The following transcript is a scan of the original and has not been edited. For additional assistance, please contact Archives and Special Collections.

JN I guess I wanted to start by asking you what years you jumped?

LA Well, I started jumping in 1954, which was the year that we built the new aerial depot in Missoula. President Eisenhauer came out and dedicated it. The last year that I jumped was in 1979.

JN Quite a long time then.

LA The year of 1979-'80. It was a few years... they were good years though. I enjoyed them. I don't know how many years that is though. I never did really figure it out. I didn't jump every year in that time period. I went to the Army, I was in the 101st Airborne. One year I played semi-pro baseball. I think that two years I was at the University working on my Master's in administration.

JN What did you do before you jumped?

LA I was in high school.

JN Then you started jumping at an early age.

LA My first year out of high school I worked with the Forest Service, there at Nine Mile where the base was. But I was working for the Nine Mile District. That was in 1953 and that was my senior year in high school. Upon graduation I went off to college, to Western Montana College at Dillon where I got my Bachelor's degree. I worked all kind of odd jobs through high school just like everybody does. Grocery stores, movie theaters, working in the woods, all kinds of odd jobs, worked on ranches. Since graduation though I have only had two jobs. I was a smoke jumper and school teacher and coach.

JN You got hooked up with the Forest Service right after high school then?

LA Yes, I got to know a guy real well in high school in Frenchtown, I graduated from Frenchtown. His name was Clint Running (sp?), he is dead now. And he got me started on the Forest Service, so I had an early start. I think I was probably about eighteen. It was a good place to be, it was kind of a young mans job. Well, I am fifty years old and that is just too old. You could do the job but you couldn't as well as you would like to do.

JN You didn't start out jumping did you when you got with the Forest Service?

LA I was working at the district at Nine Mile. The smoke jumper base is right above the ranger station at Nine Mile. I used to go up there quite a bit. Play horse shoes and volley ball, I had a
lot of friends up there. That was my first year in the Forest Service and after that one year I went jumping. That was the first year that we had the base at Missoula. After the one year in the Forest Service I was jumping every year after that. I had a back operation and I missed...they held me on there and I dispatched, worked there at the jumper base but I didn't jump on fires. I think it was one or two years that I couldn't jump. I reinjured my back, I jumped another four or five years after the operation and I kind of reinjured it so that is when I quit. I thought I had better get out while I could still walk.

JN That makes sense. What made you decide to take that up?

LA I always like the Forest Service and when I was a little kid at Seeley Lake and that is where they started the jumpers I used to watch those airplanes. That was in 1941 and those Tri-motors were flying in and out and I was fascinated by it. I didn't have any other job lined up at the time, I thought smoke jumping would be a neat thing. Probably the best summer job that a guy can have.

JN Did you make enough bucks to put you through school?

LA Yes I did. It is hard work but it is good work. The Forest Service has changed over the years... it is just all together different organization today than what it was then. That is progress, changes. But I made good money at it. You work hard and make good money, I loved it.

JN Speaking of changes what was the outfit like when you first got on it?

LA Relatively primitive compared to the standards today. Ranger stations play a different role all together. The people in the forest, their assignments have changed drastically. Their job descriptions to what things they had to do used to be... it used to be they would give you a piece of paper with a description of it.[the fire] You jump out of a Ford Tri-motor or a Travelaire, go out and jump on that fire and pack your gear to a trail head. A mule train would come and get it. I don't think they even operate mule trains any more. Pack mules in the districts... You don't do the telephone line maintenance work any more because they don't have it any more. They have radios now. You don't have to maintain the trails as they did in the past. They have got roads just about every where now where you used to have to walk every where.

JN So you actually did part of the trail maintenance yourself?

LA Oh yes. We used to go out on project and do that.

JN And the telephone lines too?

LA Yes, all of it. Building and improving dwellings back in the wilderness. We did a lot of those things.
JN  For back country rangers?

LA  Yes. You would get in to those places and you had to walk in or take a horse in. Now you fly in, helicopters, lot of helicopters. We had to walk a lot of miles. Just different organization, it has changed. Everything changes. Schools, towns, highways.

JN  What type of fellows would be smoke jumpers back then?

LA  That type of person was probably not that much different from todays person. They were just young men with an itch or an ambition or wanting to do something a little bit different, looking for a job. Much the same as the person today. Just in the way that people grow up today, when we were kids we were always, just active all the time. We didn't have the television then. We didn't have a lot of the things that take away from your time now in the form of entertainment. You had to provide your own. So we were always out playing, kick the can or something. Everything was always running, jumping or climbing, kids don't do it today. I was amazed, I was really set back, we would have kids out at the base that couldn't even do pushups. Couldn't climb the rope.

JN  In their later years?

LA  That was amazing to me. Everybody could do them because everybody worked. Everybody worked when I was a kid. I guess you are not aware of the change, all the sudden that change is there. And how it came about and when it was started is hard to put a finger on.

JN  Do you think kids are doing a lot less physical playing and work now?

LA  That is true, absolutely true. They have a lot of other things that occupy their time. In the form of vehicles or video games, television programs, whatever. Their work... automation has eliminated a lot of jobs.

JN  I guess I really hadn't thought about that change.

LA  Physically it has made a bit of difference in a lot of people. I think that a lot of health problems have developed in our young people because of the lack of physical activity over the years. That was just a way of life back then. If you wanted to go downtown you would just walk downtown. Now I get in the pick up and drive down. That is one of the biggest changes that has come about and I became aware of that after watching those kids. They didn't have the physical strength to do a lot of things. I coached twenty years and in coaching I noticed the lack of physical strength. The skills were still there, the endurance and the physical strength didn't seem to be prevalent in the younger people as it had been in the past. It is because of the lack of physical activity. Lot of them have never had any
exercise except in their P.E. classes at school and sports.

JN They haven't been doing any ranch work or farm work or anything like that.

LA No a lot of them haven't.

JN Did the training change then in the smoke jumpers to meet that difference in the kids?

LA No I wouldn't say that it changed to meet that difference. Basically the training has remained relatively the same in the fact that you have the early part of the day devoted to physical skills, the obstacle course. And that has always been that way. Some of the skills that you have to master on the obstacle course have changed. They have added some new ones and taken away some of the old ones.

JN What were some of the old ones taken away?

LA They used to use inverted V-trots and just v-trots for ankle work. They don't have that any more. They have put in a wall, we never used to have a wall.

JN Could you describe that v-trot?

LA It is just a, two pieces of lumber like two by eights, that were nailed together in the form of a V. They had the v-trot which was nailed together at the bottom with the wide part at the top, so you had the v-trot and the inverted one. And you would walk on that with you ankles tilted to meet the slope of that thing. It was supposed to add strength to the ankles. I don't think it did what they wanted it to and so they eliminated that. They put in the webbing. You would run the webbing like football players do. It's an agility test. They have the wall that you have to hit and climb over. We never had that.

JN Did they have anything comparable before?

LA No, they didn't. I can't remember what year the wall came in. It seems like it has been there for ten or fifteen years. After a while the years kind of run together on these things. Basically the obstacle course has always been a... one of running and climbing up ramps and jumping off and practicing your landing rolls. Then recovering and running to the next station to do whatever skill was required there. Whether it be crossing under an over head ladder by grasping with your hands, rung to rung. And a rope climb, a trampoline, we would wind in an out of the draws in downhill running. They would time you in all of it.

JN Natural draws...

LA Yes, they had a gully running down the back of the base in which they built a obstacle course around. So you kept crossing through that draw. You would run down hill and up hill and climb
ramps and jump off. A lot of it was to increase your skill in landing. The ability to get off your feet and absorb the shock over different parts of your body was the basic theory behind the landing. Some people could do it very well and some had trouble. So you practiced that quite a bit, a lot. The same with the units down there, our training units were down there in that draw, we had different uniforms in those days. Different parachutes, different airplanes.

JN What were your uniforms like?

LA They were canvass uniforms. The football helmets were leather, old leather helmets.

JN Did they have a strong frame or were they just leather?

LA They were fairly rigid. They had the wire mask on them. Of course today the jump gear is all together different. It is lighter, much lighter. Materials in there where you will float if you land in water. I don't know how many hours you can stay afloat, I would say twelve hours or something like that.

JN The old stuff if you landed in water what would happen?

LA You were like a rock, it was just canvass with cloth padding in it. They were heavy and cumbersome. You had a three point release harness in those days. They were released from one blow on the chest cavity after you turned the dial to a certain point. Hit that and it would release your harness. Now they have the capewells where you just throw them off your shoulders. They are very quick. That has been a big change, it has all been a big change. They don't even use the Tri-motor or Travelaire, Twin Beeches, not even the Dougs now. The Otters I guess, I really don't know since I retired, which was three years ago. I have only been back there one time. I have always been busy. It is really a shame that a person didn't take a lot of pictures and keep a good history of the changes that have taken place there. Because there have been a lot.

JN Can you think of any other thing that they dropped from the training?

LA They had an A frame that would lift you straight into the air and they would release it with an air gauge. They could control your rate of descent from that cable. It was a cable that took you directly straight up, which your normal landing patterns were not in a straight down fashion, although it was similar in a lot of instances. Generally you would have a forward speed, you would be traveling forward and so your landings were not a straight down thing. Straight down was a little bit more difficult or backward. They don't use that A frame. The average rate of descent from the parachute was I believe approximately eighteen feet per second. I would hate to be quoted on that because I wouldn't say it would be accurate. They used to use a Canadian swing which was a platform that you hook up and you jump
off, step off that platform and you would swing out. Swinging fashion and they could release you, you would let go of a rope and that would get you to the earth. They could get you going forward or backward, however they wanted to get you.

JN So you would be swinging just like a kids swing and they would drop you at any point in there?

LA Yes.

JN Would it surprise you?

LA Yes, we had several injuries on that. I remember at one time we used to get on the back of a flat bed truck and they would drive across the fields there and you would jump off and practice your rolls. They don't do that any more. The tower is different, it is a simulated fuselage where it used to just be a... well it was just a wooden structure with an opening on two different floors to simulate what ever type of aircraft you would be jumping from. And they would put steps in or take them out. They don't use any of those... they have all been replaced. They do have a tower but it is different. It is a simulated fuselage that was constructed and they can rig that to be what ever type of airplane you would be associated with. So when they put them into jumper configuration it is... the variations are not that different because they don't use that many different aircraft any more.

JN You said there were a lot of accidents on the Canadian Swing?

LA Yes, people with back injuries. They would drop you coming backwards and you would land and go to a sit down position that would jar your spinal column. Or else whiplash your head into the ground. Of course you had your jump gear on. They seemed to have a lot of injuries. As I remember that is why they took it out, because of the injuries. They might have done it for a different reason, it might not have been doing what they wanted it to do. I never did know if that was the reason but I suspect that it was.

JN So a lot of that stuff was first time stuff and they found bugs in it and had to change it?

LA I think that probably describes it pretty well. Missoula was always kind of a pioneer in smokejumping. The first fire jump was made out of the Missoula smokejumpers. Robinson and Cooley made that first fire jump in the Nez Perce Forest in 1941. And it was always kind of a pioneer as far as bases go. We had seven bases in the United States and one in Canada. They have had some problems maintaining some of them in the past few years, some of them are closed down. With more to be closed probably in the future.

JN Why is that?
LA  Heli-tack crews... Districts using helicopters.

JN  So they don't need those outlying satellite posts any more?

LA  No, actually our distance to travel to fires has not changed. They still have quite a ways to get there. But the mode of getting there has changed. Instead of the Ford Tri-motor flying along at fifty or sixty miles an hour you can load into one of these Otters or up in Alaska they are using Volpars, the last year I jumped there and they are quite a bit faster. But your distance is still the same so they can employ a helicopter and handle all of your own traffic. So the jumper base now is going back to... kind of satellite systems in where they are placing jumpers in the forests on detail or what they call project. This isn't anything new, they did that when I was jumping.

JN  You did project work out in the woods?

LA  Yes. This created quite a stir, a controversy if you read the papers last winter. About all the opinions that were given about doing this type of thing.

JN  What is your opinion on it, what is the controversy?

LA  I can understand the jumpers concerns and I can sympathize with them. Their concern is that they have to maintain a second home for the summer. They have to move to Couer D'Alene, or Hamilton, or Plains, or where ever they are going to go with these people. And they have to maintain a second home. They are going to go work out in the district and they are not paying them per diem. Well we were always paid per diem. It was nothing to go spend the summer on project, we did it. They haven't done this for quite some time and now they have talked about cutting off the per diem. That means some of those people are going to have to maintain a second home. And it is an expense to them. I guess if I were going to work for the Forest Service I would expect to do that. If I didn't want to do that I wouldn't go to work for them. They have some concerns and justifiably so. These people are out in these locations and they can send an aircraft in there to pick them up or else transport them back to Missoula and load the aircraft and then go to the fire. So it is kind of a Catch-22 there, I don't know if they can justify it or not.

JN  Well, they have them out there to do project work in the forest when there is not a fire going, and the advantage is to the Forest Service is that they can use those men for other uses then?

LA  They can use them for what ever labor tasks that they might have at hand in their district. They pay them the wages and the people do not get the per diem which is your living expenses away from home, like motel and meals. I don't have idea what it is today but it used to be $22. The last time I was working there that is what it was a day. So it would defray the cost of you
having to maintain a residence away from home. I think I would probably agree with the jumpers that if you are going to be required to live away that they should probably defray this cost in the form of this payment that they used to make. It's a problem, they are really uptight about it.

JN When you first started out did you live at Nine Mile when you jumped?

LA I did, I worked on the district at Nine Mile. They had living quarters right there at the district. I used to drive there, I had a Model T in those days, and I would stay right there.

JN What was that camp like?

LA The jumper camp?

JN Yes.

LA That was about half a mile above the ranger station. It was a beauty, it was a dandy. It had all your needs there, it was right out in the middle of the forest and had a lot of physical things that people could do. Walk, swim, fish, they had volleyball courts, horse shoe pits, kind of a close knit outfit. It was a dandy.

JN Do you think being out in the woods sort of brought the people together?

LA Yes, you didn't have much choice, you were stuck out there. You were stuck there and as I was mentioning earlier, Missoula is always kind of a leader, a pioneer in that base. It was then and is now the largest jumper base in the world. I am not saying it is the best, it is the oldest. I have always had strong feelings about the Forest Service and the jumper base. It was a good job and I needed a job.

JN A feeling of loyalty to that base, especially.

LA Yes and I have worked on pert near every other base that there is. Some time or another you seem to hit those in your travels. They shift you to handle the fire traffic. I wouldn't say anything about any of those bases. They were all nice bases, I enjoyed them. They have all under gone severe changes. It is just a sign of the times, everything changes. Your communities change, your educational processes change, your schools, the military, everything changes. There isn't anything that hasn't escaped change. You have to kind of get in with it and the Forest Service has kind of done that. I don't know if you ever get over changes, they occur.

JN What would you say are some of the hardest changes for you in looking at and seeing the changes from when you first started? Some of the harder ones to accept?
LA I think the one that would come foremost in my mind is the one that maybe you would go on a project in the Bob Marshall Wilderness. Which I did in 19... I am not sure of the year, '55 maybe '56. I was back there, another boy and I, we were back there on project and after two or three weeks they had come in to pick us up for a fire call. I was gone on another part of the... I was gone working a trail head out. So they picked him up and I was left there, and I was in there with a pack string for several weeks by myself. They air dropped my food in to me and I would go weeks without seeing anybody. There wouldn't be anybody there. They didn't have the access to the wilderness at that time like they do now. In contrast if you go back there now there are people are all over.

JN And that is sort of discouraging?

LA It is to me in a way. The old Forest Service was... it has kind of disappeared and the people have so much easier access to all of those back country areas. Which is good for the people, but having all that human traffic there is not all that good for the land. That has been the biggest change as far as I am concerned. The people, you find them every where, and the access that they have to those places. I don't know if they have got more time today or what gives them that thing. I guess they just don't have to work as much as what was once required.

JN Could you describe a little bit what it was like when you were left there for two weeks there by yourself?

LA I was there much longer than two weeks. There is not much to it. I would get up before daylight and get my breakfast, go out and get the mule train ready. By daylight I was on the trail. So I would eat my lunch at maybe eight o'clock in the morning, eat my supper around noon or one in the afternoon. Then during the heat of the day I would go swimming or maybe go for a hike. Fish in the evening. We had kerosene lanterns then, there wasn't any electricity in those areas. I would never light the lantern, just go to bed at nine o'clock at night.

JN So you lived by daylight hours.

LA Yes. That wasn't that bad, I liked it. It was good. I couldn't complain about that at all.

JN Did you have many wildlife experiences, any bear encounters or anything like that?

LA Yes, nothing out of the extraordinary. Everybody had those experiences. Once you get out into the out country, the back country there everybody had all kinds of experiences with the wildlife. I was right in the middle of it all. So I would have encounters every day. Nothing earth shattering or different than anybody else.
What kinds of wildlife would you see?

There were a lot of bear, grizzly bear and black bear, and a lot of elk, moose, and of course the deer. And the smaller forms, porcupines... coyotes... things that you would hear about even today. And there was a lot of it. Society today, today the present society has encroached upon this habitat of the animals and consequently their numbers have been reduced. That is why we have so many endangered species today. Because we are there occupying that all the time. They are used to us. That is why we have the problems that we have. You hear about the bear problems here all the time. It is because they are used to us.

Would you have those animals come into your camp at all?

Yes. They were always around. But you just dealt with them. And they didn't see that much human traffic in those days and they probably were as scared of me as I was of them. And I just had a lot of respect for them and I think it was the same way, because I could holler at them and gallop off into the woods, disappear. Now you can't, it is hard to scare them off now. One guy right down here killed three grizzlies here two years ago, he fired a gun in the air, he hollered at them, and they wouldn't leave. They were getting ready to go into his chicken coop. So he shot them, he had a kid come in and they shot them. Big stink over that, but the boy was a tribal member so nothing happened.

That sort of goes back to what you were saying, just more traffic through the woods.

Yes, actually it wasn't that many years ago that to go from Ronan to Missoula was quite a trip. That was quite a journey, you didn't do it very often. And now you might run down for the afternoon, go to the show. And so the traffic out there is also increased so much more. Motor vehicles. Didn't have that versatility to get around... so your traffic every where has increased greatly. Not only in the back country but right out on the highways.

Boy that must have been a tremendous experience. Being back there for that long when there wasn't that much traffic.

Yes, I was kind of used to being by myself, I had grown up in the woods and I know that it was a summer that I really enjoyed. I was there, it seemed like I was in there like eleven weeks. I think probably that those days stretch as you get older. Not remembering them accurately, but I didn't mind it at all, I would do it again today.

What was a day at the Nine Mile base like? Let's say your weren't called on a fire but you just got up.

Well actually you took your training [inaudible] Nine Mile after you took your training, they vacated that base. They moved you into Fort Missoula and you stayed at some quarters there.
They had the old Hale field at that time where Sentinel High School is now. That is where the air strip was. Johnson came into the picture, and of course about that ....... what you would do is you just had work details out on the districts or you would have it right there around the living quarters. Or at the jumper base at Nine Mile. After you were trained you would get up and you would go through a regular days work like any other forest employee. Whether it be telephone lines or building trail heads, or building an outhouse in some district, or making up fire packs or packing parachutes. Improving the looks of the living areas in the form of cutting the grass or the weeds, painting buildings, building sheds. Everybody had little jobs that they would do. A lot of it was you would just go out on districts and pile brush. They would transport you out there and you would pile the brush up and clean up the forest areas. Then in the fall when the fire conditions were much more relaxed they would come in and they would do controlled burns on those. It was a way of keeping the forest clean. I always went out on district work, on project work. Where you would go out on different ranger stations such as when I went into the Bob Marshall. I would go back to the Nine Mile and put up their hay. Went down to Silver City, NM with an early jumper crew in 1956 after I got injured in my ankle. I left school early that year. Went to Seeley Lake one year, Plains one year, every year it seemed like you would go some place different. I guess that was part of the Forest Service, they would kind of make a gypsy out of you. So you would go out there and your work day, you get up and do what ever they had for you to do. Most of it was generally woods work, lot of it was improving the stations. Painted a lot of ranger stations.

JN Did you feel that it was worth while?

LA No, it was work that had to be done. It was a good opportunity for the Forest Service to get it done. They would simply pay out wage while we were there and per diem. It was real good for them and just excellent for us. I thought, personally, I don't know about other people. I am sure others would share that same opinion because I have talked to them about it. There are several jumpers around this area that I see regularly and we still talk about, as my daughter would say "the good old days way back when." They were good days and that was necessary work. They can still have those types of jobs out there. The only thing is the districts have all beefed their crews up.

JN So what does that mean?

LA That means that they have more people working for them now so they don't have the jobs available for the jumpers to come out and do those things. They have become more self sufficient. Just for the one thing, the helicopter if nothing else. With that helicopter you can do a lot of things, you can get to any place and get there in a hurry. And they can get them to the ground and get them do to what they have to do.
JN Do you think that is an over all plus, or does it have some drawbacks?

LA It depends on which way you look at it. As far as the jumpers go it is taking away a lot from the jumper base. For the districts it has increased their proficiency. It has been a real asset for them, an expensive one but a necessary one. It has been the big prediction in the future that the, between the IR crews those inter regional fire fighting crews, and the helicopters the jumpers may be put out of business. They will always have a need for jumpers, but not as much as a need as they have had. It has already been established. Those people are already taking care of themselves. There is still a need for jumpers and there will always be, as near as I can see. I guess I am not the great predictor of the future but... they will still have need for them. There isn't any place that isn't using them that hasn't used them in the past. They are not using them as much because of the roads and the other crews that they have.

JN It is interesting to hear you say how you felt about the project work. I have heard some later jumpers feel like it was busy work and that there was a distinction between, especially if you were a new man that you would get lower level work.

LA I think that with the jumper base and the way that it operates in Missoula today, a lot of it is busy work. After you are trained, if they kept you there you put out on grounds work or maintenance or dormitory or... in some part of the loft, the warehouse or where ever. And a lot of it is busy work, where you cut the weeds maybe build an object or improve on one of the training units. A lot of that stuff is busy work, it is things that have to be done. It is kind of high priced labor. I would never refute or deny that. But project work where you go out on the district was... is a different thing all together.

JN Sounds like you had much more independence and responsibility.

LA You did, you were active. That is the thing, you were active. And you were doing something so that when you got finished with your job you could look back and see what you did. And you would feel good about it.

JN Twenty miles of trail or....

LA Sure, yes. You would feel good about that. They would have the lawn at the jumper base cut every day, sweep down the ramp. Work in the load master area building fire packs. Working in the tower inspecting parachutes. Go to the warehouse and have them put all of their items in the proper areas. Some of it is busy work, but it is jobs that you know, you have to address the issues. It is just a matter of who does it. I can see where they would feel like it was just busy work assignment. Things that have to be done. Not a really exciting job is what I think they mean. Not very exciting to go through all of this high gear
training.... it is quite accelerated and very emotional training and all of the sudden it is over.

JN How would you say it is emotional?

LA Well you are looking to the units. You get to that obstacle course with that time that you have to make, you have to beat yesterday's mark and always try to improve on it. And the big thing of course is getting ready for the jump. They are going to do another practice jump that day and so you really look forward to it. Then you will be out in the woods for the afternoon on pumper training or chain saw training, going through retrieving drills, compass work, digging fire lines. It is very exhilarating and you are very excited about doing it, especially the jumping part. A lot of old war stories, after one jump you would be surprised at how many veterans are around. You would be surprised about how many people actually survive that harrowing experience of that jump of the day and the way that they tell it. It is really fun to listen to.

JN The first jump, people after their first jump, it is fun to listen to them.

LA Yes it is. Then as you get more experience it is the whole nine yards at the tails end.

END OF SIDE A

SIDE B

LA At the end of the day you would go over and look at the work load, they put out a work list. You see where you are assigned, maybe you are on the Pattee Canyon brush crew for the day. You wonder, go up and pile brush.

JN This is after your new mans camp, after the training is over.

LA Yes, it is all over.

JN You were just saying it is geared down after the new mans camp and you go out and pile brush.

LA Yes, it would be like if you were running a marathon. You are in that race and you are competing, you are going, your adrenalin is going. You are working hard and everything is active. Everything is moving. What do you do when cross the finish line and the race is over, what do you do? Everything slows down, you cool down and the... pace is reduced so drastically that it is all together different. That is the same way with the training with the jumpers. Coming in off a fire and finishing your training or what not you look forward to what, project work around the base. It is not the most inspiring thing that you would want to do at the time. That is what you do and you do it because that is what there is to do. The pace is just slower. So
then you get the fire call or you have to go out and back up another crew, you go to New Mexico or Alaska, California, Oregon, wherever. And then there is movement again. You are excited about it, and it stays that way.

JN It sounds like the change in the project work has really affected the overall experience...

LA That is what it sounds like to me. Also from what I read... I am not really sure what they are doing there any more. I wouldn't be really qualified person to ask that. I have been gone... I think I know what they are doing but I am not sure. I personally would not have any problem with that. I was in the over head the last twenty years I was at the base. I was in the dispatch the last years I was there. That is the nerve center. So I always a lot of things to do, I was always very busy.

JN Could you describe the dispatch center and what your job was?

LA The dispatch is, well it is just like I said, I would call it the nerve center of the whole operation. Everything comes in through the dispatcher goes out through the dispatcher. He handles all traffic, ingoing and out going. Regardless of what kind it is. Consequently you have all fire calls, you have all project requests, district work. Any assignment that might be going out. Schedule flights for people in the downtown offices. Handle a lot of the training schedules, have all the work lists that you have to make up. Keep the jump list, the Holy Jump List. That is the one.

JN The Holy Jump List? Why do you call it that?

LA The jump list has always been a problem. If there has ever been an area of controversy its always been that jump list. Basically the way it works once you come up to the top and you jump you go to the bottom. If you get shipped out to a fire in a vehicle even, and you get ten or twenty hours they would rotate you to the bottom. I don't know what they do about that now but it was that way, people would complain. They wouldn't get to jump but the got the fire. They were there to jump. The thing now is that you are there to fight fire. How you get there is not the big thing any more. And that is what you are there for. You are a service agency. And if you are not willing to perform that service in that category they require you to do that. If you go by bus, truck or by airplane, if you are not willing to do that then they would not encourage you to sign your name on the dotted line. And as a result of everything, they watch that jump list very closely. It is the life line, it is your soul. Because that is where your dollars are. You rotate off the top of the list without sufficient monetary reimbursement then you cry to the heavens about the great injustice that has been done to you.

JN You would get all that overtime if were....
LA That is it exactly, that is the bottom line. So consequently there has been more controversy about that than probably the second coming of Christ. It has always been a difficult area. And you sometimes make mistakes. You go back on the bottom of that list and in the order in which you come back in and not in the order in which you went out. First back is first on the list. So it is very important. You just live and die by that list.

JN And it was your responsibility to make up that list.

LA Oh yes,[laughs]

JN Did you catch a lot of....

LA Oh yes. They would put you on the front burner quite often. But that was part of the job. And you would just do your best. Just do your best and hope that that was it. And if you make a mistake, if I could see where I made a mistake I would fix it. I wouldn't try to hide it or lie about it. It gets worse then. Just take my severe verbal chastising from the troops. Move on to bigger and better things. Any way, if I was [inaudible] any troop movement would also go through the dispatch office, coming through the regional coordinator, the assignment of aircraft, the bringing in of crews, the shipping them out, bringing them back, air cargo requests. Everything goes through the dispatch. It is a very active place. It is an area where you can't afford mistakes. So you hopefully keep them at a minimum. I don't know how many years I worked up in that dispatch, I enjoyed all the years I was up there because you were always extremely busy. So the days and nights went fast.

JN Times like that almost in the military organization...

LA Very similar. The Forest Service is relatively structured as we all know, more regimented every day. It is very comparable to a military organization in its structure right now. You have your manuals you operate by, you go by those. They are quite similar. Pretty regimented. There are things you can do and things you can't do. And you go by those manuals. If you don't you will hear about it.

JN When you said that it is more regimented now did you notice it becoming more regimented?

LA Yes.

JN In what ways?

LA A while ago I said it was very simple, you would get a fire call and you would jump in one of those airplanes and you would go out and jump on the fire and pack your gear out to a trail head. Then you would walk out. You would come back to Missoula and turn in your map case. Your map case consisted of a compass and two or three forms. I don't know how many forms they have today in those map cases, but the last year that I was there I
think I counted up twenty three forms that they had in that map case. From parachute malfunctions to injury reports and cargo dropping evaluations, slurry evaluations. You have to bring in some mud from the fire. And they go on and on, it is just like a well rope, there is no end to it.

JN A well rope?

LA A well rope is just a round, just a rope that had no end to it. It was hooked together and you would pull a bucket up from the bottom of the well with it. There is no end to it. The forms that you have to fill out are insurmountable.

JN I would imagine too, that if you were, if you spent a lot of time walking out and packing your cargo to the mule train, you would be under a lot less supervision and regimentation.

LA Yes, just like if you were a jumper thirty years ago and you get a call you might go jump it the way that you are dressed. Where now you got to have the right boots, you got to have the right pants, the right shirt, you got to have a hard hat. You have to have all of these things. It is like you are cloned, everybody has to be the same.

JN Or they won't let you jump. Actually if you were called on a fire back then you wouldn't have to necessarily wear all your gear?

LA There wasn't any to speak of. Everybody wore those [inaudible] those black pants or else Levi's. That is what everybody wore. I saw people on the fire line in Oxfords. But now you have to have eight inch top boots, Vibram soles, and the whole bit.

JN But you still put on the uniform before you jumped, wouldn't you?

LA You would put on your jump suit.

JN But you wouldn't put your shoes and everything were not necessarily regulation?

LA No, not like it is now. You could jump in short sleeve shirt if you wanted to. I believe you have to have long sleeve now. That is part of all these changes I have been telling you about. Those things have taken place.

JN Gee, that is, that does sound a lot more...

LA Oh yes, you jump a fire back there and they really didn't know what you were doing back there. Patrol came in and flew around they would check you. You do your thing on the fire in the back country and then you came out. Go back and turn in your fire request and have the district ranger sign your time slip and that was it.
JN Did people take advantage of that?

LA People were pretty good as a whole... they were pretty honest. I would say that for the most part if a person said they did this or they did that, I think they were honest about it. They did do it. And the rangers would go in in the fall and check these fire areas. And they would look and see how much line was built, how much stuff was cleared out of there. Saw work, we had cross cut saws in those days, no power tools. Then how far you had to walk. And they could pretty well tell, they knew. Because they had gone through this. We at the jumper base were always trying to sell ourselves anyways. And so you would try to do a good job and be honest and be up front with everything because you didn't want to get caught with any of that kind of activity. Having times and, I am sure that some of that might have been done some where along the line. But for the most part it was pretty accurate, the reports that people gave.

JN When you went out on a fire for a crew action and you fought that fire, after the day is over and you are done fighting that fire would you just go to bed, or would you work on a social interaction?

LA If you are fighting a fire, if you are out on the fire, you just build a fire. Yes you are really tired. You would rack it as soon as you could. If you were transported back to the base, you would get a shower and clean up you might go to town. Go down and drink beer. That was always a popular past time. Drinking beer.

JN When you were out in the field, could you describe a fire where there would be quite a few people on the crew?

LA I am not sure you are looking for on that question but if you are out on a project fire, a large fire, Class C or D or bigger, all crews are assigned specific areas. They are responsible for these and they would go out and construct fire lines or improve it, or hold the fire, or start the mop up work. You would go to these designated areas until you were released from the fire. You might be here one day, might be up on top the next day. You might be over on the other side the next day. But everybody fought it out from the main fire tent. They would have a map. So you knew where everybody was believe it or not, or where they were supposed to be. And these people would go do their certain activities. They would have crews to construct fire lines, have crews that would have to improve fire lines, have crews that were fellers or sawyers go in there and fall snags. Real danger and hazard. They would have to go in, it was their job. Other people would start mopping the fire up. They all had, if you were around the fire for very long you would do each and every one of those things. You didn't do just one thing at every fire all the time. Basically the jumpers were always the line construction crew and then after the fire was lined the jumpers would be relieved. The other crews would come in. Real large fires were not jumper fires. Jumpers originated to be initial
attack crews, so they would jump into remote areas that other crews couldn't get to, without a long walk or horseback ride. Take a long walk and by the time you get there you are all worn out. That was the reason why jumpers were brought about was to get there in a quick and safe speedy manner.

JN And then you would still have the energy to fight the fire.

LA Yes, you would still have your energy. So after a fire would be controlled crews would probably not work during the night hours. Safety factors. Jumpers, it wasn't unusual, in fact it was very common that they would work through the night hours, you would work all night. On your line construction and get your fire under. If it is not a big fire you would go and put it out. If it were a large fire you would probably be relieved by other crews, the hot shot crews, the IR crews or else the district personnel.

JN What are the hot shot crews?

LA The hot shot crews were ground people, they weren't jumpers, they were trained as ground personnel. Their mission was much the same as the jumpers. They were trained in initial attack, get to a fire in a hurry and line the fire and control it and they were very skilled people.

JN Is that why you would call them hot shot?

LA It was a name put on them, they would function much the same as the jumper crew except they didn't jump in on the fires. And now the IR crews, the inter regional crews, do about the same thing also. They use those people to finish off fires, to mop them up.

JN Is there more of an admiration or mutual respect between the jumpers and the hot shot crews as opposed to the IR crews?

LA I always had a lot of respect for those crews. I had respect for them and their skills, their efforts and their work. I thought they did very well. And I think they probably thought the same way about us as jumpers. Lot of competition between the crews. Get them on fires and it is a contest.

JN To see who could do the job the fastest?

LA Get the most done. In one way that was good. It was quite a sight to see a jumper crew and an IR crew or hot shot crew on a fire, watch them dig fire line. You would be amazed at how fast people can dig. You don't say that this one is better than that one, they were all good. I like to think they were all good and very professional people.

JN Was your jumping experience in Alaska different than here in the states?

LA Jumping in Alaska is definitely a different experience.
Because you are at sea level in the first place. You are landing in the tundra, it is like jumping in a big mattress. The jump conditions don't have to be anywhere what they have to be here in the lower 48 states. You can have much stronger winds, jump into situations that you would never jump in down here because of the elevations, the hard ground, the rocks, and other hazards that might be in the surface area. It isn't all that much of a piece of cake up there but it is considerably different. The tundra is soft. You would get some pretty good drafts up there but for the most part it's, your rate of descent is slower, and it is all in the landing. You don't hammer the ground like you do here. It is different.

JN What were the fires like?

LA Up there you are out on the tundra, that might burn over and the sun can dry it out. You could have a reburn one or two hours later. Down here if you have a fire go through an area it burns out the area completely. It would be several years before you get another one. Up there you can have another one in a couple of hours. If it gets down underneath the tundra you have to dig it out. That is the most difficult... Up in Alaska for the most part you cut off a spruce bough, maybe swab it in water, and swat the fire out with that. Or else use a burlap bag, gunny sack. They are not hard to put out as a rule. When you get the extreme conditions it is difficult to put them out. Fighting fire there can in no way be compared to fighting fires down here. The jumping is different, you got a long range of travel up there. Fly all day across the state, just across the state of Alaska. They call it the last frontier, but it is getting to the point... when I first started going up there in the '60's we would go out and jump in the tundra area. You would never see anybody. The last year I was there was '78 it was getting to the point where I was seeing people all over the out back areas. It was not unusual. They are doing there what we did here, civilization is crowding in to those areas. Just more accessible with all of the airplanes and boats, people have the time. They seem to have the time to get to those areas. When I first started going there you could see, you had to be careful where you were landing at Fairbanks because of all the caribou out on the landing strip, or moose. Now you go up there and it is getting difficult to find any moose. And they were all over in the town of Fairbanks.

JN What was the town of Fairbanks like?

LA It was not much of a town. Pretty small, slow in its mode of life. Certainly wasn't very modern. Today it is relatively larger and quite modern. It has just undergone all this growth, all these changes. They got a university there. It has grown quite a bit. The Alaska country has changed, the wilderness has change considerably. I guess we all get caught up in those thoughts where we would like to just grab hold of time and have it sit still. Nothing change, it doesn't work that way. Everything changes. So we would like to dwell on our thoughts on the past, how nice it was. Everybody talks about the good old days. And a
lot of things that were good about the good old days is that they are gone. It was a hard way of life. A lot of things were real good about it and sentimentally you get locked in with those. The inevitable has taken place, the change has come. Progress is here and you have to either get in line with it or get out. I saw in the paper the other day a guy from Massachusetts left home last winter to come out and live off the land in Montana. They found his body in his car over in the Swan, in a sleeping bag. Died of exposure. Those days of living off the land in the glorious west, gone. Most people face reality reluctantly. It will never be the way that it was, and a guy could say why should it be.

JN Did you have that feeling that living off the land or self sufficiency when you were on the trail in the Bob Marshall.

LA Yes, we did that.

JN Catch a lot of fish and...

LA Yes, we did a lot of that. I still go hunting and fishing but it is... if you get uncomfortably out there you can jump in your pick up and go home. It isn't like you have to stay out there.

JN You are committed to being there then.

LA That just changes.

JN When you look back on it what do you think being a smoke jumper has done for you?

LA The biggest thing it did was give you a job, a source of income. A means of some type of livelihood. It was, I think, I am not sure how to express it but I would say probably it was a great contributor to a very active and healthy life. It removed you from a lot of the comforts of civilization. You were very active, you were exposed to the elements. People didn't seem to have the health problems that they have now. It taught you how to work... it was a really good life for me. I have very strong feelings about it. It is a phase of my life that if I had to do again I would do it the same way. I wouldn't change it.

JN Are you still in touch with the people that you jumped with back then at all?

LA Yes I am. Several of them live right up here on Flathead Lake. And I will go up and see them, like today I will see several of them. I will go up and take the boat up sail around the lake, the kids will ski. But I see a lot of those people. There are probably half a dozen to a dozen people that I was very close to... more than that. I was eating lunch here yesterday and one of them dropped in on me. One that works right over here in St. Ignatius. He stopped in to see me. Just before I went to Utah a gentle men that was here to see me and really looking forward
to the reunion. So then he gets the "Big C" right there in his kitchen I guess. It was the third one that he had that I know of.

JN Third what?

LA Cardiac. Have a heart attack. I would just like to think that, that wouldn't be all that bad of a way to go I suppose. Drop down on the floor and jerk around a bit. But it is over pretty quick. None of that long suffering. I feel bad that he didn't get a chance to take in that reunion this summer. It was a big part of his life and he was really looking forward to the reunion. He was excited, just excited. Came down to see me and couldn't tell me enough about back when we used to work together.

JN It sounds like other people at that time felt the same way about it. They really consider it a good time in their lives.

LA I think that people at that time had real strong loyalties, good feelings about the Forest Service. Probably, I would say it was perhaps the most exciting time in many peoples lives. Just for the jumping aspect if for nothing else. You can't describe, they always ask what is it like to jump, words don't describe it. It was an experience, an experience that you don't get in any other facet of life that I know of. And I have done lots of things. I was extremely active all my life. Nothing is like the experience of a parachute descent. At least I don't know of any words that can describe it. It is such a feeling.

JN Is it frightening?

LA I am sure that it must be but it is over so quickly that you don't have time to be frightened. It all happens so fast. I think it is probably a good thing that you are well trained or else a lot of people would never live through that first jump. You would never think to activate your emergency, I am sure.

JN What is your emergency?

LA If your back pack would ever fail you would have a chest pack to use in an emergency. And you have to manually activate that and that back pack is by a static line. Everything is automatic. The only thing that you have to do is be in the airplane alive and suited up, hooked up. You leap out and follow your trust in that static line and that canopy to open and it would seem to suspend you until you got to old mother earth. And your old nylon umbrella that.... if it didn't do that...

JN Did it ever do that?

LA No. Very few parachute malfunctions. The riggers that pack the chutes take good care, time and skill in doing that. I still hold a Master Riggers card. I was a rigger for many years. I wouldn't try to go pack a parachute without it. They did have their gear malfunctions.
JN Did you ever have one?

LA Just slight ones, I didn't have any thing real big to write home about. The biggest one I had one time I was on a fire jump one time, the Beaverhead, I was jumping on a place called [inaudible] and I had a delayed opening. I descended probably three or four hundred feet before my canopy activated. I was alert at that time as to what was going on. I was activating my emergency when the canopy opened up. Some people have had some bad things happen. There has never been a person killed in a parachute... malfunction. There has never been anybody killed in a parachute malfunction in the Forest Service that I know of. One boy, a friend of mine was killed in Alaska when he hung up in his shroud lines during his let down and hung himself. He was from right over here at Thompson Falls. Other than that, as near as I can recall there has never been a fatality. Which is remarkable record, for the millions of jumps that have been made at the smoke jumper base it is remarkable. I also jumped two years in the military, I was in the 101st Airborne Division and they had that [inaudible] But our parachutes in the military were not steerable. That is all together different in the military. Jumping there and jumping here there is no comparison. I don't know if you can believe that but there is no comparing the two. The aircrafts are different, the gear is different, they didn't have jump suits. The conditions, the drop zone areas, everything. Here you drop any where, there they have open fields, drop zones.

JN Which did you prefer?

LA There is no question in my mind that smokejumping was my bag.

JN Why is that?

LA Because of the differentiation, you could jump the same D-Z [drop zone] ten times in a row. We never jumped the same fire. Everything was just different. We had sense in our training methods. They have copied some of ours, we used to train a group of their men every spring. I don't know if they still do that any more. So basically the training principles are the same now I suppose but the jumping was different.

JN I wonder if that connects with the regimentation that we were talking about before? Did you have the feeling that you were less regimented when you jumped as a smokejumper?

LA I wouldn't make that comparison in that respect. The military exists in the only way that they can exist, through strict regimentation. Everybody has to be equal, they try to make you that way. Give you all the same uniforms and they make it that way. At the jump base, some of those types of things are expected but they aren't going to give you a dishonorable discharge. They might fire you if you get too lax in some aspects. It is not the same regimentation that the military has. They do expect you to keep your self fit, they expect you to do
the job and they had some of the same type of things. I guess there would be a relationship there.

JN I guess what I am trying to get at there is to describe the experience of jumping with the smokejumpers much preferable. I am trying to get at why that is.

LA It is that way because it is more loose. You had more range of freedom in your movement. You could move around in the airplane, on the fire you don't have the strong discipline that you have in the military on the combat field. You are just not as confined in the smokejumpers as you are in the military. You have more freedom, more movement. You go to different areas all the time, different places, different jobs. You had an opportunity to execute different skills. In the military you don't have that. You are cast into a mold and that is where you stay. In the military they operate what they call the MOS, military occupational specialty. In the Forest Service you might do compass work, you might pack parachutes, you might build a building, you might fall trees. You just do so many different things. That would be the biggest difference, your freedom of movement.

JN It seems to fit in with what you were talking about the early days of jumping. Where you called on to do a lot of the different skills by the situation.

LA I think that down at the smoke jumper base if you took.... I don't think there is any chore that you couldn't get done. There are people of such varied skills, there are people there that are lawyers, doctors, mechanics, scuba divers, sky divers, contractors, heavy duty equipment operators, professional skiers, you can pick any kind of an occupation and you will find some form of it at that jumper base. At least it used to be like that. I think that part of it has changed a bit too.

JN Who do you suppose jumps now?

LA College bound people have always been pretty much the brunt of the jumpers. But we have had people who work every year there. Would work another off season job, until they could get on full time at the base. Consequently that is where all this experience came from. The excitement of it is what locks them in and brings them back year after year. I could have gone out and got other jobs but that was... You asked me what it did for me, it gave me a job, taught me to work gave me a source of lively hood. The best thing about it was I enjoyed every minute.

JN Even if you had other opportunities you would go back?

LA I had lot of other job opportunities. I wouldn't take them. In fact I would go right back tomorrow, although it is ... It is a different world now. I went through the good years of it. I was in there in the best years. Every other jumper would say that. My Forest Service experience spans from 1953 to 1979, that would be
the best years. The 50's had to be the best years. Now the next
guy might tell you different. He might say Big Sky, that is what
they call me, they would say Big Sky is crazy, the 40's were the
best. The 50's were the best years.

JN Well I sure enjoyed this interview.

LA I am not sure if I gave you any information or not. I was in
high hopes that my boy might take up smokejumping when it came
time for him. He didn't elect to do that. I had strong feelings,
strong enough where I would like to see my boy, or my girls even
try it. It would be good for them. It was a good thing for me,
and it was a good thing for a lot of people.

JN Definitely more than a job.

LA Definately more than a job. I am not sure that I have given
you much information but I really enjoyed the job. I could still
work for the Forest Service. I will retire from teaching in
another two years and I might go back to the Forest Service
[laughs].

END OF THE INTERVIEW