Eugene Pitts Interview

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JN Oral history interview with Gene Pitts on September 28, 1984, in Dixon, Montana. Well Gene, the first thing I wanted to do is ask you what you were doing before you were smokejumping.

GP Well I'd just got out of college because of the war and I joined the Navy in January of '42, but I wanted to be a pilot and due to the fact that I didn't have enough credits why I went to the university for two quarters, from January till June of '42. And during that time why I took C.P.T. under the Navy auspices I guess you would say; they paid for it. And, so I got my first flying out of the way there plus getting credits, so then I could go on into further training. Then in about the middle of May, I decided I'd like to be a smokejumper. I said, "well maybe that might help save my life and do some good for the country." So I wrote a letter to Commander Creighton in Seattle and he wrote a real nice letter back... thought it would be a good idea. Seven of my buddies all went over in person and talked to him or some of his aides and they were all turned down so I felt pretty fortunate.

JN You were the one of the eight that...?

GP Yes, and I didn't go, I just wrote a letter and I was accepted. So I felt very good because it later came into quite a play in my life. Anyhow I spent the summer then with a parachute outfit and then when the fire season was over then why I went into active training.

JN So you had left college to train in the military?

GP Well, when the war started or, you know, Pearl Harbor was December 7, and I wanted to get in the Navy. And I was sitting milking the cows on my dad's dairy and I heard this advertisement for Navy pilots. Gee that sounded pretty good to me. So I went into Missoula and talked to the Navy and they said, "well you've got to have two more quarters of credit. And I said "golly, I don't have it." So I went downtown to what was known as Heinrichs Jewelry and went in and Mr. Heinrich wanted to sell me a good wrist band. I says "well I'm going into the Navy I can get a good one a lot cheaper there than I can from you, so just give me the cheapest one you've got." So his ears and so forth kind of lit up when I talked about going into the Navy. And he said "do you have any college credits." And I told him what my predicament was. I was going to be drafted January 7 and, ah....

JN Which would have put you in the infantry, however.

GP Ah, yes, so I had to get into something right quick which I was trying to get in, but I was trying to be a little bit selective. So he said, "well would you like to be a Navy Pilot?" And I said, "well that's what I want to be but I haven't got enough credits." He said, "just a minute," he said, "I'm a
civilian recruiter." So he went over and called the Seventh Naval District of Seattle and told them what my predicament was, so they said "well, fine get him right over here, have him over here Monday morning...." This was on a Saturday... "and we'll give him a physical and if he passes why he can go into pilot training... and if he flunks out and he's physically fit why he'll have to be a sailor." I said, "fine" but I said, "I don't have any money." "Oh" he said, "you look pretty honest" he said, "I'll loan you enough to get your train ticket over and back and something to eat on."

JN This is Heinrich, the jeweler?

GP Mr. Heinrich, the jeweler. So by golly, he'd never seen me before and he bought a round trip ticket for me and gave me some spending money. And so I sent word home... my folks didn't have a phone in Hot Springs so I sent word home that I wouldn't be home till sometime next week, that I'd gone to join the Navy Air Corp. So there were 65 of us took the test, there was several from Montana went over, and there were only four of us that passed the test, the physical and the academic. And so, two of us were from Montana and the others Idaho and Washington. So we felt pretty good. So anyway I was sworn in. Well then I notified my draft board that I was a Navy man and had them do it to. And so that was kind of the way I got started. And so then that summer, of course, I went in the parachute outfit then.

JN ... of the Navy?

GP Well it was in the regular Forest Service, but the Navy had given me a leave of absence for the summer.

JN I see, just to train.

GP So that I could a firefighter for the summer, and then that fall then I would go into active training, which I did.

JN So the Navy actually gave you leave to train with the smokejumpers themselves.

GP Right, yes.

JN What drew you to the smokejumpers you said?

GP I don't know. I really don't know why, but I just had a feeling that it would be a good thing and I got the chance to go in then, and the commander O.K.'d it, which was really kind of unique. And I had no pull, it was certainly no politics or anything like that, because I didn't know him, and I don't think politics would have done much good at a time like that. So anyhow I went in and I learned the jumping procedures. And then when I became a Navy pilot when I got shot down, I started to bail out and I got hung up in the plane, got back in calmly and straightened out, jumped and hit my head on the wing and dazed myself, and when I came to I was slapping my face, and I pulled
the rip cord, the chute made one oscillation and I hit the water. And so that's why I say, I guess the good Lord was taking care of me, kind made things a little easy for me.

JN So you attribute that training in smokejumping to really saving your life.

GP Oh, very definitely because I got shot down and I started to bail... I had to get away because we were over New Ireland it was in New Ireland, New Britain in the South Pacific and the Japs were killing practically every pilot. They would take and cut the stomach and tie them to a tree and let the ants eat them, or cut their other vital organs, and their sex organs out, and then let the ants kill them. They had different missionaries that came back and made reports on this, what was going on. So we all were told and we believed it that we would save our bullet for ourselves, we wouldn't let them take us captive. So I had to glide out to sea and I was somewhere around 2000, 2500 feet when I tried to bail and the wind was so hard that I kind of got hooked up, so I just took a second and got unhooked, I knew every move had to count and when I dove out why I dove for the tail, but I still hit the wing because the wing came back underneath quite a ways. And it was in a F6F Hellcat Fighter plane. So I bailed out and it dazed me, I don't know you say knocked me out, but anyhow when I come to I was slapping my face. And then I pulled the rip cord and then I made this one oscillation... it hit and popped me and I went up in the air and when I came down why I came into the water feet first, of course. So I got up and got into my life raft eventually, swallowed a little salt water, and did a little vomiting, but that was all right.

JN You had a life raft that was with you...?

GP Yeah, it was tied into my backpack.

JN I see.

GP And so my partner that I'd been flying with, he couldn't figure what darn fool kept hollering they was shot down and to watch out, but I'd never use my name because... all I could use was my number, and that was military orders. So anyhow all of a sudden he looked down and there he saw he saw the plane hit and then he saw chute and then I hit the water. He couldn't figure it all out and so then he called our base and they sent a PT boat out and it got out there in about an hour and a half, picked me up. They had a hard time finding me, they sent out a big bunch of planes to fly cover because we were in a pretty hot area. But they had a hard time seeing me and I had my orange cover over the top of my head and I was waving it around and I thought I was plumb secure, I thought everybody was just seeing me down there... I could see all them real well. And here come to find out they was having an awful time spotting me, they'd keep loosing me. Well then the PT boat just barely spotted me, then they came up along side and I grabbed a hold of the rope ladder that they threw down at me and I started to crawl up and a fellow
screamed at me and I... said "jump"... and I jumped and I landed on my stomach on the deck and I looked up and I said, "well what the devil was that for?" He said, "you just pulled your foot out of a sharks mouth." Yeah... I kind of looked at him and I looked... I was still on my stomach and I looked back over the... I scooted over and looked over the edge and there was a school of great big shark circling around under the PT boat. He said it'd rolled over on it's back... that's the way they have to do, you know, to get you... they can't go from the front so they have to roll on their back and he said he just had my foot in his mouth when I jerked it out when he screamed at me. So that's why I say I feel I owe a lot to the parachute outfit and to the fact that the commander let me learn to, in other words to save myself I guess.

JN Let me ask you before we leave that incident... let me ask you, were you fleeing an island that was being occupied or something or...?

GP Well we were, see I started out in New Hebrides and then we moved up to Guadalcanal and then we went to the Russel Islands, and I was on what was known at that time as Green Island, that's just below the Solomon Islands, and we were just one or two degrees off the equator.

JN And were you flying into a hot area or out of one.

GP Well, yeah, see, New Ireland and New Britain were two big islands and they weren't secured yet. In fact six of my flying mates within a week were all shot down by anti-aircraft and so forth. We were in doing a lot of strafing of their ports and so forth.

JN Is that what you were doing when...?

GP Yes, I had... in fact maybe you've heard of Major Boington, did you ever hear of him?

JN No.

GP He was one of the great aces of World War II and he got shot down about, oh, a month or so before I did. I think it was 44 Jap planes he had to his credit, and he got shot down by this same shore installation that I did. I didn't realize that when I came over and then later they told me that we were both shot down at the same... very obviously by the same gunnery group. But anyhow, yes, we were going along through there... I always think back that I saw this bunch of nice fat cattle up on this ridge and I came back and told the commander I said "gee, they had a big herd of cattle there." I flew back and forth enjoying watching, being an old cow man from Montana. Oh, he gave me the devil, he said, "well you were supposed to kill them" he said, "why didn't you go down and strafe them" he said, "that's their food" [laughs]. I didn't think about it to me that was just a nice bunch of cattle down there [laughs].
JN When you first started training in smokejumping were you at the Nine Mile base then?

GP Right, yes.

JN What were your first impressions when you got there, of the outfit?

GP Well I don't know it was just a... it was an old CCC camp and it was pretty rugged. I think the thing that kind of amused me more than anything they had a whole bunch of CCC guys there that... they were a bunch of New Yorkers and New Jerseyites that came in and they were training kind of a for a ground crew and they were obviously ignorant and tenderfoot. They would wait and a bear would come in at night to the garbage can and then they'd circle this garbage disposal with a bear inside and hold hands trying to... they was going to capture that bear [laughs]. About three times we'd see them... that bear would come through them and just knock a couple of guys just cadiwompus, you know, as they'd go through their legs. And it's a wonder that some of them didn't swat them or something. But I would... you know, all of us natives [laughs] why we had a little more respect but you couldn't tell them anything, they just... that was just like a big dog I guess or something to them [laughs].

JN They wanted to capture it?

GP Yeah.

JN For what purpose?

GP Oh, they thought they could make... well actually I guess these that they were fooling with were more cubs and they thought they could capture them and then have them for a pet. Yeah, they had big ideas, they was going to capture them with their hands. Even a yearling bear, it might not be too big but he's a lot stronger than I want to play with. [laughs] No, I didn't realize it until I was reading the smokejumping book that I bought down here that... how bad a shape we were. They'd taken all the supplies, we just got a few scraggling supplies from what was left over from what the military had confiscated because at that time why the war had just started and there was such a drastic shortage of food stuff and materials and everything. We were in a lot sadder shape than I had any idea when there. I didn't know it till now actually, until this summer when [I was] at our reunion that we were in such a bad shape for materials and all type. But no it was a... well like we did a little training, mostly told what to do and then they had a little scaffold out there about 20 feet high, and I had a relative die so I went home for about three days for the funeral, I came back they had their practice on that scaffold while I was gone, and the day I got back they were all going up to jump out of the airplane. So for my first jump off anything was out of an airplane. I looked out of there and I says, "you damn fool." [laughs] I can remember them words, I'll never forget them. And looked down
there at them big trees just looked like little specks, you know, from up there. And then to jump out of a plane, you know, just beyond all common sense.

JN Had they given you... they must have given you some training. I mean you missed the scaffold jump but you must have had some training on your equipment and stuff like that... on rolls...

GP Well they told us what to do but I hadn't done any of it because I missed those days of training so I had nothing other than just the fact they told me when I landed not to stand up, to roll, and I rolled.

JN So you did....

GP Yeah, it was my second or third jump that a kid with me he tried to stand up and broke his back. So, yeah, we had... I don't know two or three broken backs that year from the way we landed. We were the first ones to use the slotted chutes. Our parachute jumper, Frank Derry, and his brother had, yeah, Frank and Chet I believe was his name... Frank was our instructor. And anyhow they made this slotted chute and it came down slower than the old Eagle chute did and you had a lot more maneuverability, but [laughs] it was still like driving a Model T compared to a Cadillac today. I watched these jumpers down at Missoula jump the other night at the fair, and golly them guys just go all over. We didn't have anything like that, we just maneuvered a little bit and we thought we were doing a whole big thing.

JN Hum.

GP But there were only... well there was 33 in our group and only five had had any experience the rest of them had gone to the service. Earl Cooley was in my group and then Jack Nash, he's the oldest smokejumper alive today, he's 80 years old and he started the same time I did. I didn't realize just how old fashioned or something I am because when I went to the... we were lined up getting our tickets and registering down at the smokejumpers.... and golly these guys would come by and old, gray-haired, and kind of stooped over, and I'd look and tell my wife "see what year they got on their tag," and she'd say "47, 50, 51 and I was ready to turn around and go home. I didn't want to be as old as them guys were [laughs]. I only saw one 1941 and I didn't see any 1942 of which I was the class of, ah, until we got eating this one fellow recognized me and come over and then there were six of us got together then had our picture taken in a group. I got quite a kick out of that. I'm the only one that's not retired yet, I haven't got enough sense I guess to do that. But I felt pretty honored though that old Jack Nash was there and the oldest and most celebrated jumper. And then Earl Cooley of course, made the first jump and he was in my group, so that was two of the five. And then Fred Brauer... I don't know what happened to him... nobody seemed to know. He was one of our main leaders and he was in that big fire at Helena when those fellows
got killed, he was one of the few that got out. They tried to
tell them to dig in, you know, in the cliffs there and a lot of
them ran and jumped off the rocks and killed themselves and all
kinds of things. But anyhow there were just the six of us that
showed up down there, so I don't know what's left out of our 33.

JN When you first got to camp said one thing was that there
were a lot of tenderfoot from back east, people from New Jersey
and New York....

GP Yes.

JN ... and they were training to be a ground crew....

GP Yes, they were in... well I guess you'd... some of them were
CCC guys and others were just... but they were all working for
the ground crew... or on the ground crew force.

JN As far as the smokejumper crew, there were some of these
professional ones that you were talking about... who else... what
other types of crew members were there... who was in your new man
class?

GP What do you mean, I don't quite follow you?

JN The people you mentioned, Earl Cooley and Fred Bower...

GP ... Brauer, yeah...

JN ... Brauer, and Jack Nash, was that their first year?

GP No, they... it was Nash's but the other two had been there,
Cooley had made the first jump made in this fire fighting group.
That was in 1940 so, see they made the first jump I think it was
like August 11 of 1940. Then I don't know how many there were in
1941 but it still wasn't very big. We were the big crew with 33
in '42, so you see it was really just getting kicked off.

JN What were some of the other fellow's... what were their
backgrounds?

GP Well, most of them I think were just kids like myself. I
know the one lad was from the Bitterroot and then there were some
they were... I can remember about four of the football players
and that from Missoula Sentinel, and then one fellow came in, I
can't remember his name, he was a... one of the top professional
boxers of the Northwest. And [laughs] the night before our
first jump, he paced all night and about 5:00 he put his pack on
his back and took off for town. That was too much for him, he
could get in the ring and fight somebody, but that was too much
for him to try to jump out of an airplane.

JN Had many of these people had any fire fighting experience?

GP No, see there were only five experienced people in the crew.
JN Um huh, is that because of the war too?

GP Right, yeah, the rest of them had all taken off and a lot of them... well when I was down in the South Pacific I went in on Boganville where... I went in where they were packing chutes and there were about five fellows that all knew me, and they were all people... some of them [I]had jumped with and a couple of them had been riggers here for us at that time. But the five of them were in this, ah... they were all packing chutes, so a lot of these fellows took off and went that way. I was one of the... I'm the only one that I know of in the group that went in that became a pilot.

JN But some of them did end up packing chutes and....

GP Oh, yeah, all those fellows that had any experience there went into the Army, Navy, or something of that type and were packing chutes and working in that line.

JN They weren't jumping though, they weren't paratroopers?

GP Well, no, there didn't seem to be many of them that went into the jumping, they went into the rigging outfits, you know, and I suppose there were some that jumped but I don't know who they were. I tell you at that time things were in such an uproar, like say we were short of stuff, we were all watching the war news, and we didn't have much comradeship. It was... we were all in there just to do a job and get out.

JN In the smokejumping...?

GP Yeah, in the smokejumpers. They, ah... we worked together, we were close in a sense but, you know, just for three months you don't get that much closeness with the fellows. And then we would be spread out with fires and different things coming up so we didn't have that much association with each other.

JN Now did all of you leave after that three months? Were you all drafted or...?

GP I have no idea, I have no idea.

JN Um huh, but that's how long you were there?

GP That's how long I was there... was the three months. I do know that several of them did leave then, you know. But how many of those 33 went on I really never knew. Well, as you said which you know that I didn't know, is Jack Cooley apparently stayed there with the group and helped train through the war then. So, what the others did I really don't know.

JN I guess the fellows that ended up being the trainers and the rest ended up going in the service.

GP I think that's what happened to the majority of them. Yeah,
they all put themselves into something... they all went into a specialty. They were pretty fine group. The thing that I enjoyed I think down... I got to looking, ah... I don't know how many did end up in our smokejumper convention... there was over a thousand that I know... maybe... do you ever hear the number?

JN Yeah, I didn't hear a final count, but it was over a thousand?

GP Yeah, I knew there was 975 registered and there were still a lot coming in so I didn't know how much it went over. But anyhow as I started to say my wife and I were sitting there and visiting with another couple and we got to looking around and there were very few fellows of all ages that were out of condition; they were a pretty husky, pretty healthy looking group of people. I was quite proud of them to say the least. And another thing they had beer all over and they had hard drinks, you could have anything you wanted, and by golly I never saw a man there that was really, you know, gone with it... pretty near everybody was having a drink, it was very sociable. There wasn't a... in other words it wasn't a drunken party by any means.

JN In your crew in that three months time did you run into much heavy drinking?

GP We didn't get away from base. We only got away one night and we went down... we were at Seeley Lake and we went down to the... they had had a rain over the whole area so they let us out for the night, went to a dance. I danced with this one girl couple a three times... there was big fellow there that was from the dude ranch that she was staying at and he kind of took a dislike to me, and I went outside for a breath of air by myself, and I thought a mule kicked me. They hit me in the nose and knocked me back and I come up fighting, and here it turned out to be him. He was going to show off for the girls, but we were all in pretty good shape, we were training pretty hard every day, you know, and running and doing things and we were in real good physical condition. So anyhow when we got through, he was cut up pretty good and I still have a deviated septum from getting poked in the nose [laughs]. But other than that why... but the fellows, ah, really they weren't a drinking group, they drink but it was sociable drinking. That's one thing there wasn't... and as I say even now why seeing these fellows, why they certainly didn't get carried away to the extreme that they lost their facilities that I could tell.

JN So there's 33 of you in that crew and you didn't really have a chance to get know each other all that well.

GP Well some of them might have, but I was a stranger coming from a different, so I didn't have any buddies to go in there with, I was walked in plumb cold.

JN Were some of these fellows from out of state?
GP You know I don't know where they were from, I think most of them were state fellows... I, ah... I don't know of any of them. There was one Indian in there, a quite heavy Indian, they all laugh about, he did the barbering for a lot of the fellows. I don't remember whether he cut my hair or not. I'd forgot all about that. They were laughing and talking about him being the barber, but I don't even remember what his name was, and they couldn't remember his name.

JN Most of these fellows were pretty young you say.

GP Yes, I would say most of us run from about 19 to about 24. This one fellow that... lives here in Missoula now, he was 18.

JN And no fire fighting experience pretty much?

GP No, no there was none of them. Yeah, these fellows they had an awful time teaching us how to use a compass to keep from getting lost, and grubbing lines and so forth and what to do. But, course and they weren't... it was a wet season so we didn't get many big fires that year. Like they said if it had been a hot season why the forests would have been in bad shape. Course look at today, right now, why they got all kinds of help and the wind and the fires are just raising havoc over the state aren't they?

JN Yeah, they sure are. The first couple of years there weren't that many in, and this was a first fairly sizeable crew in the....

GP Right, then it built on up to where, I don't know what they do have... maybe you know now... they've got several hundred that are smokejumpers that are stationed over the United States and so forth. Yeah, another thing that I was real proud in 1971 my son, Gary, went in as a smokejumper and he jumped then for two seasons.

JN Think the fact that you had been in had anything...?

GP I think it did, yeah, I think it quite definitely did. Yeah, he was a smokejumper and then I was a pilot and then the fellow who gave me my CPT test as to whether I got my license or not, he was up in Havre and Gary went up there about four years ago and by golly the fellow was still giving tests and he got his pilot license from the same man. It was kind of an odd thing. But I... I think it had quite a bit to do.

JN You must have spoke fairly highly of smokejumpers.

GP Oh, we've always been real proud of it, yes.

JN How'd you think the training was?

GP Well, we didn't get to... like I say, they didn't have too much to give training, and at that time they didn't have the
knowledge to draw from to give us the training and I don't think they had the equipment to train us with. All that we did was learn how to use the pulaski and the shovel and use our compasses and teach us how to get out of the hills, you know, after you get through fighting that fire back in the wilderness you've got to get out of there. But, as far as much more training, they didn't give us all that much, then a lot of it was just physical training.

JN What kind of physical training?

GP Oh, we just did a lot of calisthenics and some running. I was in excellent condition when I went in so it didn't make much difference. Ah, just a little bragging, but I had been a college runner when I went in, and then all that spring while I was at the university I used to run from the college out to... well you know where Sentinel High School is, well that's basically where our airstrip was at that time, and I'd run out there every day and run back. I could beat anything they had going at the university down here in the distance at that time. Well then that summer through the training... well when I went in the fall there had been 10,000 fellows gone through this, what they call the back test, they put a third of your weight on your back and then you take a step test for five minutes, and I passed the second highest that they'd ever had take the test. A good many of the fellows couldn't finish the test and they asked me they said "could you do it again?" And I said "oh, yeah." They thought I was kidding but I mean I wasn't even puffing. But it was just the constant good training and we had good food, you know.

JN When was that you took this step test?

GP Well, shortly after I got out of the parachute outfit when I went into active training in the Navy then.

JN Oh, I see.

GP That was down at St. Mary's, California.

JN They did not have the step test in fire fighting training very recently.

GP No, we didn't have any test like that, no. We just took this regular physical.

JN So that's something they picked up from the military you say?

GP No, the military did. This was in the Navy that I took the step test.

JN I just wonder if now the fire fighters have to take a step test?
GP  Do they?
JN  Yes, they do.
GP  Oh, I didn't know that.
JN  They have borrowed that from the military then.
GP  Yes, it's possible because we didn't take anything like that.
JN  Just a basic physical.
GP  Just a basic physical, yes.
JN  And then you did calisthenics. Did they have any special equipment to train you physically?
GP  No.
JN  I know at later time they had something they called the rack where....
GP  No.
JN  You didn't have that at that time.
GP  No, we just get out and do our jumps, and our squats, and our push-ups, and things of that nature that you can do out here... anybody can do on their own why. We just did it in a unison group, you know.
JN  Do you think that put people in adequate shape that weren't in shape beforehand?
GP  Well I tell you, I think most everybody they had in there were in pretty darn good condition when they come in. Like I say they were ex-athletes, they were young fellows, and I can't think of a one of them that really wasn't in pretty darn good condition when he came in.
JN  Did you ever talk to them and get... get a sense of what brought them into smokejumping?
GP  No, I haven't. No, I don't... at that time I I was quiet and bashful and I didn't do much talking... didn't ask me any questions.
JN  Did you ever go on a fire jump?
GP  Yes, yeah, I was just fortunate they were small fires, just two of us would jump on them.
JN  How was the experience of jumping after that first jump, how did you find it?
I was always scared. Yeah, our instructor he'd had somewhere close to a thousand jumps and he said he had to get about half loaded before he would be able to relax to go jump... really he didn't like to jump but he did it. That was what he knew and what he was good at. Well that summer the Army had that bunch of parachute... a big outfit at Helena and they were breaking legs and backs, they had an awful time. So he took three of his top jumpers and himself and went over and spent a week showing them how to jump properly. And they tell that the military still calls on the parachute outfit constantly for information, new techniques, and methods, and that because, of course, their specialists in that field because they're.... So the military and the Forest Service do work pretty close together apparently.

Now when you went in the military were you given any training in jumping there?

No. One instructor tried to tell me that you always jump for the leading edge of the plane... er on the wing on the plane when you jump so you wouldn't hit the tail. And I told him I said, "you want to jump for that tail as hard as you can jump because you're going to come down, you're going to hit the wing, and knock yourself out. And he ridiculed me there and I said, "well, sir, I've jumped, I've been trained by the Forest Service." That didn't go over at all so I shut up and I never, from that time on ever offered any expertise, you know. But as it was I did jump for the tail hard as I could and I knocked myself out. So I proved beyond doubt to myself that I was right. But nobody else was interested in it so.

So you followed his instructions?

No, no, I followed the Forest Service instruction and I still dazed myself. If I'd followed his instructions I'd have probably been worse off yet.

Do you think there were some injuries as a result of his instructions?

Well you never know, you know, these fellows so many of them never got out of their planes. Well, like I say there were seven of us shot down and I was the only one to get out alive, just in a short period in my one group. There was only about 40 that was in the group to start with. No, there was a lot of bad things went on, but they had so few people with experience, and they... like him, he was just talking off the top of his head. I listened to him and I just tuned him out. I wouldn't even listen to his instructions because it was all backward to what I'd learned, and I had jumped several times so I thought I had more knowledge than what he was putting out and he wasn't that much older than I was, so I just knew these boys up here were far advanced to what those people were.

Is there anything else specifically that he said that you
knew was...?

GP I don't remember, it's too long ago. That was just the one thing that stuck in my mind and then when I jumped why I got dazed so it's never left my mind you might say. Like I say, he was talking and telling a lot of stuff but I just kind of tuned him out, I didn't listen to him.

JN How many jumps did you actually make then in smokejumping, practice jumps?

GP Oh, I think I had eight practice and those four jumps on fires.

JN And the fires were pretty small?

GP Yeah, they were just spot fires. We caught them early.

JN Two man?

GP Yeah, so we didn't have much to do. Like I say we were very fortunate we didn't because we had to cover quite a territory.

JN So at that time do you think the smokejumpers was a pretty good outfit?

GP Oh, I was just real happy to be in them. They were a real fine bunch of men and they did the best they knew how at that time with what they had to do with. I knew no different, but I still respect whatever went on there because they worked with the best they had with what they had to do with.

JN What was Frank Derry like? What'd you think of him?

GP Well I was never around Frank. Frank was quite a bit older and he'd come out and tell us what to do and then he'd leave and I was never around... socialize... I never socialized with the man whatsoever.

JN He was probably working at the loft and designing things.

GP He did and he had his own... he didn't live on the base with us, and so, I don't even really know where he lived, but he'd come up and give us instruction and then he'd be gone again so.

JN Do you have any impressions of him just from when he came and gave instructions?

GP No, other than the fact he seemed to be very knowledgeable and we had a high respect for him. We worked and did our darnnest to please him and learn what we could from him. He was kind of a man that impressed you.

JN What about Earl Cooley?
GP Well Earl was a little older and he did his thing and we were the pups I guess just kind of learning so we didn't say much, but we just kind of did what we were told. And in those times people didn't do much talking, you just listened and learned and they told you if you was doing something wrong, and other than that we didn't have too much communication.

JN You looked up to these guys some too pretty much?

GP Oh, yes, yeah, they were all experienced fellows and they looked like... and Earl was older than I was and the other fellows were older so I respected them. We were taught... well I was taught that at home and the fellows were all skilled in their field and I didn't know anything about it so I listened to everything there was to be listened to.

JN You said one fellow did pack up before his first jump and took off, was there anybody else that had problems with, staying there?

GP No, everybody else seemed to fit in very well. It was a real good group they worked hard and it's a.... One thing that was kind of interest to me... interesting was this, ah... I can't think of his name either, and I knew it... I was talking about him here awhile back. He was the one who broke his back in the same jump I jumped. And then after the war he became a fire fighter for the Missoula Fire Department. They had an old bowling alley out... oh at the south east corner of town and it burnt quite a few years ago and he was in there trying to help them and a timber came down and it killed him. But anyhow, and then another lad got his back broken... I can't remember which one it was... their mother came up to Seeley Lake then... this was both at Nine Mile... and then later on why they came up to watch this jump and that really wasn't that dangerous, that was just kind of freak accidents. So they jumped several of them, and I was standing down in the group, I didn't get to jump that day and by golly this one fellow he didn't snap his static line in the airplane like you're supposed to, and he free fell and he was down to about 1000 feet. People were hollering and screaming at him, finally he opened his chute and made a good landing [laughs]. We always kind of laughed, here they was trying to impress them and here [laughs] he didn't hook his static line to open his rip cord [laughs].

JN This is a demonstration?

GP It was a demonstration.

JN And it happened at Seeley Lake?

GP Yes.

JN Who was it for?

GP It was, oh, we had to make these practice jumps and it was
just a practice jump, but they made it a special occasion so that... oh, several of the parents came up... they called it Parent's Day. And so this mother was there along with some other parents and then here this one fellow darn near got killed. No it's like at Seeley Lake they had some of the big wigs out of Washington D.C. and so some of us were to jump that day. And the first two fellows jumped and the wind was blowing pretty hard, and they tried to land. They come down on one edge of the air strip, but the wind carried them across and into the rocks and into the poles, and they had to take both them to the hospital. And I was the third one to jump and so I jumped quite a ways back from the strip to counteract the wind drift. I come down, there was a big old widow-maker snag, it was over 100 feet tall, and I was coming on top of it. And right at the last second I crawled up the shroud line there and I jerked it just enough that I didn't go over the top, but the silk rubbed along the top of that... it was a fire killed one... and there was still ashes on the top of the snag, and by golly I had black all over that one side of my chute. But I landed all right, I landed on the strip and made a good jump out of it. But, boy, that was the last jump, they called it off then. And here these guys had come out from D.C. to see this demonstration.

JN Do you have any idea who these guys from D.C. were?

GP No, not at all. No they just called that they had come out, this was a special demonstration for them.

JN Was it sort of a sell the smokejumping idea to them then?

GP Right, uh huh, yeah. I have an idea they were probably the top Forest Service brass out of D.C., but I don't know. They just told us that they were some of the top brass out of D.C. and we were to put on a good demonstration, but, like I say, I was the third and the final.

JN So you went right out of smokejumping then into the Navy as a pilot then?

GP Yeah, right, yep.

JN How many years were you in?

GP Oh, I had three... let's see what was it... about 40 months in the military then.

JN You had to jump that one time?

GP Just the one time, yes.

JN When you were shot down? Have you ever jumped since then?

GP Nope [laughs]. Yeah, I enjoyed, I tell you, the opening of the chute, until it opens, scares the dickens out of me. Soon as it opens and then I'm sailing down I just thoroughly love it. I
remember about my second jump at Nine Mile, it was a hot day and these, ah... oh, you know, you have your heat inversion... and I got on one of these inversions and I went back up a ways and I'd float around and I'd drop and I'd get on it and go back. Seemed to me like I stayed there five to ten minutes, I don't know how long I was, but I had more fun playing on that. It was the only time I got onto something like that, where I could really have some fun.

JN You were just saying before we ended that side that you really enjoyed the jumping.

GP Well I did, but I was going to tell you too something that the jumping did for me that was kind of unique that maybe just to me, but I never made a bad landing with an airplane. When I took my... oh I went all through my military training, these fellows when they'd ride with me they'd try to get me to make a bad landing so I'd know how to recover from a bad landing, but I knew where the ground was and I could just grease that airplane in there. All through my flying time I had exceptional good luck I guess you'd call it with landing an airplane. I just didn't come in with bounces; I'd come in and make a three point landing and that was it, or if I wanted to make a wheel landing it didn't matter I could make a real good wheel landing. And they'd say "well you've got to make a bad landing because you're going to make them and then you won't know how to recover from them." But, by golly, I just didn't make bad landings, and I know it was from the jumping because in jumping you've got to know where that ground is.

JN Meaning you got to have some pretty good idea of...?

GP You bet because you have to have your legs bent and hit right and be able to make your roll and so forth and if you don't why then you're going to be in trouble and that's why these boys get hurt.

JN So is part of what you're saying is you had a good sense of distance?

GP Very good.

JN Coming down you could just sort of feel when you...?

GP Well, you look at an old bird when he hovers and comes down to land, he knows where that object is and that's just what... through the jumping why I learnt that. Now I never did talk to any of the other boys because I don't know of any of them that flew that was in that parachute outfit except my son, now he said he never made any bad landings, that he always had very good goal. Now whether we were just kind of unique in that or whether it affected everybody that way, but it was real good training. Like I say it saved my life and I never got into any troubles. I saw one kid land when I was in Florida... they had one of these great big quanset huts... I don't know, it looked like it was 40,
50 feet high. And I was walking along on the opposite side to where he was landing, and he bounced so high when he touched down that he bounced clear up to where I saw his whole airplane, and then he went down and finally landed. And then he ground looped and mashed the plane all up. But you just see that constantly these guys would just make terrible landings. I mean they would bounce sometimes 100 to 150 feet in the air. And I could just come in and just as they say grease it in. It wasn't that I was that smart or anything it just was the background I had for it.

JN Them two big ways that really gave you....

GP It... it was tremendous to me.

JN Can you think any other way that it benefited you?

GP Oh, not particularly, it, I think just the fact it gave me a lot of confidence through my flying and the background. Like we had, oh... the thing that I do look back is not particularly that helped me that much... but interesting to see the old Ford Tri-motor down there and the Travelaire, they're quite the collectors item now, we got to fly in those. The pilots that were flying them were some of the best pilots and I'm sure that didn't hurt me. I didn't realize that these fellows were so cool and calm and, you know they were real pilots that... because the things they did, the places they had to get in with that old equipment, why it was phenomenal now that I look back at it.

JN Well they were real skilled....

GP Yeah, they were skilled, Bob and Dick Johnson and then Hughes, he was the one that checked out... I saw him down at the smokejumpers reunion when the... but we were at the banquet and the time... when the banquet was over why he disappeared and I never did catch up with him. He was the one who checked me out and checked my son out for our license, and he flew some of our jump flights for us, as well as Bob and Dick Johnson. Of course they're all pretty legendary people.

JN Other than that one fellow that broke his back did you have any other serious injuries?

GP There were just two broken backs, yeah, that's all that I can recall.

JN And were those fellows pretty much washed up from smokejumping then?

GP Why, yeah, they were out for the season, and then probably by the time they healed they both would have gone into the military. Well I know the one did, the one that jumped with me, I know he went into the military. They weren't bad breaks, they were probably fracture of a vertebrae, you know, but it would knock them out for the time.
JN So all in all it was pretty much a important experience in terms of the training for that jump in the military then?

GP Very much so.

JN You liked the people in the crew, but you didn't get to know them that well because of this....

GP No, no, I didn't. Well we didn't get to go out, you know. At the time you're around and I tell you all my life I've bumped from one thing to another like when I was in the military why I was a replacement and I was in five different squadrons and so you don't have the comradeship that you do if you're in one group and stay steady there. You bounce around all the time and you meet people but at that time we never knew from day to day how long we's going to be alive and so you... I guess you just didn't think about those things at that time, that way.

JN When you're in the jumpers, you say it was pretty confused times because you're looking at the news and wondering what was going to happen next.

GP Right, yeah.

JN So, was everybody pretty much looking forward to when they were going to be in the service?

GP Yes, yes, and you knew... I mean it wasn't... there was no tomorrow as far as the jumping. We knew that we wouldn't there next season, we had no intention of being there. And so we were there doing a job and then ready to go on to the big job. So that's the way I felt and I think it was pretty much the way they felt.

JN Were those frightening times at all in term of...?

GP No, I look at it all through my military... I'd hear guys get berzerk and that but I never did get particularly frightened. I just accepted it, went on, and if I was here I was going the best I could, and if something happened why I guess it wouldn't made any difference. So I saved my money in the service and sent it home to buy a ranch. And I never felt down, I don't feel I was near the pesimist a lot of people were in the service. You know, just like in your daily life you see some people that are always down and sad, others aren't, and I just never let myself dwell on those things.

JN Well, I think we've pretty well covered it there. I sure appreciate your coming over for an interview.

GP Well I appreciate being interviewed. O.K. and I thank you.

JN See you later, Gene.
GP Yeah.

END OF TAPE