The Alaska Communications System

by Carol Rios

The Alaska Communications System was part of what Billy Mitchell (later a general and famous aviator) termed "the opening of the heroic age of the United States." The Signal Corps played a prominent role in this heroic age by providing communications for America's burgeoning empire.

Americans of all sorts flocked to Alaska and the gold rush as early as 1890. Soon the Army, whose job it was to keep the peace, found that it could not do so from a few isolated Army posts scattered around the territory. Recognizing the problem, Congress in 1900 authorized a communications system for Alaska that would connect all of the military posts to each other and to the United States and Washington, D.C. The challenging task of building this system was given to the Signal Corps.

Chief Signal Officer, Brigadier General Adolphus Greely, himself a veteran of an Arctic exploration, sent construction crews, including one under the command of Lieutenant Billy Mitchell, to Alaska. Hauling supplies over rugged mountains, swamps, valleys, and frozen ice fields, the construction crews endured many hardships. The winters were undescribably harsh, and swarms of mosquitoes made summers equally unbearable for both the men and their beasts of burden. Once Mitchell's crew carried wire across the still smoldering embers of a forest fire that burned in the direction of a line they were constructing.

By June 1903, just three years, one month, and one day after it was begun, the Trans-Alaska Telegraph System, comprising almost 1500 miles of overland lines and a few hundred miles of undersea cable, was completed. Messages could now be sent from places like Nome on the Bering Sea and Fort Gibbon on the Tanana River to Eagle, Alaska, where they were channeled through the Canadian line to Vancouver and Seattle, and on to other points in the United States. By 1904, an undersea cable and a 107-mile wireless telegraph link completed an all-American communications route from Alaska to Washington, D.C., and the rest of the country.

By 1906, the Washington-Alaska Military Cable and Telegraph System (WAMCATS) was handling over 300,000 messages per year—about 20 percent of them military. Constructed at a cost of around 529 million dollars, the lines continued to be maintained by the men of the Signal Corps. Many of the breakdowns could only have occurred in the polar region. On one occasion a moose entangled his antlers in an open wire pole line. On another, a whale became entangled in the Valdez cable at the mouth of Sitka Harbor. Three of the 105 Signalers serving in northern Alaska died while actively engaged in repair duty.

Though radio communications made WAMCATS obsolete, remnants of the system are today still discernible from the air. As one crosses through spruce forests, tundra, and the various faces of Alaska's barren landscape, the line shacks and trails below offer mute testimony to the role the system played in our country's history. In the years following its construction, the system not only provided territorial communications, but rendered invaluable services to scientific research. Among the most notable was support of the transpolar flight of the dirigible Norge from Spitzenbergen, Norway, to Teller, Alaska, in May 1926.

Many pioneering polar flights, both Russian and American, were aided by Signal Corps communications. In 1935, Sgt. Stanley Morgan, from his lonely Point Barrow station, notified the world that he had recovered the remains of aviation pioneer Wiley Post and his passenger, Will Rogers, from their crash site well within the Arctic Circle.

During World War II, Alaska became a major tactical operations center. Operating at widely dispersed locations, the Signal Corps had approximately 2000 officers and men serving in the territory in 1944. Signal Corps soldiers went ashore with combat troops in the Aleutian campaign of 1943, establishing communications from the beaches to field headquarters. Throughout the war, Signalers improved Alaska's communications system and established the Army Airways Communications System and the Aircraft Warning Service.

Immediately following the war, the Signal Corps planned and supervised telephone and telegraph communications to support construction and operation of the Alcan Highway—the land route from the United States, through Canada, to Alaska—in addition to supporting 44 widely separated installations throughout the territory. Until 1962, when the service was turned over to the Air Force, the Signal Corps in Alaska "got the message through."

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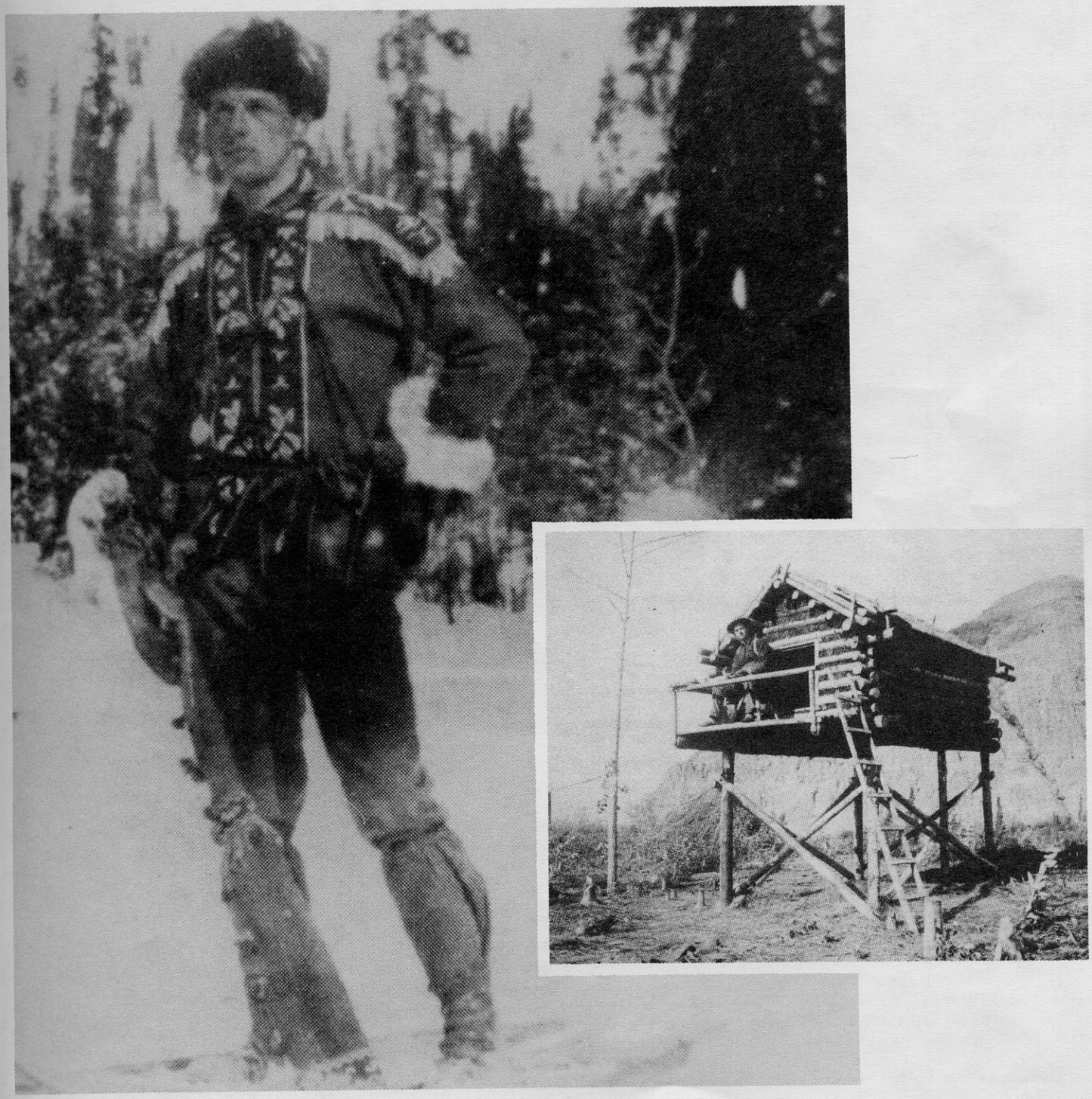
RIGHT: later to become famous as a crusader for air power, Capt. William ("Billy") Mitchell is shown here when he was on duty with the Signal Corps in Alaska in 1900. *(Photo from Signal Corps Photo Collection)* ***INSET: A soldier's quarters, Fort Egbert, Alaska, around 1900.*** *(From photo on p.20 of Periodical, Volume XIV, Number 2)*