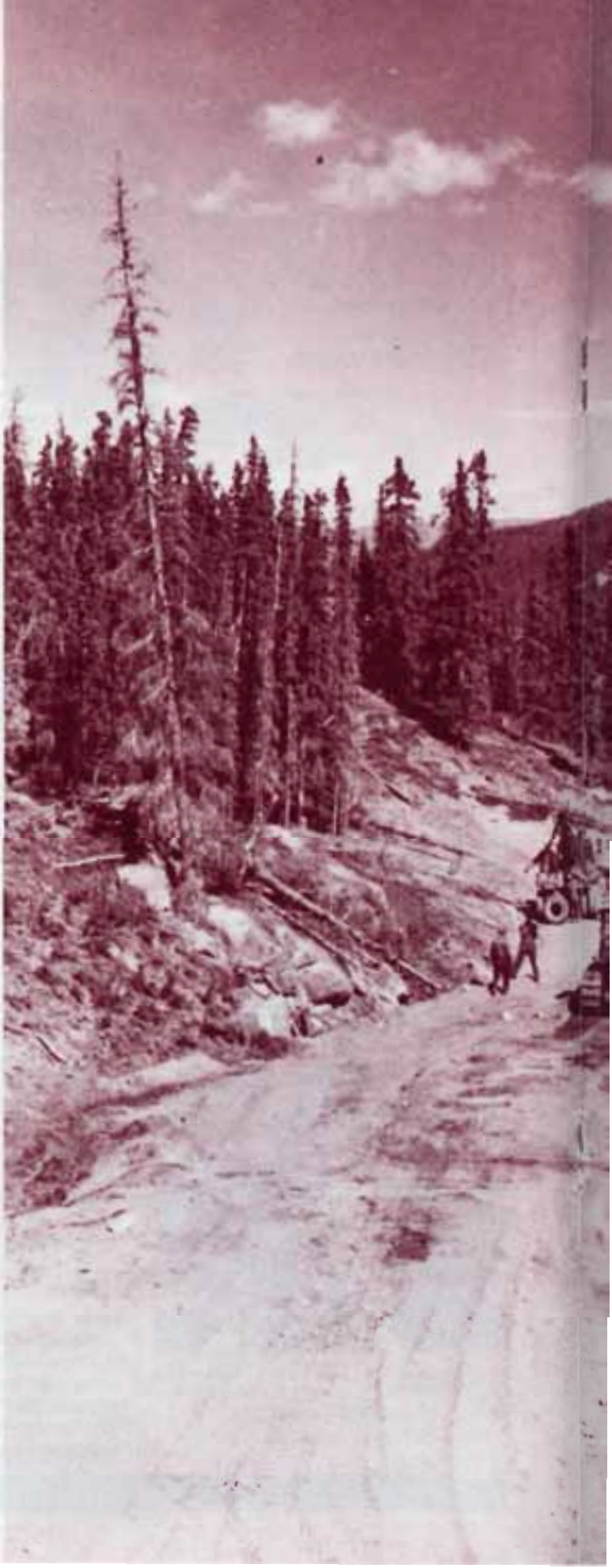
Story by SSgt. David L. Bruen

The U.S. Army Signal Corps played a large part in the history of Alaska. One of the involvements was with the Richardson Highway.

History has it that a young lieutenant named Billy Mitchell led a team of signalmen laying telegraph lines from Valdez to Fort Egbert (Fairbanks) in the winter of 1903. This land line had to be maintained regularly.

A 172d Infantry Brigade pamphlet gives this description of what maintenance of the line was like:

"The maintenance of the land lines taxed to a greater extent the resources of the Army than did the original construction, for construction had been performed by large parties and maintenance was done by individuals. Extreme suffering was experienced by these repairmen during the savage storms that lashed the wilderness. Often repair parties were forced to leave their stations when soft, deep snow made travel by snowshoes so slow that men could not reach relief cabins and were forced to seek shelter in thickly wooded places where fires could be made.



The introduction of automobiles dramatically cut the time required to inspect the 370 miles of communications lines . . . sometimes. (Photos: US Army)

The repairmen had to carry not only their tools and equipment, but also tentage, bedding, food and cooking utensils. After poles were cut, they were carried on the men's shoulders through dense thickets and over quaggy muskeg. Dragging or rolling heavy coils of replacement wire was an equally backbreaking task."

Entry after entry appears in the annual reports of the Chief Signal Officer recording the hardships and the accidental deaths of soldiers in the line of duty.

It was noted in 1907: "A number of men were severely frozen and during the recent breakup of the river, which washed away a hundred miles of lines, the men worked in ice cold water for days in order to restore communications."

The connection between the communications line and the Richardson Highway can be clarified.

Signalmen laid telegraph lines from Valdez to Fairbanks. Sometimes they worked side by side with the construction teams and other times they worked far ahead, laying lines through majestic pine forests and across towering mountains. (Photos: US Army)

About 1918, trucks were introduced to replace the mule teams for hauling maintenance personnel and supplies over the part of the line between Valdez and Fort Egbert. The officer in charge of that first section reported that motor transportation was responsible for cutting the time necessary for an inspection of the line, a round trip of 740 miles from six weeks to ten days.

As a result of this increased traffic, the Chief Signal Officer, Maj. Gen. George C. Squier, in November 1923, recommended the conversion of the Signal Corps telegraph line between Valdez and Fairbanks to telephone purposes and its transfer to the Alaska Road Commission for operation in connection with the construction and maintenance of the Richardson Highway.

The Highway was officially opened between Valdez and Fairbanks on July 25, 1925 — an offshoot of Army Signal Corps operations.