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Interview with Wendy Kamm for the Smokejumper's Oral History Project 11/30/84, OH# 133-53.

KR Wendy, I guess the first thing I'm interested in, and a good introduction to the tape is what's your background? Just kind of an overall view like when you started?

WK I went to Sonoma State College in California and had majored in environmental studies and had always been interested in outdoor jobs. And I applied with California Department of Forestry, the first year, thinking I wouldn't get hired and I got hired.

KR Good for you.

WK I spent my first summer working for the State of California and really had a great time. It was hard to adjust to, because it was very militaristic, and that was kind of hard to adjust. When you couldn't go home at night, you had to live at the station, you had to be there pretty much five days a week, twenty-four hours a day, and that was a little hard to adjust to. But being that it was only a temporary thing, for the summer, it was OK. I had a great captain and that made all the difference in the world. He had a lot of faith in me. He had hired the first woman in the county and had gotten a lot of flak for it. She turned out real well, and I was the second woman to be hired. I feel I did a pretty good job there, and really enjoyed it. I wanted to continue in fire fighting, but I didn't want to be in such a military type version of fire fighting. So I applied to the Forest Service and got hired on what's called a BD crew which is a brush disposal crew, which actually had very little to do with brush disposal. What we did mostly was thinning timber stands, and we also doubled as a fire crew, when a fire would come in on the forest, we would go to it. We were like an IR crew, but being as we didn't have the title of an IR crew we weren't. But we did the exact same thing, we probably did the same number of fires and had the same skill level of an IR crew.

KR Great experience.

WK Yeah, it was. I liked it because it gave you something to do between fires instead of just hanging around the way a lot of fire crews did. When you're officially in fire, they don't want you way out in the middle of nowhere. Whereas half the time fires would start way out in the middle of nowhere and we were the closest crew. So I stayed on that for the Sierra National Forest on the Bass Lake District for two years. And then I switched districts on the same Forest and became Assistant Foreman on the BD crew on the Minarets District and really liked
that a lot. The next year they dissolved the BD crew, they
pretty much got rid of them all over California, it seems like,
through the cutbacks. So I went on to a fire engine crew and was
the Assistant TTO which is Tanker Truck Operator, they changed
the name of it now, I don't know what they call it now. It's
basically someone who operates the pumps at a fire and drives the
truck and also does fire fighting duties, too. So I got a lot of
hydraulics in that and that was interesting, kind of a different
angle on that. And I had had some of that with CDF but not quite
the level of responsibility I did there. And then the next
season I saw a flier for smokejumping, and I had always wanted to
try smokejumping. I had met a smokejumper the winter before that
in Mexico. And I told him, 'oh, yeah, I've been on fire crews',
and I said, 'I'd really like to be a smokejumper' and he looked
at me and just laughed. And he goes, 'they'd never hire a
woman.' And from that moment I was determined I was going to be a
smokejumper. Which was sort of, I never said it to his face,
but, I'll show you, I'm going to do it.

KR   Good for you, yeah.

WK   So, I applied and was really surprised that I actually
got hired my first time I applied and I got hired here in
Missoula and also got notice from Redmond, Oregon that they would
hire me also, but I had already accepted here in Missoula.

KR   Fantastic, so is this your first year?

WK   This is my third year.

KR   Third year jumping? So you had five years prior experience?

WK   Yeah

KR   When you were assistant Foreman on that BD crew, was that
the first woman that they had?

WK   It was the first woman they ever had on a BD crew and it was
funny because my boss, who to this day is one of my favorite
bosses had never hired a woman and was just pulling his hair out
because I was the most qualified person. He didn't want to hire
me because he had had bad problems with women on fire crews
before, and so finally there was nobody else to choose from so he
had to hire me. So he ended up hiring me and it ended up he was
happier with me than with anyone else on the crew.
Unfortunately, the foreman, much as I liked him as a person, was
not the most intelligent person and I found that all the
correspondence would be between me and the boss instead of
between him and the boss. Because he just had real problems
understanding people, and dealing with just paperwork and stuff.
KR And so you had that communication, and he could rely on you.

WK Yeah. . . Yeah

KR That's great, so your first year you started fire fighting. You want to take off your coat and hat and make yourself more comfortable, whatever. If this is '84, then your first year was '81?

WK My first year jumping was '82. '82,'83,'84.

KR And you trained here in Missoula?

WK Yeah

KR What was that like?

WK It was hard, it was very hard training. The units were very hard.

KR Did you know anybody up here?

WK No, I knew absolutely nobody.

KR And so you know that you're a woman walking into this situation, where you had had one smokejumper laugh in your face.

WK Yeah.

KR I mean. . .

WK I didn't know what to expect. I had no idea what it was going to be like. I found I was a lot better accepted than I had thought I would be.

KR Great.

WK But it was about as hard as I thought it would be, I expected it to be real tough. I was all ready for the PT test, because I had practiced that. They send you in March, when they accept you, they send you a notice saying, you will be expected to do this, you know, so many push-ups, and pull-ups. Plus I had heard that before, so in January, when I started doing all my push-ups.

KR Training, yeah.

WK [laughs].

KR What was the hardest part of that PT test for you, that you had to develop the most in, in order to pass?
WK. I think, the first year it was the pull-ups. And I find now it's the running. Because I built my upper body strength up, I don't tend to lose too much of it, if I keep at it. But I had an accident two summers ago and fractured one of my vertebrae on a parachute accident and since then my running has slowed down an awful lot, and so I have to really keep at it and really have a hard time running for the test.

KR Yeah, I can see that, you still have pain from that injury?

WK No, but I'm just not as fast as I used to be. I used to pass it with no problem at all, with a whole minute to spare. But now I come in with about twenty seconds to spare, it's a little close, [laughs].

KR You have to pass that every year, too, don't you?

WK Every year, and that's what's real hard on some of the older guys, is they get out of shape after a while.

KR So you work at it all year around?

WK I do pretty much, I find it's a lot easier to stay in shape than to get into shape. I go into a kind of a slump, like right now I'm in a kind of a motivation crisis where I just go, "Ah, I don't want to do this." I just want to do my push-ups and leave. Where usually I just go in and get it done in an hour, but it's real hard right now.

KR Give yourself a break 'til January.

WK That's what I figure, I figure, January first, you've got to get serious.

KR How many people were training that year?

WK They started out with about 34 or 35 people. And four of the women washed out and I'm not sure how many of the guys washed out, about three or four of the guys washed out. Most of the people ended up quitting. They didn't end up washing out, there was only about one or two that actually washed out.

KR In the PT training?

WK Yeah. Some of them couldn't pass the PT test and then you had a second chance after the units to pass it again. And some of them just realized the units were too hard, or else, one of them quit during the pack out. He said, I can't do this and quit. Which was probably to their own benefit. Because why go through the unit training, [laughs] if you don't have to. It's fun, but at the same time, it's real hard and you really push yourself to
your limits.

KR What's unit training?

WK You go through all the different, it's all... sort of simulation. Tower simulations, simulating exiting from an airplane with a parachute exit, and then they have a landing simulation where they raise you up with a harness on a pulley. Then they drop you down and you have to roll, and then they pick you up and drop you down again. You just do it over and over until you get it right [laughs]. And they have a, what is it, an obstacle course and you had to do that within a certain amount of time. I found that pretty hard. And just a lot of stuff like that. They had pole training, it was simulating climbing a tree with spurs to get your parachute out. And you were timed on almost all of it, or else they went a lot on form, and they were real hard on you psychologically, too. Which I think was good, because you really have to weed out people who just don't have the mental stamina.

KR So they were psychologically hard on you in terms of pressure?

WK Yeah, in terms of timing and in terms of telling you, 'This is the worst rookie class I've ever seen.' Of course you hear that, they say that about every rookie class. Make you feel real small, which makes you try a little harder. I think I was kind of laughing the whole time, because I realized the whole game that was going on there, and I wasn't going to take anything to heart.

KR How many women were you trying out with, you said four washed out.

WK There was seven to start with.

KR Three women made it and were hired and given jobs?

WK Yeah.

KR Great. Was that the first year that women were on.

WK In Missoula, yeah. There was one, Diane Schullman worked the year before in McCall.

KR Right, so you were the first three out of Missoula. That had to be a high.

WK Yeah, it was. It was a lot of fun, it was great.

KR Were the men pleased having three women on the crew?
WK It was mixed, some were pleased and some weren't at all pleased. But they sort of kept their mouths shut about it, because they had been given such an incredible drilling of that you were going to get sued for sexual harassment if you say anything. They were scared to say anything. For about the first week we were there, nobody would talk to us, because they were scared that we were going to sue them [laughs]. It was kind of funny. I didn't like it because I didn't like the power we had over them in some ways. I didn't think it was quite fair. And it also made me totally unapproachable, just because, as a friend. I think among the rookies we were all real tight, just because we were all from the same rookie class. You'll notice that people who tend to be real good buddies are people who were all in the same rookie class.

KR Still to this day?

WK Yeah.

KR Important bonding there when you're going through all that sweat and tears. So let's see, '81, I can't remember that summer was that a hot summer?

WK It was '82

KR I mean '82, was that a hot summer?

WK No, in fact, it was the second worse summer in smokejumper history as far as fires goes. It was terrible, it was depressing. I made less money that year. I made twice as much the year before on an engine crew. And so I wasn't feeling real good about, you know, when you're smokejumping you make big bucks, and those big bucks were terrible [laughs].

KR How many jumps?

WK I had the grand total for the entire base, of six fire jumps, which is nothing, nothing at all.

KR So you made more money than anybody?

WK Yeah, I did, as a rookie it was an insult to all the old guys. It was terrible, because you hear, usually, the grand total is fifteen or so like it was this last year.

KR How did those jumps go for you? What was your first jump like?

WK My very first jump, it was quite a jump, it was probably my most memorable jump. My first fire jump, I was in Alaska, I got to go to Alaska my first year and jumped out of a Vopar. And we were jumping out on the tundra, and there's a lot of little lakes
out on the tundra. They're not very big, they're maybe an acre or
two in size. And right, the first stick went out, two guys went
out ahead of us, and I was in the second stick. It was me and my
partner, Dan Twohig, and right when we went out this hugh thunder
cloud rolled right over the fire and just let go. It started
pouring rain, lightning bolts all around.

So the spotter slapped us before he did on the other one. I
was really shocked. I was the first one in the door and I was
expecting to get over to where the other guys had jumped from.
The next thing he slapped me and I couldn't argue, I had to jump.
I looked down and I'm right over a lake. Oh, no [laughs] there's
lightning bolts coming down on all sides, and I'm soaking wet
before I even got on the ground, and this is terrible. So I
didn't know whether to try and go with the wind and jump over
the lake or to try and stay in to the wind and hope I land on the
shore. As it was I turned a quarter and ended up landing right
on the shore of the lake. I didn't want to land in the middle,
it would have been awfully cold.

And then I had trouble finding the fire, because the tundra
there was so completely flat and the water, the rain was raining
so hard, that you couldn't see more than fifty feet in front of
you. It was like being lost, I could see my partner and he
could see me, but we couldn't find the fire. Finally we just had
to yell and see if the other guys could hear us and they finally
heard us. We went over there.

KR  Was there anything to do with the fire, by the time, with
the rain storms?

WK  No, it was completely out. All we did was build a tent and
jumped inside and went to sleep for the night, it was about two
o'clock in the morning.

KR  You jumped at night?

WK  Yeah, up there you can jump at night because the sun's
pretty much up all the time. It'll get dark, but not real dark,
it's just like immediately after sunset, is about as dark as it
gets. So it's light enough to see, you can jump.

KR  Had you ever experienced the tundra before?

WK  No, I had never seen the tundra before, it was marvelous.
In fact I was laughing when I landed because it's like landing on a
big mattress, it's all springy and soft. You could land on you
head and you wouldn't hurt yourself, [laughs].

KR  Good first jump.

WK  Yeah.
KR Were you scared?

WK I was nervous, yeah. Because I didn't know what to expect. What was funny was when I... we had just gone and circled the fire before and jumped four people on that one, and I looked down out of the window out of the airplane, looked down and thought, 'gosh, they're jumping right into the trees and not even looking for a hole,' I thought that was terrible. I thought they should at least jump in a hole. I didn't realize the trees were only ten feet high. [laughs] I got on the ground and the tallest trees were about twelve feet high.

KR No problem about getting snagged on them.

WK No, you'd hit the ground before your parachute even touched it.

KR I've heard that fighting fire up there, you don't dig line you just kind of beat at it.

WK Yeah, you beat it out.

KR Strange. So what was your second jump?

WK My second jump was also in Alaska, on the same trip. And that one we did have about an acre of fire that we had to put out, slap out. And nothing real eventful about it.

KR You said you jumped with one guy, David Toohey?

WK Yeah, Toohig, Dan Toohig.

KR Dan Toohig. What were your jumping partners like, when you jump with somebody, I don't know what was the smallest fire you went out on, a two manner?

WK Yeah, I have been out on four two manners.

KR Isn't there a bond between you and the person that you jump with?

WK Yeah, there is. Luckily in every case that I've jumped, I've jumped with someone that I really like a lot. First one was with a guy called W.W., probably went by his initials. And he was real friendly, he was real encouraging to me. And the fire wasn't that hard to put out, it was pretty easy to put out. Except that we had a lot of snags to drop, and we had a crosscut saw, and I'd never cut a tree down with a crosscut saw. It ends up being the biggest tree I've ever cut down in my life, and it had to be with a crosscut saw. And we had a lot of trouble getting it down, because the tree was so rotten in the middle, that it didn't have any weight to it. It got over at about a forty-five degree angle.
and it wouldn't move. And we drove all our wedges in and they just disappeared into that tree. It got to the point where I was ready to climb up to the top and start jumping to get it to move. But we finally got it down.

That was my first pack out, and to this date that was my worse. It was really, really hard. Because, it was only about three and a half to four miles, it wasn't very long, but it was in an area that had a lot of blowdown from the wind. The wind had blown down all the trees and so about every twentieth step would my feet actually touch dirt. The rest of it was all just rolling logs and just, it was like splinters all over the place. Oh, it was hard, and I fell down and cursed and yelled and kicked my pack, got up again, and fell down ten feet later, it was hard.

KR  How heavy are your packs?

WK  They'll ranged anywhere from about ninety pounds to a hundred and twenty.

KR  Did you have trouble with the initial pack out that you have to do for your test?

WK  I did pretty well on that, it was hard. And I wasn't sure I was going to make it, but I did pretty well on that. I didn't realize what happened and that was kind of funny. You're timed by the last of the old jumpers that gets in. You have half an hour to get in after he gets in. And I thought he was way out ahead of me, I didn't realize that he was behind me. So I was running up the mountain and running down the other side trying to catch up with him. And he's a mile ahead of me, and 'oh no, I'm gonna flunk, I'm gonna flunk.' And it turns out, I turn around and I see him five hundred feet behind me, and by this point I've got a quarter mile to go and, "oh, shees," I can relax. I slowed down to a snail's pace at that point. I didn't have to run anymore.

KR  Tell me about some other fires, that first year in '82.

WK  Let's see, I jumped in Grangeville. I jumped that one with W.W. in '82. And I jumped another one with a fellow rookie who had been through the same training that I had been through, and that was kind of fun. It was a beautiful area way up, I think it was in the Clearwater, and just incredible. Real high altitude, we probably jumped at about 8500 feet and then had to climb to about 9500 to hike out along the ridge top. And that was just beautiful, you get up to just above timber line, and that was just fabulous. It was really pretty, landed up in a meadow. It was kind of scary on that one, because the wind was blowing pretty hard and there was a lot of big snags around. I was determined to make the spot, I didn't want to land anywhere else. I find the more scared I get, the more accurate I get on my landing. And
usually if I have a giant field and there's a spot where I'm supposed to land, I'll miss it by a mile.

KR Pressure.

WK Yeah.

KR Is it any different jumping in higher altitudes?

WK You land a lot harder because of the air density. There's a lot less density, the hotter the day or the higher the altitude, you have less dense air so you fall faster. And so, like a lot of places like on the Silver City all their jumps are pretty high altitude so they won't usually let any rookies go down for a booster crew. Which makes sense to me, which is also kind of funny because some of the bases like McCall, wouldn't allow anybody to go to Alaska as a rookie. And Alaska is the easiest place to jump because it's like jumping on a mattress, but they all want to make it seem like it's so hard. But it's the easiest fire fighting I've ever done.

KR Interesting, I didn't know all those little aspects of the rules and regs.

WK Yeah

KR How many jumps in '82?

WK I had six fire jumps, I had a total of fifteen jumps, including my practice jumps.

KR Were there any other fires that stick out in your mind for '82?

WK Not really, nothing real spectacular, I did jump two more, one right here, up the Rattlesnake, and then one over near the border of the Beaverhead and Lame Deer. Not Lame Deer, Deer Lodge. But it was a real memorable fire.

KR In the Rattlesnake?

WK Yes.

KR Where was that, kind of on the backside?

WK Strawberry Ridge, you could see it from town.

KR Right, now I'm remembering, I remember that one.

KR What was the, after your first year, you got accepted to the program and you work, and like you said, you bonded with a
lot of people especially with the rookies. What's it like ending, leaving that first year?

WK  It's kind of sad that it's all over, it seems like it went awfully quickly. We have a short season up here, middle of September, first of October, and I'm used to going to about the first of November. It just seemed like it was over so quick. I was real sad to leave that first year.

KR  So you weren't burnt out, of course it was a light year.

WK  No, I wasn't burnt out at all.

KR  What was '83 like?

WK  '83 wasn't much different from '82. '83 was the year I got hurt. So my season ended in the middle of August.

KR  Tell me about that.

WK  I was jumping a fire, it was going to be a two manner up on Big Knife Ridge, just over Arlee in the Jocko. We flew over it, we were going to jump out of a Cessna 206, which is a two person plane. And we circled it the night before and the winds were real high. In fact, they'd circled it from one of the other bases, I can't remember which one, one of the sub-bases and decided they didn't want to jump it because the winds were so high. So they sent us, and we circled it and we decided the winds were too high, too. So we were going to jump it as early in the morning as possible. So we went in and left about 6:30 in the morning and went out and circled it. We just couldn't find any smoke, we just didn't know where it was. And the spotter plane threw out a roll of toilet paper, so we did see the toilet paper so we knew where that was. But we couldn't see any smoke, but we were going to jump it anyway just to check.

I was the second one out. Dennis jumped and landed, he can't really tell what's happening the first few seconds, when the first person goes, because you don't have any communication. They have their radio in their leg pocket, it takes awhile to get out. And then I jumped out and the wind was real still and my parachute was handling real well and I came into a patch of trees. I steered for a patch of trees thinking the more trees the better. And I came through and my body hit the top of one of the trees and I went right and sort of bounced off and went through it and next thing I looked up and said, 'God I'm falling awfully fast.' And thinking in my head, it was kind of like in slow motion, everything went in slow motion, 'Gosh, I'm just falling too fast.' My chute should catch now, and it didn't catch, and it didn't catch, my chute should catch now, and I never felt the chute catch. Next thing I know I hit the ground, I never felt my chute catch the trees,
The minute I landed I hurt so bad. I could hardly even breathe I hurt so bad. I knew I was hurt, and I knew my back was hurt and I shouldn’t even try to move. But I was real flustered trying to get out of my suit, trying to get my helmet off, I was getting claustrophobia real bad. So my helmet, I just wanted to get out of my suit real bad. And I yelled to my partner to come, and he came down. We jumped at about eight o'clock in the morning and nobody came on until nine. The hard part was there were going to have to rescue me out of there, there was nobody at the base. So they had to call everybody at home to come back to the base and get all suited up and on the plane. So it was about an hour and a half just laying there, waiting to hear an airplane circling overhead. It was getting real frustrating.

KR A lot of pain?

WK Yeah, a lot of pain. I sprained my ankle and had a compression fracture in my vertebrae.

KR Whereabouts in your back?

WK First lumbar, just right below the ribs, so it's my lower back, it's my first lumbar vertebrae of the lower back. Felt myself getting real shocking, real pale, everybody when they landed said I was white as a ghost. Stayed conscious the whole time, but knew that I didn't want to get up and walk around. They had to bring a scoop stretcher in and pick me up. And they brought life flight in and they cut a helispot. Flew me to the hospital in the stretcher. Quite a bit of time in the hospital. And then about two weeks after I got out I developed blood clots in my leg from the accident because I had been moving around a lot, plus I had sprained the ankle and injured back. And ended up back in the hospital for another week or so. So spent pretty much the whole winter recovering. The blood clots ended up being a lot worse than the broken back as far as the pain goes.

KR And they classify that as a broken back?

WK Well, it was an actual fracture, I mean, I didn't lose any movement in my legs or anything. It's a compression fracture is what it is. My vertebrae looks like a mushroom now, it's all flattened out on top and spread out. I'm probably half an inch shorter than I used to be. It's common in parachuting, it's a common injury.

KR Scare you?

WK Yeah, it did. Luckily I didn't know what was happening until I hit the ground, so I didn't panic or anything. By the time it had happened, it was over and...
KR What happened? Now looking back on it, you're coming down thinking it's gonna catch now, it's gonna catch now...  

WK What happened was my chute just tore the top out of the tree. And I don't know how it never even tugged, I guess the top of the tree was so weak. And what I don't understand is how I only hit one tree because when I came in the trees were only about three feet apart and the canopies about fifteen feet wide when it's fully opened at least. And how I hit only one tree, I don't know. I don't understand it, and nobody seems to understand exactly what happened there. I said, 'what should I have done differently? and they said 'we don't really know.' And then one of my foreman, we had a foreman, an accident foreman, what could have been done to prevent this accident and he says there's really nothing you could have done differently but just to fill out the form I put down that you should have been grabbing branches on the way down. Which is not real smart 'cause then I would have had a broken back and two broken arms.

KR How are those branches gonna catch you?

WK No, I didn't realize I was in trouble until I hit the ground. Plus there weren't any branches once you got past the first twenty feet. But they had to put something down.

KR Did you jump this last summer?

WK Yes, I did.

KR How did you get back in shape?

WK I started out just lifting weights and just mostly for my arms and legs so I wouldn't get out of shape there. And then I took up swimming and I did a lot of swimming and to this day I still do a lot of swimming. I found, I tried running, but running is real painful especially with the blood clots I had in my leg. My leg would get fatigued real fast after just half a block it would be ready to quit, while the rest of my body was ready to go. But by about the end of November I started to run again, and I just was determined to jump this last year, the next year after my accident. It's like falling off a horse and getting back on. So I probably spent more time getting in shape than I ever did before.

KR Is this your best year in terms of being in shape, except for the back?

WK No, I think first year was, just because of the fact that it did really slow me down. As far as push-ups and pull-ups go, I'm probably about the same, it's just the running that slowed me down a lot.
KR What was it like making your first jump this year?

WK It was scary, I was very nervous. I didn't know quite how my back was going to react when I first hit the ground and it didn't hurt at all, I was really surprised. My feet hurt more than my back did, [laughs]. I always get kind of a stinging sensation in my feet right after I hit the ground.

KR But no problems with your back, all year?

WK No, I've had to problems with it, it hurt a little bit in the beginning, especially with twisting motions and stuff. But I've had no problem with my back at all.

KR Excellent.

WK Yeah, I've been really lucky.

KR So are there a lot of other jumpers who have similar injuries?

WK Yeah, someone did the same thing the year before I did, the exact same thing. And it's been done a lot.

KR Do they come back and jump?

WK Yeah, this one did. He's about the first one that ever did come back and jump after a compression fracture. He had five vertebrae that he had compressed. So I used to always go to him and say what do you feel like now? I'm in so much pain, what do you feel like now? Because he's one year ahead of me. So he told me you may feel a lot of pain, this was last June, as I said, in June, I was in a lot of pain but this next June, because it was two years for him I don't feel anything. And that's the way I feel, I don't feel anything anymore. Almost two years later.

KR That took a lot of guts to come back and jump.

WK Yeah, everyone thinks I'm crazy. All my doctors told me I was crazy, they said physically there's no reason you shouldn't be able to. But mentally they would debate my mental reason for wanting to come back [laughs]. For me I figured if I didn't come back and jump I would have given up on a lot of other things in life. I would have said oh well, then I shouldn't ski either or I shouldn't run either. I would have really given up. And I didn't know if I was going to jump more than one season, but I was determined that at least I was going to jump one season.

KR And then make a decision?

WK Yeah.
KR What about the other smokejumpers, did they want you back? I mean, did they say you've got to do it, you've got to do it, you've got to get in just one more jump?

WK No, nobody really said anything to me in that way. But they were all real glad to hear that I was planning to come back, I said that right after the accident. I said I am coming back.

KR Good.

WK Yeah, I'm real glad I did.

KR So what was this year like?

WK This year was great, it was a good fire year. It was between about, it was hot, the middle of June I went to Alaska, about on the twentieth of June, and til the end of the season it was just going the entire time.

KR How many jumps?

WK I got ten fire jumps this year and I probably could have gotten more. You see, there's a real problem with the bases and stuff. They have the sub-bases of Missoula, I think the sub-bases kind of have a bad deal because you'll always end up getting sent home when there's a lot of people in Missoula. Even though you're at the very top of the list, you'll be sent back to your sub-base. Which puts you at the very bottom of the list and then you'll be called two hours later and you'll go from number ten on the list to number one hundred on the list. So it's really not all that fair, in my opinion. I think the sub-base people don't have a real fair deal. So, but I got ten, and I can't complain about that.

KR Sure. There were some big fires this year.

WK Yeah, there were quite a few.

KR What ones did you jump in?

WK I didn't end up jumping in any of the big ones because the winds were so high during that week. It was really blasting, forty, fifty, mile an hour winds in some places. That they couldn't really jump people. I did end up making the Houghten Creek fire as a crew boss for the mop-up stages. So spent about two weeks there just mopping up. It went on for about another month after I left.

KR So you made the money that you thought you were going to make, maybe?
WK Yeah I did.
KR That's good, finally, after two seasons.
WK Yeah.
KR Let's see what other fires, Libby?
WK That was in the Libby area.
KR Did you go to the Seeley Swan area?
WK No, I didn't make any of those, I didn't make any of the really big ones. Right when that started, I was on a fire over on a real sharp corner of the Bitterroot, where the Bitterroot and the Payette and the Nez Perce come together. And was there for about four days and that's when everything broke loose, that was real high winds when I jumped that one. It didn't end up being a big fire, but it was kind of scary because you end up travelling backwards about twenty miles an hour, trying to avoid, if you turn forward you'd be travelling forward about thirty-five miles an hour. So that was kind of scary because we were jumping onto a ridge top.
KR What's the difference between your back and your front in terms of wind resistance?
WK Yeah, you have fifteen miles an hour forward speed.
KR Less?
WK Yeah, so foing forward, so if the wind is over fifteen miles per hours, you have to steer into a fire going backwards. You sort of have to time it just right, and then usually at the last, I'll turn around and take a real good look at the spot and then turn back around. Because you don't want to land with the wind, you want to always land into the wind. And so, usually, turn around once during the whole time just to see where I am.
KR Did you land in any trees this year?
WK No, I haven't landed in any trees since then. I have a phobia about landing in trees. I'll do anything I can to avoid landing in trees. I realize a lot of times it's safer than landing in rocks or something.
KR Some people say, I mean, go for the trees. Trees, are they supposed to be that dangerous?
WK Nine times out of ten nothing happens. It depends on the tree. You don't want to end up in a larch tree because they're
real weak. I don't know what kind of tree I landed in, it was either a fir or a lodgepole. They were both all growing in together, and I didn't really see what they pulled out of the top of my chute. But they said they found six feet, either of fir or lodgepole in the top of my chute.

KR And that's what collapsed it?

WK Yeah, all the air just spilled out, from there it was just a free fall. I don't know how far I fell, but it was probably twenty, thirty feet.

KR What other fires this summer? Any that are worth talking about?

WK All the Alaska ones were fun. I really like that, there was one in Alaska, we had heard about it, but they didn't have any planes. We were in McGrath and they said, there's a fire we're going to send you to, but we have to wait until we get a plane in. So we just waited around drinking coffee around midnight and then finally about twelve thirty a plane finally came in and there was five of us. We were real short on people, there were supposed to be eight. So we circled over it and it was about fifteen acres. And I thought, I was thinking in my mind, we'll have this thing within an hour, it will be a real easy fire.

And we jumped it and here again we had to jump over a lake. But the wind was blowing really hard, so no sooner did we get out and over the lake, and once you turned towards the fire, you just really took off and landed right by the fire. And we just started beating on the fire and beating on it and the head would always stay just about a quarter mile ahead of us. We kept beating on it and beating on it and next thing you know the head just takes off and goes and goes and goes, and I don't know what it was about that day. It was real misty in the morning and real dry in the afternoon. But everything behind us would keep lighting up again, you'd have to run back and beat it out again. Because usually you have one person trailing behind who beats out anything that gets missed, because you always end up missing something. And we just couldn't keep up with what was behind us, we just had to keep going back. Next thing you know the thing just takes off, over the mountain and we kept calling for help, and it got so fogged in over the top, that they couldn't get a plane in. They said we'd like to help you, but we don't know where you are, we can't see you, [laughs] while this thing's taking off over the mountain. Can't do anything about it. We followed it for about a mile and a half and walking in Alaska is real hard. It's great for landing on but walking on it is terrible.

KR Why?

WK It's so roilly polly stuff, real hard, everything rolls and moves when you stand on it. You end up staggering around while
you're walking, while you're trying to beat the fire out, too. And we followed this thing forever and finally about five in the afternoon they brought another plane load of people in. And we were just exhausted and by this time, it had jumped over two mountain ridges and just kept going. I think by the time they finally caught it it ended up like fifteen hundred acres. Started out fifteen, and I thought we were going to have it in an hour. I had never been so exhausted in my whole life. Just beating and beating and beating non-stop for just hours and hours.

KR And having it always ahead of you and always taking off and everything.

WK It was funny because when I was digging out there I thought I must really be getting out of shape, because I felt like I was ready to die. And I didn't say anything to anybody and then I walk up and there's the fire boss sitting there with a glazed look in his eye and he goes I'm gonna die, [laughter] Well, maybe I'm not in such bad shape after all.

KR There was something I was going to ask you about that fire. Oh, what time of the year was that?

WK It was right about the first of July.

KR Were bears a problem?

WK No, they are in some places in Alaska, and they can be just about anywhere. Some of the people will get a lot of black bears especially come into camp. And they're real hard to keep away from camp. You can scare them away but they'll be right back within an hour. I hadn't really heard of too many problems with grizzlys even though there are a lot up there. They'll tend to avoid you a lot more than a black bear will.

KR Why were the black bears so friendly, just their curiosity?

WK I don't know. They don't seem to have a whole lot of fear of humans. They're very curious, yeah, plus they smell food.

KR How was the food?

WK It varies. We used a lot of freeze-dried, and it's OK. But after about the third day you don't want to eat it anymore. In Alaska they eat a lot of the new rations that have just come out, they call them MRE's, or meals ready to eat. Instead of the little green cans, now they have these pouches. These plastic pouches that you put up next to a fire to heat them up. And they're OK for about one day. Some people like them a lot better than freeze-dried, I don't. I find there's an awful lot of salt
and an awful lot of sugar in everything. And I just find that when I'm that thirsty, I don't need to be taking that much salt, it doesn't help at all. Not real nutritious stuff.

KR Don't they ever fly in any fresh food, like steak and potatoes?

WK My first two years, they never did. This last year I was on one fire where they had a fresh food drop and it was wonderful, it was great. Because we'd been there for about three of four days, eating nothing but freeze dried and we were just sick to death of freeze dried. And they flew in some steaks and some fresh salad and cantaloupes and stuff. It was great. Of course the cantaloupes all exploded when they hit the ground but you could still eat them, they were all still in the box, but you could still eat the pieces of them, it didn't matter much.

KR That's one way to slice it. Alaska, how many times have you been up there?

WK I've been up there three times. Every year I've worked, I've been real lucky.

KR Is that someplace you'd like to live?

WK I don't know if I'd want to live in the winter in Alaska. But in the summertime, because I don't think I could handle twenty-two hours of darkness. The cold I think I could handle, but I don't think I could handle the darkness.

KR And that goes on for four months.

WK Yeah.

KR I don't know if I could either. In your beginning, in your rookie class there were three women, four women who made it.

WK Three women.

KR Are they still jumping?

WK One of them is, Kim Maynard is still jumping.

KR Did you ever fight on a fire with her?

WK I have, but I never really got to work real close with her. I'd say about the only person I've ever worked with was Linda Reimers because we were both at the same station up in Lincoln. So we did get to work real close with each other, while we were actually on the same crew. Because usually when I was with Kim on the same fire, she'd be way over on the other side of some thousand acre fire, so I wouldn't see here until we came in to
get food or something.

KR  Is there a comradery there between the women?

WK  Yeah, there definitely is. I think the women all watch out for each other. Definitely talk with each other about different things than you would with a man.

KR  What kind of things?

WK  Just basically what they're going through as women jumpers. And a lot of the hostility I never noticed, really, until this year, how much hostility there is towards women jumpers.

KR  From?

WK  From a lot of the guys.

KR  Who are currently jumping?

WK  Yeah.

KR  How is it that you say that, what is it that you notice, that you become aware of?

WK  I notice it in the way the guys will talk about women behind their backs. Like no one will ever say anything to me, to my face, but they'll say it to their friends and it ends up coming back to me. Or they'll say it about one of the other women on the crew to me and a lot of the jokes about women, everyone has a tuna nickname, you know, which I don't appreciate at all.

KR  A tuna nickname?

WK  Just cause all women are tunas. One of the ladies had a can of tuna attached to a parachute stuck in her bin, with Princess Tuna written on it. And just stuff like that, and then, I was, at the very end of the season when I left the Houghten Creek fire I was going to work on a project out at Saint Regis. And they had chosen somebody, somebody from Lincoln was going to get the job, and they asked all the guys at Lincoln if they wanted it. Lincoln had late work so they said that they didn't want it. And I figured, well, Lincoln only has room for five people and six of us want to work, so I said sure, I'll take it. As it was, they said there was going to be a lot more overtime than we would get at Lincoln. So I said OK, I'll take the job.

And the guy who was in charge of the job was really upset to hear that I was the one who got the job. And he had been talking to all his friends and he resented the fact that I got it. And the very first time that I got along with him on that project he just tore into me. How I screwed some poor deserving guy out of
a job by taking this job and didn't I feel terrible, and I really should have let some guy take this job instead of me. And I'm just going, Jesus, what are you talking about? And he goes, well you're from Lincoln. And I go, well so what, you know, so someone from Lincoln got the job and that was made from the head of the base out there that someone from Lincoln was going to get the job. They didn't say some woman, they said someone from Lincoln. And as it turned out, he really didn't care whether this fellow from Lincoln came up but it was the fact that it was me personally that he didn't like. And I just notice a lot of that.

END OF SIDE A

SIDE B

KR Did you talk to him about it. I mean did you confront him, that you felt it was just because you were a woman?

WK I never really got a chance to. I really would have liked to but the season ended all of the sudden, like everything fell apart. We had been promised work until Thanksgiving and all of the sudden they just came in and said gee, we don't have any work for you. And at this point I was so angry at him I don't think I could have been objective. I probably would have just blown up. But I said to him, I think a lot of it is based on the fact that I am a woman. I really think if you have any complaints you ought to go to your boss. It is no fair to lay the guilt on me, because I am not the one who chose this spot, he was.

KR You didn't make the decision.

WK No. They just offered me a job and I said sure, I'll take it. Why shouldn't I?

KR What kind of person goes for, I don't know if it's fair to say high-risk, because I don't know if jumping is high-risk, just fire fighting is high risk. But what kind of person goes for putting the combination of jumping and fire fighting together and goes for it.

WK I think you have to be a person who really likes adventure. I've always liked adventure. You have to be fairly athletic. I'm not a real jock type, I'm not really into competitive sports but I do really like, I'm more into single sports like running or skiing or something like that. Has to be somebody who really likes to travel a lot. Cause he will travel a lot. And somebody who's got a lot of self confidence. You have to be fairly sure of yourself.

KR Is there any of that, everybody says smokejumpers are crazy, right, and some smokejumpers I've talked to are kind of hold that
crazy title dear to their heart. They like to portray themselves
as crazy. Is that part of it, or is it just part of the myth
that's fun to wear?

WK  I think it's part of the myth. But at the same time
I've always considered myself crazy and proud of it, too.
Because I feel if you're crazy, you don't have to make any
excuses to anybody. You don't have to justify anything you do,
you just do it because you're crazy.

KR  Just wear the label because you're proud of it?
WK  Yeah.

KR  What kind of woman goes for smokejumping?

WK  A woman who's very determined. I think you have to be a very
strong person psychologically. Because first of all you have to
be strong just to make it to the point where you were hired, or
you wouldn't have made it through all of those years. And you
have to be real strong to make it through your first year,
psychologically.

KR  Psychological, is that just because of the demands on the
body and the pressures of a life and death situation?

WK  That and I think it's also the fact that being a woman
jumper, you're always going to be different. You're always gonna
stand out, and I've just come to accept the fact. I used to
always rebel against it and think it was terribly unfair, but
I've just come to accept that fact that I'm going to be judged on
every fire. I will never get to the point where I will do a good
job and they'll say OK, she's a good jumper. Every single fire
I'm going to be under some skeptic's eye and you're always
conspicuous. No matter how long you work at it, you're always
going to stand out.

KR  You always have to prove yourself.

WK  Yeah, I find I always have to prove myself. I've just grown
to accept that and I've grown to accept the only person I can
prove anything to, is myself. I don't really care that they're
always criticizing what I do or what the other women do. I just
have to make myself happy.

KR  What kind of criticisms, what kind of things do they say
behind your back, or what kinds of things do they find to be
critical of women jumpers? They're short or what?

WK  Mostly it doesn't usually tend to be on performance, it's
funny too, because you'd think that's the main thing people would
criticize on. It's mostly just being a woman, it's more a personal thing. It's like they'll nitpick and just find something or a lot of it maybe that just is that you did something wrong or something they didn't think was appropriate and they would have done differently even though you feel perfectly justified in what you did. Or maybe you had a bad day. And everybody remembers that bad day, they don't remember all the times you did great. One of the ladies had a trouble with one of the pack outs and I still hear about that. Gosh give her credit for all the pack outs she did well, you know, all I ever hear about is that one bad one. How many guys have ever done badly on a pack out. Just about everybody has had trouble on a pack out somewhere. But they remember all the negative things. They don't ever remember any of the positive things, or at least not all of the guys. But the ones that seem the most vocal seem to be the ones I come in contact with, or hear about. There's a lot of support, too. A lot of the guys are really behind women jumpers, and you know, they'll say what so-and-so said is really unfair and you're doing a really good job and that helps a lot.

KR Can you relax around them more?

WK Yeah, I do. There are some guys I feel a real kinship with.

KR A real bonding?

WK Yeah, you know some guys I feel just like brothers or something. I feel like I can talk to them real openly about real personal stuff concerning jumping or concerning my personal life.

KR So what happened to that fear that was in all of these jumpers' hearts, the male jumpers' hearts you know about being sued, that's just, they don't think about that anymore?

WK Yeah, I think two years have gone by since that happened and they're not worried about it anymore. Plus I think they realize that the kind of women that work as jumpers are not the kind that are gonna jump up and immediately sue somebody. I think the women are tough and you know, I can take the jokes and I can joke right back. If somebody gives me shit I can give them shit worse right back. And I think they realize that we're not really that sensitive.

KR Is that how you deal with the humor or the remarks that come across that are borderline criticism?

WK It depends where it's coming from, it depends on who says it and it depends what exactly is being said. Because some people will give me a bunch of shit as a person, you know, and it usually isn't a lot of fun, you know, I will give them shit right back. But something like what that guy had said to me was not in
fun and that's when I will get angry. A lot of people said, you should have filed a grievance. But I have mixed feelings, if I had filed a grievance, it would have blacklisted me, not him. And so that's why I'm real hesitant to do something like that. I can say, yes, he definitely stepped on my rights as a person, and I have a right to file a grievance. But within a week everybody would know about it and within a week, I'd have a bad name, so it isn't really worth it to me. I think the only way I could deal with it would be to go to him personally and say, hey, you know I think you really stepped on my rights as a person, I can file a grievance. I'm not going to, but if it continues, I will.

KR What is it, just hypothetically speaking, that could happened that would be worth it for your personally to file a grievance.

WK I think if someone had done something where I was clearly, OK, if I was clearly more qualified than someone else and the other person got the job, then I would definitely file a grievance on something like that. If it was real black and white that my rights had been violated, than yes.

KR Is there any sexual harassment on the job, or with the guys?

WK Not really, no, no. I haven't really noticed any of that, there have been a lot of relationships that have started up but I think they have all been mutual. There have been a lot guys trying to pick up on the women, but the women have said no and no is where it ends.

KR Listen.

WK Yeah.

KR There's no harassment there?

WK No, not really.

KR Are you going back next year?

WK Yeah, I'll jump a few more years.

KR Would you like to move up, what's your next step up?

WK Next step is a squad leader.

KR Would you like to do that?

WK I would eventually. In fact there was talk about making a women squad leader in my first or second year. I thought that's kind of ridiculous. How could I as a second year person give orders to somebody who has got ten years and been trying to be a
squad leader? Luckily they dropped that idea. If they made a woman a squad leader in the second or third year I think it would be a mistake. I would have felt real inadequate and I would have felt like I had no respect at all. If I'm gonna get it I'm gonna earn it. I wouldn't want to have it given to me. I would like to do it eventually, though.

KR Yeah, yeah. How many women are jumping right now?

WK In the U.S.?

KR Yeah.

WK There's five out of Missoula, one out of Redding and one out of Redmond and one out of McCall. I think there is eight.

KR Do you see more and more women that you may run into? Do you think more a more woman are going to become smokejumpers?

WK I don't think it'll ever get to a fifty percent ratio, but I think some of the other bases will pick up a few women. The trouble is there's so few women in fire in general, just on the roster, I got hired off the roster, I know Diane Schullman got hired off the roster, just based on qualifications. They said they really wanted to hire a woman this year in McCall but the next women in line for it was a hundred down with a hundred men over her, and they couldn't hire her. It wouldn't be fair to hire her.

KR Right.

WK Because so few women are in fire fighting, they just don't have the qualifications.

KR Why is that?

WK I think a lot of it is, I think a lot of it is because of the original hiring, a lot of sexism based on that. And I think a lot of it is because women just socially are not geared into a job which is physically demanding, which is very dirty, where you are away from home, away from your family. That's something a man does, so very few women are interested in that.

KR That's changing.

WK Yeah, it is changing.

KR Gonna take a few years for it to show its effect.

WK Yeah.
KR In the beginning of our talking you talked about wanting to get away from the militaristic atmosphere that was in one of your beginning positions, is smokejumping less militaristic?

WK In some ways, but not much, you don't all have to where the same uniform. You have to all wear fire clothes on a fire, but that's a matter of safety. Smokejumpers, especially in Missoula take pride in nobody wearing the same t-shirt, nobody having the same hat and nobody ever walks in line. It's, in fact if you're caught walking in line, they will come and take you aside and talk to you [laughs]. They want to get as far away from that as they can, it's funny because when you're with the IR crew here, all of them have the exact same t-shirt, and they all walk in line, and they all do what they're told when they're told. Granted we do what we're told when we're told by our boss, but you know, it's like hup-hup here we go, one, two, three. If you did that with the smokejumpers, they'd all look at you and laugh, [laughs].

KR You talked about the psychological pressure, and you didn't put it down but in my mind, that is somewhat militaristic. Psychologically putting a lot of pressure on a person to see exactly how much they can take. Creating a situation to bring out one's humility. That is militaristic to me. Did you find it so?

WK Yes, I did. Luckily that only lasts during that first three weeks of training and then after that everybody accepts you and you are not under that psychological pressure. It is sort of a way to weed out the people who psychologically aren't going to make it. And I see why they do it.

KR Have you ever been on a jump where you, somebody else has gotten hurt and you have been a responsible party for their safety?

WK No, I have never really jumped where someone has been badly hurt. Maybe a slightly sprained ankle or a cut or something.

KR Do the guys fear that?

WK I think a lot of them do. There are varying degrees of that, there are some people who are just scared to death on every single jump. And you can see it in their eyes, their eyes are like this when they are looking at the airplane. And they are shaking. They may have been jumping for ten years but they are still like that on every single jump. And I wonder, gosh, why bother if it scares you that bad. I get nervous on some of them and other ones, you know, gosh there is a huge field, oh, great. I get nervous on the ones that are in the real tight spots and there are a lot of snags and rocks and stuff. I get scared on those. I also have, I don't know if it is good or bad, but I have
also noticed that I have the ability to jump out knowing that I might die, [laughs]. Is that a real positive thing or what?

KR Reality.

WK Yeah.

KR Have any of the other guys talked to you about that? In terms of hey, I'm jumping with you, you and I are going on a two person fire and I am worried about if I break a leg whether you are going to be able to deal with it. There is that comradery and that bond of looking after one another when you jump, and not being responsible and yet being responsible for the other persons welfare. Do they ever talk to you about that?

WK No one has ever talked to me about that. It is usually not that bad. I'm an emergency medical technician so I feel as far as I could do everything possible as far as helping someone. Then usually you are going to have a radio and if someone broken a leg they are going to fly in a helicopter and get you out. So you wouldn't have to carry anybody out. You know, you always hear that, what if some guy, what if some ninety pound woman has to carry some two hundred pound guy out, you know. That situation doesn't happen. You always hear that. Every accident I have seen they fly a helicopter in immediately.

KR And you can build a heliport?

WK Yeah.

KR What other fears do guys have about jumping with women. What are their fears, why are they critical? Having worked with them for two three years, can you seen into their psyche, where that space is?

WK A lot of the them, I know there's a lot of them that fear jumping on a two man fire with a woman, a two person fire, I should say. It's going to create problems in their relationship with their girlfriend or with their wife. And you know I think it's valid to a point that that fear is there, you know. Fire is about the least romantic place I can think of, [laughs]. But that fear is there. And I've heard some men say, I don't think there are any in Missoula, but there was one in McCall I talked to who said, absolutely under no circumstances would he feel morally justified in jumping a two person fire with a woman. That he thought it would be totally immoral and if the situation came up he would move himself down to the bottom of the list.

KR Interesting, yeah, I have heard that fear before. Do any problems arise when a woman goes out on a two-person fire?
WK  Not so far, not that I know of.

KR  Have relationships broke up because men have been there?

WK  No, I think a lot of it is all in their heads.

KR  Any other problems there, are fading as experience, as years go by with women jumping?

WK  I think just the doubts, the physical aspects, I think a lot of men have been won over. It's funny because one of the guys, my third and fourth jump here, and we're out of Grangeville. Three of us ended up, they sent a plane load of us over. The first seven ended up jumping the fire and three of us went to Grangeville and we were there for two weeks. And one of the guys who was there was a diehard, you know, male chauvinist. He had been heard to say before they ever hired women, that if women ever get hired I'll quit. So I didn't know what to think, I should at least do a good job. But it was funny because on both of the jumps that I jumped, he was the spotter, and on both of them on I made the spot and my jump partner didn't. And so that impressed him, and then both of them were pack outs and I made it in. And the first one, I knew it was going to happen and I was just kind of blasting about it, and my partner and I were laughing, the whole way down the hill that they were going to weigh our packs when we got in. Just to see how much more he had to carry than me. So we got in and you could just see this nervous tension in the room. So I said forget it and I left and of course the minute I left they grabbed my pack and stuck it on the scale and stuck it on the scale and mine weighed five pounds more. [laughs]

KR  Does that consistently happen on your pack outs?

WK  No, it was just that one time, I was the first women to ever jump out of there. Out of Grangeville.

KR  That is funny.

WK  But I knew it, I was just saying, I bet they weigh our packs when we get down.

KR  You have a good head for that, for reading situations in terms of and knowing when this is too weird, I'm going to leave my pack here and I'll go, let them do their business. Where does that come from?

WK  Just from experience from working with them. All of my jobs have just been male-oriented jobs and just always being the odd one. I guess I'm kind of used to that mentality.
KR Is that part of the craziness?

WK Yeah, I think so, you have to like being the odd one, I think.

KR And you like that?

WK I do sometimes but I was real glad to know, when I first came up I was really afraid I was going to be the only women jumper on there, and when I met Kim Maynard there, who was trying out, there was just that release. Oh good, I'm not the only one and I felt a lot better.

KR What kind of bonding, I know there's some real, there's some heavy, heavy bonding between men for smokejumpers and I know there's heavy bonding that happens between men and women who are smokejumpers and then there's the bonding between the women smokejumpers. How is it different, do you think, the experience for the women as opposed to men?

WK Yeah I think so, because as a woman you understand what the other women are going through. Where as much as you may be able to talk about it with men, and they'll say they understand, I really don't think they will ever come to a point of knowing what it feels like to be a woman jumper. And knowing what it feels like knowing every day you go to work, you're going to be different, and they're going to blend in. Where you're never going to blend in, because you're different. And as much as, I have very close friendships with the men, there's a certain part of my friendships with the women that could never be the same as with the men. Just there's that understanding there.

KR What is that understanding all about, of going to work and knowing you're different? How do you feel, where does that come from? Besides just physically, you're a woman, I mean...

WK Just that whole thing of you're always going to be judged. And you're always going to be real conspicuous and when everybody's cutting line the eyes are always going to be on you and not on the other people.

KR It's that obvious?

WK Yes, that and just little things too. You're in fire camp trying to take a shower, it's such an ordeal. The men get twelve and a half hours to take a shower, but women get half an hour to take their shower and if you don't happen to be in fire camp in that half hour, you don't get to take a shower. And you have to deal with stuff like that all the time. And then all these things about, oh well, you're a woman so we can't let you sleep in this barrack. So you'll have to go sleep somewhere else. And I really hate that, I really hate that, and I feel like I'm there
to do a job, all I'm going to do is go to sleep. Why should I be separated from my crew? You know, fire call comes in, that means they all get up, get dressed, get ready to go. Then they have to go wake me up, and then, oh women take so long. Of course, I was in bed by the time they were on the truck.

KR Right, didn't get an equal chance.

WK Yeah.

KR When you're out on a fire and you're setting up your bags and your tent, is there space there? I mean, you're sleeping over there, you're tent's over there.

WK I find out in the field, you don't really notice it. Everyone just picks there, everyone scrambles for the most comfortable spot and if it happens to be right next to somebody else, they're going to fight tooth and nail to keep that spot. So out in the field it doesn't, it's mostly when you're dealing with other crews or dealing with the public, that they really get sort of ruffled about it. Out on a fire nobody cares. And boy, we went through this whole big meeting this summer with all these situations, situations like that and everyone was getting so upset about it and my point was that nine times out of ten the situation works itself out. And when you bring in an outside person who says, here's what you're going to do, it makes a lot more problems, you know. Half the time the men don't care if a woman sleeps in the barracks, because all they want to do is go to sleep, too. You come in off a fire, you're not going to dance around the room naked all night, [laughs]. You just want to go to sleep. I think the more, they try to get involved in solving problems the more problems they create.

KR Wendy, I've been involved in just a couple things in my career where we have career workshops where we have like high school people, trying to get them to start the thought process about what they're going to do with their lives. You would be an excellent person to invite, if you weren't out on a fire because they're usually held in the summer. What would you tell, if you were the representative, you know, for smokejumpers what would you tell those young people. No fire experience, but who wanted to make the Forest Service a career or were thinking in that direction and smokejumping part of that, what kinds of things would you have to say to them?

WK I think I would say first of all, find out exactly what the job's going to entail. Come into it prepared, don't come into it unprepared. Unfortunately most of the people who were washed out washed out because they weren't prepared. They really didn't know what to expect. And I would also say have a lot of faith in yourself, because most of the people who quit just gave up. They
just said I can't, and they probably would have made it through if they just had more faith. That was ninety percent of making it through my rookie training, was just saying, I'm not going to give up, no matter what happens, I'm not going to give up. Just telling myself every night I go to bed, you can do it, you can do it. All you got to do is live through another one and a half more weeks, you can do it, after that you can die [laughs].

KR Were there other people there saying come on, Wendy you can do it?

WK Yeah, especially among the women, we'd all get together at night and sort of give each other moral boosts. Oh, no, I did terrible on this station, I did terrible on that station. Oh, no, you just had a bad day, we know you can do it, you'll do better tomorrow.

KR There are tricks that you learn about getting through those stations, don't you learn there's an easier way?

WK You learn the skill quite a bit more. See a lot of it's real new. Like I had never put climbing spurs on in my life. And so, it wasn't that easy the first time I did it. But once you get to do it a couple of times it is not that hard at all. But even that is mostly psychological, you look down and you're fifty feet in the air and it's not a real comfortable feeling. I found the trick to that is not to look down.

KR Only as far as your feet, maybe.

WK I look at my feet the whole time. I look up to see how far I've got to go, but I don't look down.

KR How far do you have to go on those things?

WK I think some of them are fifty and some of them are sixty feet high.

KR What would you tell women who were interested in either smokejumping or just alternative careers for women. Non-traditional careers for women, because you've been involved in non-traditional jobs, you know, prior to smokejumping. What kind of things would you have to say to women?

WK I think I would tell them to get in shape physically, first of all. There's real little emphasis, it seems like, and that's changing, these days, on women being in shape. Especially upper body strength, women go out and run, but you don't see as many women involved in sports that involve upper body strength. I think I'd also want to go into the problems they're going to end up facing as far as, like the fact that you're away from home,
makes it hard on relationships. Makes it hard on your social life. You've got to be willing to give up your social life for maybe four or five months. And your social life becomes smokejumping. And just difficulties like that that you'll run into.

KR Any preparation, psychologically, that they could do for themselves?

WK I'd say to learn as much as they can about fire. I think a lot of it, it really helps when a woman has experience behind her. I'd say, first of all, get the experience. Because there's a few women who get on with, like, one year experience on fire. And all I hear about is, you know, she only had one year experience, she's really not qualified. And that's going to haunt them for the rest of their life, unfortunately. And you know, them may be real qualified people, and physically be able to do the job, but that does stick with you. I would say get the experience, first, not only from a social point of view, but also from a safety point of view. You're a lot more aware about what to do on a fire, in how to be a supervisor on a fire. In the safety aspect on how to handle a fire that just blows up out of control.

KR How did those women get on with maybe one or two years of fire experience, because they were women?

WK Yeah, I think so. I think there was a real push to hire women.

KR And that was coming from... ?

WK From affirmative action. I can't blame them, if someone gave me the job, I'd take it too, without a lot of experience. So I can't blame them at all. But, you know, I think it's not that fair to the guys. Like there are some guys on the IR crew here in town who have been on it for ten years and can't get hired, and they're perfectly qualified people.

KR Why don't they get hired?

WK I don't know, there's only so many jobs that go around.

KR How old are you?

WK I'm thirty.

KR And how long would you like to jump?

WK I'll probably jump two or three more years. So I'll probably have six seven years more jumping in my life.

KR That's along time for a jumper.

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WK It used to be, it's not anymore. It used to be people averaged about two or three years. Now the average is about seven years. Which, I don't know, if it's a sign of the economy or what, [laughs], I think it is. I think there's an awful lot to, it becomes a real comfortable place. The job's guaranteed every year, and it keeps you away from the outside world. I'm always going to have this job, as long as I'm a smokejumper I don't have to worry about surviving, because I'll always have this job, and so it's a real comfortable place to be in.

KR Is there a place where the smokejumpers become that family or social life, a primary social place for the smokejumpers because they have to leave every summer, you know, you have to leave, and give that up. So is it replaced, totally replaced for some?

WK For some, everybody kind of splits up all over the place, you have... some of the people stay here in Missoula and some go to all ends of the earth. A lot of them go travelling, a lot of them teach. I think that's a real good situation of teaching all fall, winter, and spring and then working in the summer. What do you mean a place, you mean an actual location.

KR No, just a place in their life, a real important reinforcement for them. I mean, you eat, sleep work, live shoulder to shoulder for four or five months, three months. Is it hard for some of the guys and women to leave that atmosphere, that caring, crazy, excitement, atmosphere.

WK I think so, I don't think for all the people, but there are for some, who really hold to it and are really sad when the season's over, and who really don't want to give it up. You see a lot of old jumpers who are almost afraid to go into the outside world because of that. They like the life so much, and at the same time there's a big unknown void out there. They're not quite ready to venture into yet.

KR Where do old jumpers go? I mean, what is next for jumpers in progressing, in promotion?

WK Usually getting into a supervisory job in fire, or in timber sometimes. A lot of them will go into timber, usually if they have a forestry degree and background. A lot of them do it while they're in school, and as soon as they're out of college, they'll go on into whatever they really wanted for a career. Those are the people that usually stick, three, or four years. But a lot of them continue in fire. A lot of them are going into things that are totally the opposite. I met some that are, oh, bartenders. Oh yeah, I smokejumped back in 1950 something. Or going into accounting or something like that, not that many of
them usually stick with the Forest Service.

KR Why is that, anticlimatic?

WK I think anticlimatic, yeah, and I think also a certain amount of burn-out working with the government.

KR We've talked about a lot of different things. Your initial experience and what makes the kind of people you see jumping, what kind of women you see jumping, to your injuries and just jumping on fires, and the bonds and the friendships, up to this time, and I know you want to jump further. What's the most spectacular thing that jumping has given to you, personally?

WK Self-confidence, I think, just physically and psychologically I've gone farther than I ever felt I could. I really surprise myself. Because I had always put a limit on just how much I would be able to do, and I passed that and then I stopped putting limits on things. It's really given me a lot of self-confidence

KR Couldn't ask for more.

WK No.

KR I've kind of asked the questions and given direction to this. Is there anything you'd like to say before we close the tape?

WK I can't really think of anything. I know, just in general it's the best job I've ever had. It's not something I'd recommend to anybody, just because it's something you really have to want to do. If you go at it half-heartedly, you're not going to make it. Either you're going to end up washing out or you're going to end up quitting. But I think you really have to want it, and once you're in, it's great.

KR Thanks Wendy.

WK Sure.

END OF THE INTERVIEW