Kim Taylor: This is Kim Taylor interviewing Bob Searles for the Smokejumper Oral History Project at Camp Paxson on Seeley Lake, August 12, 1986.

To start with, can you give us a brief biographical sketch, Bob?

Robert Searles: Yes, Kim, I was born in Everett, Washington—Northwesterner by birth. Stayed there until I was about well, I guess, 12 years old. Moved to Tacoma, Washington, where I matriculated—I guess is the word—from Stadium High School, and I went on from there, after a year of wandering around as somewhat of a musician in the those days, and went to University of Washington [UW] for a year or so, in between. Went on trips to Southern California and became established in music down there the summers, and continued at UW. Took a year or so off and went to UCLA [University of California-Los Angeles], and then the war happened. I never finished UCLA. I was majoring in...We didn't have a theater-arts major at the time, or I would have been a theater-arts major. I was very active in extracurricular activities on that score, and would have continued after the war, had I not gotten into—after the smoke jumper experience, and civilian public service [CPS] for about four-year period during the war—had I not gotten into light opera work after the war and traveled throughout the country, and that for a while. Never much beyond the chorus and understudy, and never reverted to being the musician I had been before the war. From there got into television business, first as an announcer on what was then a primitive ABC TV network for the Charlie Ruggles show, then as a TV director for a period of about 15 to 20 years. Nothing outstanding there other than a series of standard staff shows, plus a few specials. Managed to get most product on to—as a producer and director—on most of the local and network stations in the area. Specialized in annual baseball, sports, musical shows, the Miss California beauty pageants, Oscar Levant, Marcel Marceau, and a few things like that. Got out of that into the television and hi-fi audio business, all of which has been a hobby of mine through these years, and continued in that field until I retired about seven years ago. Since when I’ve busied myself in the fields I love—music and television and the arts, generally, theater, what have you. So I’m still active, but I’m not active, shall we say, professionally.

KT: Okay. Let’s go back to when World War Two broke out. How is it that you decided to take the stance as a conscientious objector?

RS: I had taken a stand at the University of Washington after about a semester of ROTC [Reserve Officers’ Training Corps], partly out of the fact, I guess, I was in the drum and bugle corps and wasn’t too successful as a drummer. [laughs] No, basically it stemmed from the
Oxford movement at the time in England, and from my readings and my association with a Methodist group at that time. The Oxford movement was rather a pacifist movement prior to World War Two in England. My readings of Gandhi’s nonviolent actions in India. The whole thing rather added together with my surroundings and with my experience, I suppose, in the Wesley Club Student Union movement at the university. I lived at the Wesley House there. Generally, I decided that I had to take this stand.

By that time I was, of course, at UCLA, and I was inducted from Los Angeles. Since I had already been a CO [conscientious objector], in regard to ROTC at the UW several years before, many years before, they classified me immediately and sent me packing up to Oregon to Cascade Locks. I assume, as they did with everyone in the military—all my buddies—sent them as far away from the home as possible. As a result, they actually were sending me closer to home, since my folks were in Tacoma, Washington. I think it was about April ’42 that I was inducted—or had been inducted, or arrived I should say, perhaps—at Cascade Locks in Oregon which is camp on the Columbia [River] east of Portland, as many of them were—Civilian Conservation Corps camps. I was there for a period of three years fighting fires initially, working in the kitchen, and finally ended up as a Forest Service assistant to the superintendent of the camp. Clerk—they designated it as that in those days and sending everyone out of various assignments, including fires.

I finally decided I wanted to get into something more active again, and I think I wanted to, probably, have something to tell my kids if I ever told my kids, “Daddy, what did you do in the war” routine I wanted to assure people I wasn’t...I guess, that we weren’t completely without some gumption, so I joined the smokejumpers and decided to get into something a little more dangerous and put my butt on the line a little more. I’m sure there was that portion behind my applying here. So, I was here in ’45 for that season which turned out to be a very busy season. Then was sent back to Cascade Locks for demobilization early in ’46—January, I believe. That’s about the story of that.

KT: Okay. What was your training experience like—

RS: Here?

KT: —to become a smokejumper? Yes.

RS: Well, having been in fairly good shape—although not much of a huge-bodied person—I found it was pretty rigorous training here, because I’d been, after all, with a clipboard and a list of people sending people out and driving trucks and not too much fire-line activity just the year previous. Although, I’d had plenty of that two years previous at that time. I found that I had to get back into shape pretty fast, and I guess we did because it was pretty rigorous. They marched us out, and we had one ex-Marine [laughs] and he took us in hand and whipped us into a ten-mile hike, probably the first day, with a pack on our backs. Wasn’t long before we were in better shape than we'd ever been in our lives, I’m sure. I certainly was.
KT: What did you think about the tower?

RS: Well, the tower was a bruiser. It was murder. I never really enjoyed that. You'd come home at night, there'd be welts under your arms, and between your legs, and man, I tell you. They said, well, that's nothing. When you jump out with an Eagle [parachute], that's what's going to happen, but we didn't use Eagles in '45. [laughs] We used those somewhat gentler [unintelligible] Irvins [parachutes], right? Really, the tower was the worst, in terms of body bruises.

KT: How about the first time that you jumped off?

RS: Okay, first time I jumped. Lots of fun. I've forgotten whether it was...It was probably two-man, it was probably out of the Travel Air, and managed to sprain both ankles. Catherine Crocker (?), who was here, was the nurse, and she bandaged me up. They let me vegetate for a while, and about a week-and-a-half later, I had to get myself back into condition again and take three jumps in one day, of course, to make up. Then we had the inevitable fake fires that we had to [laughs] douse and work a line on and the timber jumps and all of that. I managed to survival all of that, nicely, but I had to compress some jumps together, because of the sprained ankles. Never had any problem with ankles after or anything else.

KT: That's good. Why don't you describe some of your let-downs?

RS: Let-downs, in terms, let-down periods when I depressed?

KT: No. [laughs]

RS: Or let-downs from trees.

KT: Tree let-downs.

RS: Wow! I had one that damn near killed me. Earl Cooley was describing one this morning that he had faced me—one of his early jumps—because one of the lads asked him about it in there. Lads, some lad, our age. I guess when we get in this environment, we think of ourselves as much younger. I jumped on a two-man stick, I guess, our of the Travel Air somewhere in the Bitterroots—not too far back in the Bitterroots.

Thank you. [speaking to unidentified person]

My buddy was first off the step, and I was second. This was tall timber. This was at least as tall as these tamaracks. My chute collapsed against about a 150-footer, and I saw just this green blur. I remember looking down, and of course, there was nothing but crossed, heavy stuff below. Timber as large as three or four feet diameter. I certainly didn't assess all of that in one
glance, but you had that feeling that this is it. All of a sudden whammo, I had slammed against a...a snag split right in front of me. I could see right through it. I smashed into it and stopped, and I looked down and there was another 100 feet. The chute had caught on the top of that snag and saved me, I guess, because it wasn't going to stop otherwise. It had thoroughly collapsed, and I looked down and my buddy had gathered his...he'd managed a clearing. There really was no clearing there, but somehow he had managed to slide by and land properly. He yelled up, and he said, "You know, there are no—" Looked down, there were no branches on this snag. Nothing left over, and I had the rope, of course, in the pocket. So I threaded the rope, and lowered myself down and had 30 feet to go, and I got at the end of the rope or 25. I was far enough, anyway and managed to slither down the side of the rest of the tree. I can't recall. I know he threw me he threw me part of his rope, or we tied it together. We did something, but I got down, and without any damage because, again, there was no place to land down there. It was still crossed stumpage. That was one I wrote home to my friend, the superintendent, about immediately. Several pages I'm sure, [laughs]

I probably could bore you to tears, if I could ever find that letter I wrote. Maybe I have, but that was the most exciting let-down I'd ever had. I had none other, I believe. That was the only one.

KT: How about some of your fire experiences.

RS: Oh boy. Well, I think it was the Big Meadow Creek fire, a huge fire, down the Bitterroot [Valley], on the Salmon [River], off the Salmon. We had paratroopers, we had everybody there. I thought we had some German prisoners, but I don't think we did. It was a huge fire, and we stayed overnight. The drop was okay dropping in, but fighting the fire, it was a monster because it topped. It went up, and it was like a freight train like they all are. We were down in the creek area—I was down here with a crew in the creek area—and I remember we were exhausted and leaned back against a small tree. I can't describe it. My green thumb was never very good on what make, or model. [laughs] The tree exploded behind, it just [whistles] blew up. I got out of there, jumped in the river—in the creek—along with some deer and the rabbits and everybody else, and it went over us. We just went under, and the fire swept over us. I guess there was enough oxygen to make it, but we were right down in the valley. We weren't on a ridge top. That was kind of exciting.

KT: How did you feel after that happened?

RS: I guess about the same way I felt on that other experience [laughs] like somebody up there is watching out for me. [laughs] I don't know. It wasn't anything I had done to credit it, I'll tell you that. That was a tough fire to fight. I mean, it was a lot of hard dirty work, of course. In those days, we didn't have anybody coming in and mopping up after us, that's for sure. We were on that quite a while.

KT: How about any other fire experiences?
RS: Two others that stand out...and I didn't have that many jumps. I don't think I totaled over—practice and all—that one season, over about 13 or 14. I think it was 13, 14, because I was working in the loft part of the time as well. One I remember. I was in the inspection section of the loft for about a month, and went out to a fire or so in between, but I rigged my own chute. I was not a rigger. [laughs] I remember rigging my own chute, and of course, you get up there, and you think, “Did I attach the static line?” Oh boy! [laughs] I’m jumping my own chute. I don’t remember if Cooley was...I don’t know. It was one of the other boys. We had a [unintelligible] so we must have been in the [unintelligible] all right. That particular fire, I got the boys to go around again. I mean, [laughs] I actually did not know it, and finally they got me to jump out—the second time around, last man—and it was attached. I landed okay—no problem. I can't remember what fire that was.

In another instance, we went on this biggie. Biggie over at Hellgate Canyon on the Snake, and we all just about landed right on the edge there. That was a toughy, as far as landing was concerned. I don’t recall much detail of the fire.

The very last jump we made again was about a four-man—I think it's about a four-man jump. It might have been six, but I thought I remembered four, plus a paramedic, who, in those days, a paramedic was called an Army doctor. He was a...We jumped to rescue two hunters down around Hamilton, again up in the Bitterroots slightly. It seemed that they were partners out of Missoula in some business, and it also seems that they got a little loaded on good bourbon, and—or bad bourbon for all I know, whatever it was. One of them had mistaken his partner, it seems, for a deer. Although deer rarely wear red flak jackets, [laughs] but he'd shot him. So we went in to pick up the wounded man. That was a rather uneventful. There was some clearing, but it was in fairly high timber, and we managed to get him out on stretcher and over toward Hamilton, where he picked up by plane and taken into, I guess, probably the Catholic hospital down here—one of the hospitals in Missoula. They hovered over this man for a couple of weeks, and I think he died as I recall. I don’t know whether anyone preferred charges against the partner or not, I never did find out. Perhaps you can search the archives for that sometime, because there were 400 to 500 hundred men on that jump, including the Army paramedic. That's about all I remember about the jumping.

KT: Are there any pack-outs that stand out in your mind?

RS: I remember one two-man jump in the snow, when the fire was already out, right? I think I’m adding up to more jumps than I said that I made it, but I don’t believe so—

KT: I’m keeping count. [laughs]

RS: All right, okay. It was a two-man, and I remember jumping and there was no fire. The ground crew had arrived before we did. [laughs] So we stayed and slept all night and ate the K-rations. When we woke up in the morning, it had snowed on us and we’re under the chute in the snow, and all that. Packed out...We had to hike in to Pierce, Idaho. I don’t know if you ever

Robert “Bob” Searles Interview, OH 163-003, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
been to Pierce, Idaho, but it's an old mining community in the panhandle. There were about 15 saloons and one church, and the church was boarded up. I remember, [laughs] I remember that aspect of it, and the packing out from there was not long. I don't recall ever having to have a really long march out of the woods. We had no helicopters in those days, as you know, but nothing that required days and days of getting out from an area. Usually, we managed to get to a road and a truck somewhere along the line. Coming back in the Trimotor [Ford Trimotor] off those airfields, of course, in the Bitterroots in the wilderness country—with those Johnson pilots who were so magnificent—coming back without a backpack on and a reserve chute, and you're sitting there and everything's broken and you're a passenger for a change, that was exciting. I think I had 11 flights in a plane. I'd never been in a plane in my life before, before I ever landed in a plane. I'm sure there are others that have done that too, but that was interesting to me, because I had never been in a plane before I came over here.

KT: Did you have any project work that you did?

RS: Yes. I was out on a tree-transplanting business in the winter, of course—winter project. That was very cold, very early in the morning, and the fire out there we wanted to get to but couldn't except for our two or three or four minute breaks once an hour. In order to keep warm we developed a sort of a stomp. [pounds table] We planted a lot of trees. We planted more trees—the boys told us—there than anyone ever had before, and we planted them fast. But in order to keep warm, you had to have something going.

What else about that? Other projects included being an assistant cook in the Ninemile area there. Bad, very bad, bad, cook. I done a little of it at the other place, and they requested that I leave after making up an atrocious batch—a recipe for 50 men in a side camp right on the slopes of Mount Hood, I recall. This was this was a cake for dessert. I had to go in, and we had nothing to pour in to really make this thing rise. We had no yeast or anything else. I got some blackstrap molasses, unbeknownst to myself, poured it in this mixture, looked in the oven once, and the cake, of course, was way up here. It had risen clear to the top of the oven. The guys are screaming for lunch, and I open the door again and the cake was this flat—clear down to here. When the Forest Service, I think, when they tasted this, one guard that was with us there, suggested that possibly I could apply for a job with the [unintelligible] project; the fake rubber project they had going in Santa Fe, New Mexico, because I'd made such a wonderful concoction. This stuff, I'm not kidding, you could have made tires out of it, mattresses out of it. So, I was a lousy cook, but I did K.P. some, I think for about a month in Missoula.

Other projects I can't recall. We stayed at the fraternity house down there, when we were assigned in town, and went out from there on flights.

KT: What were some of the guys like that you worked with?

RS: Both Forest Service personnel and the guys themselves?
KT: Yes.

RS: Well, we came from disparate backgrounds. Of course, we had the hard-charging Mennonites, and the Brethren. I was a little more of an, I guess, an effete Methodist. I don’t know. But we were all doing the same work, and as far as the Forest Service personnel was concerned, great, absolutely great. I had nothing but admiration for them.

I made a training movie with Phil Stanley (?), and, I guess, Ed Nafzinger, and I was in this movie, but I think it’s long gone. We did make a training movie which, I think, they used for a while, though I don’t know where the remains of that movie are. But I remember Frank Derry was the instructor, and we went through the whole routine—all the real climbing and everything else—and wore our spick-and-span outfits. It was kind of a fun thing to be in, but I’ve never seen the fool thing, so I don’t know. I understand it’s long gone, and they’ve had several movies made thereafter. We were assigned that, evidently for a couple of weeks. That was nice duty.

KT: [pauses] Were there ever any injuries on the crew other than your sprained ankles?

RS: You mean on the part of others being injured?

KT: Yes.

RS: Yeah, but I can’t specifically remember bringing out anyone that was injured. I know there were instances when that happened, but I was not on those fires. No, I don’t recall.

KT: What kind of socializing or off-duty activities did you do?

RS: Well, I remember going to the skating rink, and having a delightful Saturday night there on occasion. People in town treated us very well, and we tried to reciprocate and not be too loud at this place we were staying—where we were assigned to stay. We’d bang on the piano and sang the old songs and had a reasonably decent life on that sense. I guess, went to the local churches at that time, I can’t recall. We were active with some of the local youth groups associated, I guess, with those churches, but that’s about all. We didn’t have much of a social life, other than just in the barracks, so to speak.

KT: What would you guys used to do in the barracks?

RS: Swap tall yarns about the last jump, what else? And doubtless, our girlfriends back home. Also tall yarns, no doubt. That was about it, I guess. We were like any normal American kid at the time.

KT: What kind of reactions did you get from your friends and family about being a smokejumper?

Robert “Bob” Searles Interview, OH 163-003, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
RS: Oh, they invited me to put on a uniform among other things, but my dad, who was in a small banking area in Tacoma, Washington, was very supportive. He sat right next to the gentleman who was...I think, the head of the war bond drive, was his employer. Not only in the state, but nationally, and that man has been...I've had conversation with him—he's gone now, and so is my dad—but in later years I have had conversations with him. Even though he was on the Federal Reserve Board, the president of a bank, and then head of the war bond drive in the Northwest, as well as Washington, and finally nationally, I think he's been very friendly, very fine. Didn't agree with me obviously, but very tolerant. I guess tolerance is the word, friendly too—friendly tolerant. I had, obviously, a lot of rejection otherwise, yeah, sure. Not so much interestingly from servicemen. I got along swell with majors and colonels and everybody else during the war and after the war. No problem at all. The people who stayed home were the ones who were cold.

KT: What did you experience from them?

RS: At home? Tolerance, I guess, sometimes. Not a great deal of hostility. I don't recall any really hostile situations. Been times, I think, when we were in a group and hitchhiked once and were invited out of the car when they found out who we were, that sort of thing. That was in Oregon. Again, after the war, I was associated with a number of people who had been in the service overseas, seen a lot of combat and all that. They were the most tolerant of all, always have been.

KT: That's interesting.

RS: Always have been in my experience.

KT: Are there any wild stories that you can remember from your experiences as a smokejumper?

RS: [laughs] Well, there are always stories told about Ed Carlson (?), who was here for three years. He was a Jehovah's Witness, and he was a great outdoorsman-type. Of course, all my life, I've been more of an indoorsman-type. I don't know how I ever got out in the woods in the first place, but I love the woods. I've always gone. Dad took me camping. I've climbed all over Mount Rainier, I've climbed [Mount] Adams, and [Mount] St. Helens, when it was still [Mount] St. Helens, and [Mount] Hood and all that. That much I liked to do. Yeah, sure, I like that. Canoeing on Puget Sound. I was that much of an outdoorsman—fishing and what have you—but never hunting. I never even wanted to kill an animal. Never did. But I have tall stories or experiences. I guess on one of the jumps I made, I remember jumping practically on top of a moose, but it was at a salt-lick, so this isn't just any rare moose, just happened to be running by. I just happened to land practically on a salt-lick, where, naturally, the animals are going to be. That scared both of us. [laughs] It was not a bull moose in heat or anything like that, so there wasn't any problem, but I do remember that.
I also remember on a fire-line...One of the first fires I was on was a great big fire in Eastern Oregon while I was at Cascade Locks, and that was a rough fire. It was on the Indian reservation—Warm Springs Indian Reservation, as a matter of fact. We had a pack train, and these were horses that had just the weekend before had been caught and semi-tamed, and had been wild horses. I was astride one with a rope, which only pulled one way, right, but the horse was following the other horse. I had tagged on me...There was a cook stove hanging over the other—this was not a mule train, a horse train—over the back. A cougar, or a mountain lion, jumped this horse in back of me, and the horse rolled down the hill with a cook-stove on top—all the way down. Somebody in the line, evidently, a forest guard, because none of us, obviously, had a gun, and shot the cougar—shot the mountain lion. It's a mountain lion is what it was. It was a small mountain lion, but enough to topple this horse. I don't recall whether they had to destroy the horse or not, because he wasn't into good shape carrying that batch of gear—the pack horse.

I guess that's about the only thing, that and the rattlesnakes, on the same fire. Of course, there were a lot of rattlesnakes. We pulled tricks on others. We found a creek, and we all stripped, and jumped in. We were lying around in the sun, and we found his dead rattler and coiled it up, of course, next to a buddy's head, so when he awakened it was sitting there. [laughs] So, we have our cruel side too, see. Yeah. I don't recall any other...I imagine there are stories, but none of these, as far as I know, honestly, are apocryphal. I think I've experienced all these, but some of them may have a little embellishment. I don't know. I'm sure almost all stories do.

KT: Yes. So what do you think, having been a smoke-dumper—

RS: Smokejumper? [laughs] Believe me, I would have liked to have dumped a lot of smoke in those days. [laughs]


RS: Don’t laugh, right. [laughs]

KT: Okay. What do you think, having been a smokejumper, has given you for the rest of your life? [laughs]

RS: For the rest of my life?

KT: Yes. [laughs]

RS: It's a good question, nothing wrong with it.

KT: [laughs] it was a bit awkward. [laughs]
RS: It’s a good question. Again, what I was looking for when I came over here, it was a highlight, no doubt. It was really a highlight. It really was, and I think back on it, of course. As you get to be my age, if you are ever unfortunate or perhaps fortunate enough, to get to be more ancient years, it was definitely a highlight. I wouldn’t have exchanged that experience for the world. Just great. It has, I suppose, impinged on all the tall stories I’ve told anybody ever since, but I’ve never had any children of my own to tell this to. I’ve manage, I guess, to brag a little bit to—when they’ll let me—to my nieces and nephews in Canada. Again, about the smokejumpers. I’m very proud to have been a part of it. I really am.

KT: What do you think it gave you?

RS: Certainly a sense of camaraderie, with the people I worked with, and that includes the Forest Service personnel. I have a great deal of respect for the—

[Break in audio]

RS: This sense of camaraderie extends today, to anyone who works in this field—the forestry field. Anyone who’s going to school or attending the University of Washington Forestry Department or over here, and so forth. Forestry is a strange name—Forest Service, forestry. We have a forestry department, as you well know in, I guess, in California called the California State Forestry. A lot of state departments are called that. I remember, they said, “You don’t use that phrase. It’s a Forest Service here.” I adhere to that. But a camaraderie, as I say, included the personnel. I was very fond of the guy I worked for in in Oregon, the camp superintendent, and kept in touch a bit, and of course, Earl Cooley is an institution. It’s always been damn nice of him to come out here every year and share a few experiences with each other. It’s a lot of fun. As far as smokejumper experience impinging on my later life, I don’t know that it had much to do with the career I chose, or anything like that, but at least it gave me in a reference point. The whole war experience, I guess for anyone, regardless of their particular experience or stand, rather, our assignment was always a wrench and a crucial marking point for anyone who was in their 20s in those days—teens or 20s.

KT: Do you have any further comments that you’d like to make about your experiences as a smokejumper or in the CPS in general?

RS: I don’t know, but I would do it all over again, if I were the same age and had the opportunity. My viewpoints, basically, have not changed. I am not affiliated very formally with any church group anymore, but I’m talking now as a philosophy of life. I think the nonviolent approach to situations, even though it might mean getting yourself killed, is about the only way we have to go in the face of the present nuclear situation and the impasse we now face in various areas of the world. I’m active, as a result, in various peace organizations that aren’t necessarily sectarian, today—support them. I’m willing to march and put my butt on the line for a lot of these things. I haven’t, basically, changed my philosophy on that score. I think I’m...
reinforced by it, as matter of fact, with the experience of smokejumpers and camps, and renewing acquaintances at reunions such as this. Of course, this helps out.

KT: I'd like to thank you for sharing this with us.

RS: Thanks, Kim, I appreciate it very much.

[End of Interview]