John Dudley

Interviewed by Hilary Hilscher

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Ed. Note: We are in John Dudley's basement where his Morse code equipment is set up, listening to "dots" and "dashes" coming in over his Ham [amateur radio] console. He is interpreting as we listen.

John: This is Bob Edwards. You notice he is sending a short and choppy. "Okay, see you both later. 73 - disregard. See you." This is W7FI, Doc's call. This is SK. He says, "Good night."

(MORSE CODE)

John: We've been talking about going over to visit him and he says any Sunday. I used to go visit him about once a month on a Sunday and we'd spend the whole afternoon just talking.

(MORSE CODE)

John: And he's running around 25, 30 words a minute.

(MORSE CODE)

John: "Well, I think I'll wander up to the tavern."

(MORSE CODE)

John: "Get a foaming glass of beer." Brea is with old-timers. "Oldsters," he says. Now he is talking about the OFN net - Old Friends Net. Some old friend of his in California they get together every night at 7 p.m.

(MORSE CODE)

John: The signals come in here very fine. It's over on Vashon.

(MORSE CODE)

John: He was managing nine apartments over there. He says he had a full house, brand new apartment building.

Hilary: And again we're listening to - who are we listening to here?

JOHN: Oh, this is Doc Foster.

Hilary: Uh-huh.

John: Yeah, Doc Foster. Went to Valdez in 1914, retired from the Signal Corps in 1944 at the end of the war as a master sergeant. Went to work the next day as a civilian in Civil Service at the same job in the Federal Building in Seattle. But he spent about 25 years or so in Alaska. In fact, that big Army Signal Corps sign that is at the museum up there, Doc is the one who gave it to me and it is at the Anchorage Museum. Should be on display.

Okay. Okay. I just gave his Ham radio a call, "W7FIA" and my call, "W7ITJ" and said, "Okay, Doc, good signal, six, nice and clear here today. Sweet copy."

Hilary: Testing [my tape recorder], oh okay. John, I'm just going to set - sure there we go, yes, okay, you're on.

John: You have a control for this?

Hilary: Well, I do and that is what it's, okay, there we are. Testing, testing. One, two talking to John Dudley. Okay you're on.

John: Yeah, does this tape have some of the code on it already?

Hilary: Yes.

John: Yeah. Why don't I describe what we have just heard then? With the radio telegraph code and the several signals that you heard running at different speeds and different tones were different operators and one of them was myself, John Dudley, an ex-ACS from February 1940. And I was talking to Doc Foster, who - this was on the amateur radio band. But Doc Foster went to Valdez in 1914 as a Morse telegrapher and a cable operator. And another signal that you had heard on the tape earlier was Bob Edwards and they were using also on the amateur radio band. Now they're two gentlemen who have long since retired -- and we're talking back in the mid-70's, 1970's. When Doc went to Valdez, Doc Foster went to Valdez in 1914, retired in 1944 before World War II was over and that was an option that old-timers had. When their 30 years was up, they could retire, war or no war. And Bob Edwards was another. Doc retired as a master sergeant and Bob Edwards was another code signal you heard on for a short period – also retired WAMCATS and a master sergeant.

Hilary: Now one of them immediately went back to work?

John: Yes. Doc Foster was the master sergeant working with Charlie Murphy, who was a traffic superintendent of the Alaska Communications System in 1944 and Doc had spent about 25 of his 30 years in Alaska and now he was the clerk. Even though a master sergeant

they called him a clerk to Charlie Murphy. And Charlie Murphy as traffic superintendent was traffic superintendent for the entire Alaska Communications System. All stations north and including contact with the War Department and so on.

Hilary: John, tell me how you got connected with this.

John: I was just going to say that, yeah. I was going to say that Doc retired 30 year master sergeant and the next day in civilian clothes went back to work as a Civil Service employee doing exactly the same job for Charlie Murphy. Now Charlie Murphy had gone north with the WAMCATS in 1900 to Valdez and he had been in the Army on ski patrol in the Yellowstone Park period 1896, 97, 98, 99, but he was posted to the Philippines and he and his squad were at San Francisco getting ready to embark for the Philippines on an Army transport. The WAMCATS had been approved, the Army Signal Corps had been appointed by Congress to construct the Alaska telegraph system between all posts in Alaska, that is from Fort Davis near Nome to Fort St. Michael to Fort Gibbon to Fort Eagle over Eagle on the Canadian border and then down to Fort Liscum at Valdez. And so Doc, I mean Charlie Murphy, was ordered to go to Alaska and his only -- he was not a telegrapher. Knew nothing about Signal Corps work or anything. His one qualification was that he was a skier and had been in charge of, as a buck sergeant, in charge of the ski patrol hunting poachers in Yellowstone Park. And from there Charlie was in with on the early construction of the first Morse telegraph line between Valdez and Eagle and at a time period when Lieutenant Billy Mitchell, the famous later on General Billy Mitchell, was in charge of the line construction in 1901.

Hilary: John, how did you get started with your interest in the WAMCATS?

John: Oh, in the WAMCATS. Well I was interested in amateur radio and as a high school student at age 15 I got my amateur radio license and .....

Hilary: A ham, you became a ham.

John: I became a ham, yes. And learned the code. And the code was fascinating, but a friend of mine I grew up with, several years older than myself, graduated several years earlier from high school, went to the YMCA Radio School here in Seattle and wanted to be a ship's operator. Well, during the depression, 1936, during the depression there were no jobs for radio operators aboard ship. So he joined the Army Signal Corps because he had heard about their wanting operators in Alaska. And so he joined up as a buck Private and went north and was posted to Anchorage in 1936. In fact, Bill Miller went to Anchorage in '37 or '38, a little later on. They didn't know each other, but anyway in those days all the Signal Corps in Alaska personnel were on detached service. That means that you were a buck Private in the Army and you got your $21 a month and then you got commutations, rations, and quarters money. So that, in Seattle, it was $80 a month and in Alaska it was $120 a month. Well, in 1940 when I joined up and went to Alaska, I got $120 a month as

a buck Private, but clerks in grocery stores were making $100 a month with a family of several children.

And I was the first… *(tape skipped)…* I had heard great stories about the old WAMCATS and the Signal Corps as I became more interested in 1915-16-17 -- talking to old time operators. They talked about that famous outfit that was the iron men of telegraphy if you will, the WAMCATS. Well, by this time in 1936, the name WAMCATS ceased to exist but the name, officially, but it carried over, you know -- The organization known as the WAMCATS -- even though in 1936 the name was officially changed to the Alaska Communication System.

Hilary: Now John, you said when you had been talking with these old-timers, you mean talking by Morse code?

John: Oh, talking by Morse code on the amateur radio bands, yes, yes, yes.

Hilary: Do a bit of the code there with your setup that you have here.

(MORSE CODE)

Hilary: And what are you saying?

John: Okay. Well I was just sending V's, like you're tuning up any kind of a station. An operator at one station will ask another operator to QSV or send V's so he can tune the receiver.

(MORSE CODE)

So while you're sending V's, the operator on the other end is setting the tone to his liking.

(MORSE CODE)

And he gets to a tone of his liking he says… *(MORSE CODE).* He'll say, "Go ahead - GA - go ahead." And then if the other operator has traffic to go, he'll say, "Okay." If you have a message for him, you say *(MORSE CODE).* I said, "You're number 13." Then the next part of a message might be a check *(MORSE CODE).* I said, "Check 37." And then you give the date and the time group and where the message originated. Then you echo into the address and then you go into the text and then finally the signature.

Hilary: So tell me how you would track messages coming in. You'd be doing the "bug" with your right hand.

John: Oh, yes. If you were - when you copy a message on a circuit, you're the receiving operator, you're typing the incoming code message and you type it just as the operator on the other end sent it. He'll send, say it's number 321, he'll say, "Number 321 CK" for check and number by the way is NR. He'll say, "YR NR (your number) 321 CK check." The check is the number of words in the text that the customer pays for. So he might say, "Check 10, one extra, rush one extra." Well, that means you are charged for 10 words but they'll charge you one additional word to rush it. And so the check in the text will be 10 words but the check indicator will be check-10-rush-one-extra. So you're paying a little extra to make this message run through as a priority. And then you get the station of origin and then the daytime group and then you have the address of where the message's going to. And then you send the break sign -- *(MORSE CODE)* -- break sign like that and then you go into the text of the message. Then, when you get through the end of the text – *(MORSE CODE)* -- you use the break sign again. Then you send the sig *(MORSE CODE).* You say, "Sig", then you give the signature of whoever, whatever the signature is on the message. And then -- *(MORSE CODE)* – "AR" and then you go on to the your number, next message, and so on. And if you have a string of 10 messages, you just send your full 10 one after the other. And if the operator on the receiving end is a good operator, he'll never break. But if the signals are poor, he might break for a word correction or some unusual word, some unusual spelling, and that's possible.

Hilary: If you are the receiving operator?

John: But if you're the receiving operator -- if you're the receiving operator, you type all this in the approp -- in the approved form. Starting out with the first line is the number of the message and then the check and then the station of origin and then you drop down to the main part of the text. You are doing this on the typewriter. It may be an old Underwood #5 as we had up in Alaska even into World War II. They were getting some of the newer machines. But then when you're finished, when the message is all finished, you put the ending time on it and you "strip" the message out of the "blank", hang it on a hook. It's a gooseneck hook. On the other end, the sending operator -- you're the receiving operator – the sending operator may say the next message might be a city message. Well, the "city" means for local delivery. So you reach up and you take the preprinted message as you're continuing to send. While he's sending your number, check such and such, he may be half-way through that -- almost into the address -- by the time you get the message in the typewriter and you play catch up. You catch all this up.

Hilary: And accuracy was critically important.

John: Absolutely critical, yes. Yes, you could not make a mistake. And because – first off there are carbons. He might have 10 or 15 messages for you and you haven't time to lay one aside to make a *(tape skipped)* for local record at the station and the top carb - the top copy -- went out to the customer, went into an envelope *(tape skipped).* The operator at the other end might say "tru", "here tru" TRU. Well, that means a 'through message', it went through your station, being relayed through your station. For instance, if I was in

Anchorage and I was copying from Nome, then the operator at Nome would say, here city and number and whatnot. I've got the yellow blanks with the carbons in it. I put it in what we call "the mill", the typewriter, and hit 'for local delivery'. But if the message is going on through to Fairbanks -- Nome did not work Fairbanks directly. Nome sent traffic to Fairbanks by way of Anchorage. So we copied it at Anchorage and we copied it on just what looked like newsprint – about… if you had a press, a book, you might have a "book" message. Some station that you're copying might have a "message - book message" that goes to -- I think -- from Seattle, you might have book messages going to Valdez, Cordova, Bethel, Flat, Kanakanak. So what you did, you got …

Hilary: And a "book" message is going to numerous places?

John: Going to numerous places, and they're all called out as to what those places are and sometimes it may just say, "All stations" and it is left to the traffic chief to see that it gets distributed to all stations. But these are multiple carbons, multiple carbons, and so the traffic chief will -- after you have copied this -- he will strip off the appropriate carbons and mark a couple of stations on one and a couple of stations *(tape skipped).*

Hilary: With the operators at each of these circuits?

John: Operators at each one of those operating [circuits], yes. And the operators could -- would -- receive messages from the outlying stations, as well as transmit to the outlying stations. It was a two-way thing. But it was a simplex system where you transmit message traffic to Nome and you wouldn't be receiving anything back from Nome until you had cleared your traffic. And then you'd take from him. Typically, if you had 30 for Nome and he had 15 for you, typically you might do it in blocks of 10. You send him 10, he'll send you 10, you send 10. But once in awhile, there would be a priority, especially during World War II with a lot of military priority traffic. You'd break the circuit and handle the priority right now.

Hilary: Tell me about the rating system for messages. There was a - how would you determine what went at what time and before what and who paid what?

John: Well, there were many classifications. I was never in the classification of that sort of thing, but there were routines. There were what we called a "hot commercial" message, a "regular standard commercial" message, something you might file with Western Union. Say you didn't know anything about the Alaska system at all and you were in Bellingham and you had a brother up in Fairbanks and you wanted to send him a message. You would go down to the local Western Union office and file the message and pay for it there and they would put the charges on it appropriate to being sent to Fairbanks. You don't know how it was going to get there, but it would get to the Alaska tube and went from the Western Union Office over to the Federal Building, pneumatic tube. *(Tape skipped)* they had a separate Morse telegraph line went into the ACS office and then it would go on to the radio circuit to Anchorage and then they would copy it at Anchorage and retransmit it

to Fairbanks. And that would say just a 10-word commercial message – well, they call them 10-word blocks. Now if you wanted to make that more of a priority message, you might say, "Rush one extra". You're paying a little bit extra for it. The extra -- you buy one extra word and that's the one extra -- which then puts it in a little higher priority, but the least priority of all would be the night letter. A 50-word night letter is about the same cost as a 10-word day letter. And different classifications -- and they were subtle and they changed over the years, you know. The military later -- all the military traffic carried sort of priorities too. There were some that were really, really hot.

Hilary: You mentioned, earlier, errors.

John: Yes.

Hilary: And the reason you would keep track of all the carbons and everything was so that errors could be traced?

John: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Each message was a matter of record. If it was a "through" message you only typed one copy, one sheet on a "through" message, but that message stayed -- it got retransmitted to the next station -- but that copy stayed at the station it was received at. That was a matter of record. And an error, what everyone called a "bull" – and, by the way, the chief operator at each station posted a "bull list" each month -- and if you were on the bull list just one for a month. you got a talking to. And the most bulls I ever had -- and I was working the Seattle circuit, the high-speed Seattle circuit on the Anchorage end back to Seattle, and handling around 230 to 260 messages in an eight-hour shift and the message would be anywhere from a 10-word block, commercial 10-word block, to 50-word night letters or maybe 150-word night letters, it just depended. And 500 word press and so on...

And there would be commercial traffic, there would be business traffic, there would be bank message traffic. And bank traffic moving banking funds was all coded and not -- a little more difficult to handle than the five-letter military code. The bank codes were long 'words' -- anywhere from two letters like of or something like that or it just might be SR -- you don't know what it means -- to a 15-word EPTTYZZX, you know. It had to do with the banking code it was coded by.

Hilary: Made no sense to you.

John: It made absolutely no sense and so you had to copy letter by letter, practically, because it had no meaning. Say, when you were copying traffic, plain language traffic, some of it was so routine that you could copy -- good operators copied words behind -- you know. Three, four, five, six, eight words behind and very commonly done, but closer to it. Brand-new operators just getting into the business of telegraphy would copy almost letter by letter.

Hilary: What were the speeds that you copied words or sentences?

John: Well, even to join the WAMCATS or the ACS before World War II, you had to copy 35 words a minute, and prove it in the main office when you joined up. And the chief operator here in Seattle would take you over and sit you on a radio circuit. And in fact, in my case I joined the ACS just shortly after my 18th birthday -- and my birthday was January 26, 1920 *(tape skipped)* -- the ACS in February 21, 1940 and I would have been there the day after my birthday, except my dad had to drive me from eastern Washington and he owned a garage and machine shop and it was wintertime, you know, and the highway -- two-lane highway, you know, just the old highway -- and so I was a little bit late.

But when I walked into the Signal… the ACS office on the fifth floor of the Federal Building, we walked into the Federal Building -- old hallways, you know, and marble walls -- we took the elevator up and we walked down this hall. It was kind of nobody there. It was about five minutes to eight in the morning, you know, and I had directions to get there. We finally came to the door and it says Alaska Communication System, gold leaf on this opaque glass window. And I could hear the code in there. Pop says, "Are you sure we should be here?" And I said, "Oh, yes, I think it's okay."

So I just did *(knock, knock)* knuckle wrap on the door and the guy says, "Come in," and it turned out to be master sergeant Lee Bunnell. He was the chief operator and his desk was just opposite the door over there about 15 feet or so, and I came in and he says, "Can I do anything for you son?" And I said, "I'd like to join up." And he said… and I introduced my dad and I said, "This is my dad." I introduced him and gave our name. And so he -- Lee -- turned to my dad and he says, "Is this boy old enough?" Pop says, "Yeah, he's 18." So he says, "Well, he wants to be a radio operator?" And I said – well, Pop says, "He **is** a radio operator. He says he really knows the code." And yes…and Lee says, "Oh, we'll see." And so his desk was right near the Ketchikan circuit. So and… Ketchikan had just moved … they transmit … Ketchikan was a duplex circuit. They'd transmit and receive simultaneously. *(Tape skipped)* Sent some traffic to Ketchikan and the tape had already run through and it was just making dots - sending dots on the transmitter. And the receiver operator had just finished picking up some Bomee ink tape from Ketchikan.

And so they sat me down on their Ketchikan receiving circuit, the operator got up and let me sit down. Here I was with all this code, and there were other circuits in the office. Washington WAR Washington, DC; WVY San Francisco, WXA Ketch -- or Juneau -- and WXE Anchorage. These were all running high-speed radiotelegraph circuits and the code was all through the room, you know. And operators were busy at other tables and so on, copying and sending, and so I was pretty intimidated. So Lee went over to the Bomee tape that had just been sent to Ketchikan just minutes before and he stripped it back a little bit and he says… oh, he flipped the switch on the control panel. He says, "We'll take the transmitter offline." And he says, "Okay, son," he says, "I'm going to start you out at 25 words a minute." So he puts it in the Bomee automatic head and starts the tape

running and *(tape skipped)*… in the typewriter so I just saw blanks in the message box but they put a blank in, you know. And I started copying as he went, but I didn't copy it in message form. I knew it but I was so sweaty-palmed that I just kept typing, you know. And finally I could hear the speed pick up and what was so intimidating about the Bomee automatic head it had three speed ranges on it, starting at 15 words a minute, *(tape skipped)* and he -

Hilary: *(Inaudible)* volume up just a touch. Uh-huh.

John: How is it now?

Hilary: There.

John: It was reading at 25 words a minute. So when he reached over and handed -- ran the control -- up to about 35, I kept copying. and I ran off this long press blank that I had in. It is like a legal-size sheet and I ran off, and I fumbled another one in, and I didn't get anything in message form, but I got every word right. So what he did -- the old-timers loved to lay a heavy on the young ones you know. And so he just kept it going, kept it going. *(Noise)*. They had a Vibroplex bug thing there.

Hilary: Uh-huh.

John: And so I started sending on it and I hadn't sent more than three words and he says, "Okay, son."

Hilary: And what does 25 to 35 words a minute sound like, John?

John: *(MORSE CODE)* Let's see now this *(MORSE CODE).* This would be about 35 *(MORSE CODE).* So let me just say Seattle, Washington *(MORSE CODE).* That's between 35 and 40.

Hilary: Great. You called the errors "bulls".

John: The errors were called bulls, yes. And a bull would be something that was officially challenged by a customer. And a customer might challenge the amount of – well, a dollar value of something or some quantity. Grocery chains -- the grocery stores up there ordered their groceries and their inventory by… over the telegraph and brought it up by Alaska steam later. And… but… it had to do with quantity and the kind of whatever it might be.

Hilary: Now there's a very famous story that has to do with a bull.

John: Oh, yes. Yes, it does. I had a few myself but nothing quite like that one. Yeah, Larry Burrows at Nome in about 1930 was one of the new operators, and he was copying

traffic, and I believe it was from Kotzebue. And sometimes you will have static. On long wave radiotelegraphy, you'll have static and noise and whatnot. And you can always say, well, signals were bad or signals were poor, but that's no excuse. And Larry was copying something, and the operator on the other end was actually… one of the grocery stores was ordering groceries to be delivered on the last ship for that season. And he ordered Muscatel grapes. That is what he intended to order, but Larry at Nome copied… was it muskrat rapes or something like that? And he knew better, but it just got by him. You know you get so... in such a routine, and I'm surprised he didn't catch it at that time. But when the message then was relayed from Nome to Anchorage for relay on to Seattle, the operator -- the other operator at Nome who was handling the traffic to Anchorage – said, "Well, Larry is really off the wall -- Larry really blew this one." He didn't mean… he said, he must have meant muskrat **traps**, but he had muskrat rapes you know. And it was Muscat grapes, I guess is what it was supposed to be. At any rate, it went through as "muskrat traps" and so the guy ordered 24 dozen or 12 dozen or whatever, and it was a whole barrel of muskrat traps anyway. It should have been a barrel of grapes, but it wasn't. So when the fellow received it, it was muskrat traps. And I guess they had muskrats up there, but not that many.

And the following season anyway it was received… and then the following season the muskrats were unusually…

End of Side A of tape

Side B

Hilary: Trap story…

John: Yes, indeed. And anyway, there was a great increase in population of muskrats the following year and so he was the only storekeeper in the whole area, the only hardware store or storekeeper that had muskrat traps in abundance and made quite a killing off the thing. And much more so than if he would have had the Muscat grapes! And… but also in the following… that story was in one of our issues -- of 18- I mean 1989 or 1990 issue [of the newsletter John produced for WAMCATS and ACS members] I've forgotten but the following year in one of our issues and -- I got a letter from his cousin or nephew of his. That was a bull of the first order and even though it was a financial boom to the person who received the error or who received the wrong product, it was still charged as a bull to the operator because you're not supposed to make an error. But it wasn't challenged. It was just noted that they received the traps and anyway when it went through Charlie Murphy's office in Seattle -- Charlie Murphy was the traffic superintendent by this time -- they showed no mercy. An error is an error, no matter whether it was a financial boon to the person who received the product or not. And so Larry got a serious bull, and I believe he said he didn't receive a promotion for a couple of years.

And promotions, you know, you join up as a private, buck Private. The next rate is a Private First Class, but there are many other specialty grades in the Signal Corps from one through six. And so there were little incremental grade increases that you could receive. You could be a Private Six Class Specialist and that would be a pay grade. Then you could be Private First Class Specialist and that would be a Private First Class, but then you could be a Private First Class with a specialty rating, anywhere from one to six. And before you ever made a two stripe corporal -- and these were noncommissioned --- when you made corporal you were a staff sergeant, technical sergeant, master sergeant. That was the top of the enlisted grade. And a buck Private would have a specialty rating, specialist six, specialist fourth, fifth, and so on until you got to number one. Each one had about a two-dollar pay increase.

Hilary: Two dollar per?

John: Per specialty.

Hilary: Per month?

John: Per month, yes.

Hilary: Per month.

John: Oh, yes, per month. On an annual basis that wouldn't be much would it? But you could be a Private First Class and you could be a Private First Class and make nine dollars a month more than a buck Private. But if you were a Private First Class, first-class specialist as Johnny Wasmer -- and I was later on -- you were making a pay grade between staff sergeant and technical sergeant. In fact, when I made buck sergeant, three state buck sergeant, I lost pay because I [had been] a Private First Class -- what they called a first-and-first: Private First Class/First Class Specialist. But so there are all sorts of pay grades. So what Larry lost out on were a couple of the specialist grades, the little incremental steps in between.

Hilary: It was interesting that the WAMCATS and later ACS were sort of a blend of military civilian workers and classifications. How did that all work?

John: Well, as a matter of fact the WAMCATS were strictly military -- and the ACS was strictly military also.

Hilary: Hmmm.

John: Now it… There are two things here that made it seem like a combination civilian-military. Well, they were military organizations and… When I joined up in 1940 it was called the First Signal Service Company and it operated directly out of the Chief Signal Officers Office in Washington, DC. And the WAMCATS -- formed in May 26, 1900 --

had always been assigned to and operated directly under the Chief Signal Officers Office in Washington, DC. But when Congress specified that the military posts in 1900 as a result of – the military posts that were built in Alaska in late 1890's and the early 1900's as a result of the strike in the gold fields in Alaska -- that the military posts had no intercommunication. They were by dog sled or by riverboat or shank's mare -- you just walked. And if the post was on the coast like Fort Liscum at Valdez and Fort Davis at Nome, you could go by Alaska steamship from port to port. But when Nome was iced in, there was no shipping in the wintertime. The last boat of the season was the last boat of the season until the ice broke up. So any communication between military posts in Alaska from Fort Davis to Fort St. Michael to Fort Egbert over on the Canadian border in the wintertime was by dog sled or walked. And horses and mules were not widely used up there because of the muskeg condition in the summertime. They just couldn't travel the country. There were not *(tape skipped)* or man walking.

Hilary: Now even though WAMCATS were military -

John: Yes.

Hilary: Oftentimes you got a husband and wife team.

John: Yes.

Hilary: Tell me about that.

John: No. No. There were no husband and wife teams.

Hilary: I mean the man would be married.

John: Oh, yes.

Hilary: And in the military.

John: Oh, yes. Well, yes. She could be, yes, a lot of the people were. They actually were. And the wife was there but not as part of the station team.

Hilary: Except informally.

John: Except informally.

Hilary: Yeah.

John: How could I say that? Well, I was going to say that the military post and the military traffic… Congress decreed that the Signal Corps would build all the telegraph lines across Alaska but, at the same, they were not just to serve the military. They were to

serve civilians along the line so that as the telegraph line, the military telegraph line, went from St. Michael to finally Nulato and Kaltag, Nulato and Fort Gibbon, and to Fairbanks and so on -- as it passed through each town -- it went through a military post in some cases, but mostly went through small towns like Iditarod and Flat and so on -- that it was to service the civilian population as well and the civilian governments.

So, as far the civilians were concerned it was a military telegraph line but it served them like a Western Union did. And so they never thought of it as a military thing because the offices were generally right in the town, just as a Western Union office might be here in the states. And between the *(tape skipped)* before World War II, hardly anyone in Alaska in the military wore a uniform. Everyone was in civilian clothes. So that the people in these small towns just thought of it as the local telegraph office. And because the person who served them from behind the counter -- like Inar Thosen at Valdez. Inar had been there from World War I, 1918, and when I met him in 1942 he was a master sergeant still in charge of Valdez, but until the war -- World War II -- started he had never been in uniform. We were all issued a uniform but never wore a uniform. And I was in the Army almost two years before I even put a uniform on. I had one that had to be tailored and fit but only one and when the war broke out we were ordered to put our uniforms on. So in these small towns, the WAMCATS and the ACS had the look of kind of a commercial operation, which it wasn't.

And because the people the locals dealt with [were] people in civilian clothes across the counter in handling the telegraph messages…and the Signal Corps was quite wise in the Alaska situation of letting men -- if they wished to do what we call "re-up" at the end of a three-year hitch -- leave them at that station. So there were people like Inar Thosen was an institution in Valdez. He ran the telegraph office and he was involved and his family were involved with the local business, and the local business people and church and whatever happens in small towns, you know. Same thing at Cordova and Bethel and Flat and Fairbanks. Bob Gleason knows Woofter… but they were wise to leave them there because they became a part of the community. At the same time, they were only on military pay, but they had the option of drawing almost in salary equivalent to what was the rate of anyone working in any commercial business.

Hilary: John, I'd like to go back to something you mentioned earlier and that is the difference between a simplex and a duplex circuit. Tell me a little bit about what that meant and the speed that those went.

John: Yeah. Well, the simplex circuit is a one-way at a time circuit and the radio telegraph circuit that I have been speaking of here -- like Nome-to-Anchorage and to Fairbanks, Valdez, Cordova and so on out of Anchorage -- you transmit a string of messages, then you receive a string of messages. So they are all run in serial form, one after the other. A duplex circuit as we had between Anchorage and Fairbanks went when traffic was heavy. When traffic was light between Anchorage and Fairbanks, we had a simplex circuit. The operator would send a string of messages and receive a string of messages. But when the

traffic built up and got to be very heavy, especially during World War II, then you'd have two operators on each end. One transmitting and one receiving simultaneously -- and there were two ways. So you were sending and receiving. So, if you had a circuit that was running 35 words a minute as a simplex circuit -- and if you put two operators on and you were able to transmit both directions, then you literally doubled … and they were of equal capability … it literally doubled the speed of moving the traffic.

And there are two kinds of duplex circuits. One of the duplex -- like the cable circuits, summary cable circuits -- could go duplex and they didn't interfere with each other. And the high-speed Bomee automatic tape circuit between Seattle and Anchorage. We transmitted and received separately and independently, but the transmitting and receiving operators on each end sat side by side so that the one could work with the other and they didn't interfere with each other, but they were there to cooperate.

But there was another form of duplex circuit that really called for expert telegraphers. And that is where you have one receiver and one transmitter at each end. You had a transmitter in Anchorage sending to the receiver in Juneau. I'm talking about transmitting equipment now -- to the receiver in Juneau and then Fairbanks and then would have a transmitter that would send him back to the receiver at Anchorage. However, you would have a receiving operator who would be receiving from the transmitter at Fairbanks and the transmitting operator at Seattle -- I mean at Anchorage -- transmitting back to Fairbanks would be transmitting. But if the receiving operator dropped a word and he had to get a word correction, he had to break the circuit. He stopped the sending operator, he stopped the receiving operator on the other end, and four men became involved. So that – so, you had to have the most expert operators working duplex with simplex circuits.

Hilary: And what are we talking about in terms of speed?

John: The speed -- it literally doubled the speed. The duplex doubled the speed. You move twice the traffic.

Hilary: Which would be from say 35 words a minute -

John: Yeah.

Hilary: To 70 words a minute?

John: To 70 words a minute.

Hilary: Uh-huh.

John: But actually… but as a matter of fact, each one continues at 35 words a minute. They are just interwoven if you will.

Hilary: Yeah. John, when you think about your time in Alaska, what was rewarding to you about being up there? What were your greatest accomplishments?

John: Never being picked up by the MPs, I think, during the war -- and a lot of our guys were, as a matter of fact. And the tapes you have on Ray Blackar you'll hear that and see our… just to digress for a moment. The ACS in Anchorage was also… the Alaska Communications System was also the communication system for the Alaska Defense Command. So we handled both the military and *(inaudible).* General Buckner, who was the commanding general of the Alaska Defense Command, and he went to Alaska in 1940's, could never understand why this Signal Corps outfit wasn't under his command. Well, the ACS was not -- and whenever they tried to bring it under all, they had to do -- all the local commander had to do -- was to call the Chief Signal Officer in Washington, DC, and the General was told, "Hands off." But we handled all military communication whether it was Army engineers or the highest priority, and as a result, there was a little animosity between the … and we were also bivouacked or stationed in town on detach service and Fort Richardson had 50,000 troops out there. So the MPs -- who had a station, MP station right in town at, I forget the building, tt was only about a block or so from the Federal Building at that time, the new Federal Building at that time -- would pick our guys up for almost any … what they considered an infraction, you know. And our guys didn't -- we hadn't -- didn't have dress codes for the day, you know, so the guys might have a loose tie or something like that, and the MPs would pick them up. They eventually were told to take hands off, but Ray will explain all of that and he laughs about it.

Hilary: That's great.

John: And… but they really thought for a while that they might move us or move us out -- I was in Juneau at that time and -- they might move us out to Fort Richardson, but *(tape skipped).*

Hilary: You think about - you think back on your time in Alaska.

John: Oh, yeah.

Hilary: And what were the … were the real exciting moments for you or rewards?

John: Well, at that time, communication was state of the art. It was interesting to me, being 18, 19, 20 years old. It was exciting. You were rubbing elbows with expert telegraphers of an older time, guys with great yarns and stories and whatnot. You got an occasional promotion, which made you feel good. But the real challenge was trying to become an expert at what you were doing and most of all, all of us who joined up aspired to be radio operators and we wanted to be the best. And so what we did was challenge ourselves against the best, the so-called ironmen of telegraphy, you know…and up to a faster circuit.

Some of the circuits were called bush circuits, bush-league circuits. You worked out of Anchorage or you worked the canneries in Bristol Bay. Well, the cannery operators were generally pretty good operators, 20 - 25 words a minute, 30 words a minute and they handled a few messages at each cannery but there were dozens of canneries. And but then you could be over work the circuit that went to Valdez, Bethel, and Kanakanak and the amount of traffic wasn't too great and the speeds weren't too great. The old-timers were over there and they were long past wanting to be the fastest -- no need to be the fastest. They were just smooth and easy at 30 words a minute, you know.

Then we had the faster… then we had the other routine circuits like Cordova, Valdez, and so… but then we had the hot-shot circuits -- Anchorage to Fairbanks, and Anchorage to Nome -- and those were heavy-traffic circuits and you had to be pretty good, a real qualified manual radio telegrapher operator, to handle those. Then there was the hottest circuits in the house, the fastest one in the house, which is the Seattle high-speed Bomee tape circuit. Well, the manual operators, the expert manual operators said, "Ah, you tape guys -- it's all written down for you." Well, it wasn't. You were reading a wavy ink line on a strip of paper and that was a skill in itself, you know. And you could read that at 60, 70, 80, 90 words a minute and type the messages. The manual operator was generally limited to 30, 35 or 40 words per minute, sending manual radiotelegraph signal. The occasional hot-shot might go 40, 45 words a minute for a short burst, but he would be all burned out and have to slow back down again. Or he'd handle a few hot ones and copy a few hot ones and send a few hot ones.

So being… so what you aspired to do was to go to the next level circuit, the next best circuit in the house, the next best circuit -- because your reputation grew with you. So we all aspired to that. So Johnny Wasmer was one of the good ones.

And a lot of our guys were good, but it is amazing that a great big… we had a fellow named Carl Carlson at Anchorage, who was an ex-Marine, great big -- hardly any neck. He could have been a wrestler, just like ham. He'd sit on a manual radiotelegraph circuit doing a rather delicate thing: typing traffic and hanging up message traffic. And off duty however he was a Marine or a sailor on shore leave. He could party and hardly find his way home that night, you know.

But so what we all tried to do was to aspire to be the best we could. And so I figured the hottest circuit and the best circuit in the house was the Seattle circuit. So I worked my way up there. But when I first joined up and went to Juneau, they put me out at the receiver station at Juneau and I was out there for about two months [with] the radio engineer, civilian radio engineer -- and there was a little bit mix of civilians and military, but in very selected places until later on… *(Tape skipped)* transferred from Juneau, one of our large stations, back to Seattle cause he was going to go with the Federal Communication Commission move-over, and I was their ham radio operator in Juneau and so was he and I… we were talking on the ham bands *(tape skipped)* and hooked up

there. He recommended to Sergeant Stevenson, who was in charge of the station, that I should take his place and he was a qualified radio engineer and I was just a ham 18-years-old working at the receiver station. So Stevenson called me in and he says, "Dudley," he said, "You're going… we want you to take the place and be in charge of all the radio maintenance in Juneau office." And I told him, well, I didn't know anything about Kleinschmidt perforators and Bomee automatic keying *(tape skipped).* "You'll be taught." And they, sure enough, they explained a few things to me and I seemed to pick it up just like that.

And the transmitters were nothing to me. I built amateur radio transmitters and whatnot and we had the transmitter station at 12th Street, a big transmitter station with 200-foot tower and so on. *(Tape skipped)* transmitters at the 12th Street station and we had three transmitters at 11-mile, remote controlled at 11-mile. And when Stevenson said, "You're in charge of it, you know," and I said, "Okay." And so they gave me the company truck. It said Alaska Communications System written on both sides of it, you know. And I had a V-8 pickup, V-8 van truck to go out and service these different places and I could sign for gas whenever I needed gas, you know And so I worked the day shift and I just moved around doing all these different things. And I'd run out to 11-mile and then I'd be back at the 12th Street station and then they'd call up and then I'd go to the main office and fix a Kleinschmidt perforator. Well, I was just in hog heaven. Couldn't have been better.

And then in April of 1941, I was transferred to Anchorage and they were moving the Anchorage office from across the street to the brand new Federal Building. And a fellow named Gustafson, who was a staff sergeant, an old-time WAMCAT… I had been promoted: I was a brand new corporal. In fact, Johnny Wasmer had made corporal in September '40, and I went up and I replaced Gustafson, but he was kind of upset because here I was a corporal and he was a staff sergeant. Well, a staff sergeant was several ranks higher and a staff sergeant was something that, in the WAMCATS, sometimes took 15 years to achieve. And here I was a corporal replacing him so an insignificant rank was replacing him and that bothered him -- to the point where he wouldn't tell me much about what was happening up there. He said, "You're on your own."

So I went around and I picked things up. I recognized some things 'cause they had some similar equipment *(tape skipped)* and he, Gustafson, left for Seattle and I never saw him again but sure enough… but I just did take over all of the office maintenance in Anchorage. And not the transmitters and the receivers that I did in Juneau, but it was a little different [with] circuits going to so much equipment.

And one day, traffic was all piled up and Willy Williams, who was the traffic chief or chief operator and traffic chief, said, "Dudley do you know the code?" Because I was running around fixing typewriters and fixing Kleinschmidt perforators. And… but I was in hog heaven 'cause I was in the radio room, you know. And I said, "Yeah," and he says, "Well," he said, "Get over there on Seattle and help me pick up some of that tape."

I'd picked up a little tape in Juneau but not much. So I went over there and first thing you know, I started picking up tape. And then he said … "Hey," he said, "We need you over on a manual circuit. Can you go over there and sit down and work Bethel?" So I went over and served a little bit of traffic with Bethel. So he was plugging me in here and there, but I was supposed to be doing other things, you know. So he said, "What are you doing in maintenance anyway?" He said, "You should be in operations," because he saw me working a fast circuit. And I said, "Well, I don't know. I'm having fun, you know." So he immediately moved me out. He sent a message to somebody in Seattle and the next thing I knew, I was in operations.

So now I moved over to the Seattle circuit and started working parallel with Bill Smith, and Bill Smith was our fastest operator in Anchorage. He was the receiving operator *(tape skipped).* We'd have one or two operators would be punching tape for transmission, and, when traffic got really heavy, the signals would come in maybe at 2-300 words a minute and the tape would pile up on the floor and they'd rip off 25 numbers at a time. And they would take off 25 numbers and go over on a side circuit and read the tape. You fed… you piled the tape up on the floor, you stripped it off onto the floor, and then it went up over a typewriter bridge, a little bridge above your typewriter, above the keyboard and then went up onto a reel. And then you had a foot throttle to control the speed of the pickup-take. You'd control it -- the tape over the typewriter bridge -- and as you did that, you'd read it and you'd read the… it had a base, a blue baseline. If there was no signal, it would be a blue baseline. If you sent a letter "A", there would be a short bump and a long bump -- de da, a dot\dash -- and that would be "A". Well. it got so you could just glance at words and see words and it said: number 321 check 16 Seattle 10:32 a.m., you know, June 12, 1941. Well, you see all these go by and you just type it as you saw it. Then there would be the address, then the break sign, then "BT" would be the break sign, and then *(tape skipped)* words a minute, you just held the foot throttle down for about 80 words a minute, and you just kept typing and that wound up.

But if you made a mistake, if you made an error, what we called a "bull" earlier, it was now a matter of record. Say you typed a 16 and it should have been an 18 of something -- and for some reason… and sometimes the tape, noise on the tape, will make it a little bit garbled. For instance, 1 for 16 would be one short bump and four long bumps, so that's 1 and then 16 would be one long bump and four short bumps for a six. So da da da da da da, de de de de. But there might have been some noise and you thought, well, those dots might have been a split dash, that could have been a seven. You're really not sure. So you kind of guess at it, you know. And it could be a bull.

Well, if the customer doesn't question it, no problem. But if the customer questions it, it's a problem. Because they send a "service" from the station… from the other station they send a "service" from the customer -- wherever the customer might be inquiring *(tape skipped).* The operator then pulls out all this tape and he goes back and checks all this and if it is a certified bull, it goes on your record and that's one bull for the month. But when you're handling hundreds of messages a day in an eight-hour shift… the most bulls I ever

> had was three in one month. And Willy called me in. He says, "Dudley," he said…he says, "One more and," he says," You're off the circuit." So they threatened to downgrade you to a lesser circuit or just take you off the thing altogether. Of course they were shorthanded during the war. They wouldn't dare you know, but the threat was there.

Hilary: Yeah.

John: And the threat could be handled any number of ways, you know.

End of Side B of Tape.