

Careful, Snowmobile!-

Riding Between Steel Rails Bad

ELMENDORF AFB, Alaska—Picture, if you will, a snow machine with its rider aboard travelling between two steel ribbons at 30 miles an hour. Only the roar of his engine can be heard and perhaps the swish of his rubber treads biting into the evenly-packed snow.

It's a grand place to run an iron dog—the curves are banked, there is virtually no speed limit to observe—and it's one of the most dangerous places anywhere to run a snowmobile.

Gene Janusiewicz, safety officer for the Alaska Railroad, says that so far this winter, there have been "two close calls" with snowmobilers almost getting run over by trains.

"We had a 'musher' bail out of a machine on our main line near Wasilla earlier this winter," he said, "but the engine got the machine."

The locomotive, he said, sheared the seat, engine and body away from the upper half of the snow-goer.

"You've got to remember," he declared, "that a 400-pound snow machine is no match for a 130-ton locomotive."

Most of the locomotives which run on the main line are the 130-ton GP-35s.

Not only is it dangerous to ride on the right of way," he emphasized, "but it's also trespassing on private property."

"Under an ideal day, let's say 75 degrees," said conductor F. M. Patton, "It takes a freight train with five or six diesel units hauling 90 cars and moving at 50 miles an hour nearly one mile to come to a complete stop after the initial brake application. And the colder it gets, the longer it takes to stop."

Janusiewicz, himself an avid snowmobiler, points out that "A machine traveling between the rails at 25 m.p.h. or better

can't climb out from between the rails; he's just going to fast. The skis have to be turned to nearly a right angle to get out."

The problem exists not only here in Alaska, but on all railroads which have snowfall along their right-of-way—and the dangerous practice has been occurring more and more since the machines were introduced on the market in the mid-60's.

The most difficult situation of all is when a train is moving at 50 or so miles an hour catching up with a snowmobiler. The iron dog musher can't hear the train creeping up behind him and probably won't be able to hear the horn blowing until it is too late.

It's even worse on curves. If the musher and train are one mile apart and heading towards each other at 30 m.p.h., that's a closure rate of 60 m.p.h. The engineer will take at least one-half mile to stop. At higher speeds, time is even more critical.

"Curves are especially bad," said the safety engineer, "because neither can see each other until only seconds separate them. The person near Wasilla happened to turn around and see the train bearing down. He managed to jump into the clear, but most of the machine was ground up under the wheels."

The other accident happened when a fellow ran his machine into the side of a locomotive while he tried to beat it across the track. He was not injured—except for his pride and pocketbook.

"When the engineer came around the curve," he said, "he saw the snowmobile ahead, tried to stop, but lost sight of the machine and rider under the nose of the locomotive leading the train."



ANCHORAGE, AK. (MKR) — Watching the Buckingham Palace Guard on parade from the airline's new office at 7 Buckingham Gate, is Alaska's International Air's Vice President of Finance, Robert D. Heath. Heath was in London recently, supervising the opening of the office,

across the street from Buckingham Palace. Airline officials expect increased numbers of European contracts through the London office, which arranged recent charters to Vietnam, Zambia, and other destinations outside Alaska. Heath is a Fairbanks resident.