Ron Lund interviewed by John Harper on July 6, 1984, for the Smokejumper Oral History Project. OH# 133-64.

JH This is John Harper interviewing Ron Lund, BLM [Bureau of Land Management] jumper in the shower/outhouse facilities that's not hooked up, behind the parachute loft in Fairbanks, Alaska. This is the 6th of July, 1984. Ron, can you tell me a little bit about when you started, where and training conditions?

RL How far back do you want to go, do you want to ...?

JH Right at the beginning.

RL Well I mean... I first applied at Missoula in '62 and at that time I'd all ready had uh... a couple years of fire experience. I had a fire outside of uh, Great Falls in 1960 I was on for three weeks. And the following summer,'61, was the big year in the Bitterroots. Sleeping Child fire... I spent a month on the Sleeping Child fire so, therefore, I had my fire experience and then I worked construction in Great Falls on the Minuteman Missile sites. I applied for jumping at Missoula, but at that time apparently the chances of getting on were... were difficult. I did not... I had not had the so called one year of practical experience working somewhere, so they sent back and said I wasn't qualified because of that.

At that time, the fall of '62, I was going to go to school at the University of Montana, major in forestry and that was what I had planned then. OK, the following the summer, I spent my freshman year in Missoula, following summer I got a job at the Forest Service down around Ennis and, uh... so there was my first year of practical experience with the Forest Service. Uh, that... the... I guess it was the winter quarter of '63, I guess it was. '63, '64... there was a brochure came down at the Forestry School about smokejumping in Alaska, which I didn't even know existed and, uh... so I decided to go ahead and send an application uh... reluctantly because I didn't feel I was going to be able to get hired. I figured it'd be the same story up there. I sent one anyway and, lo and behold, they sent back and said, "Yes, we accept your application."

Apparently what had happened was '63 was bad fire year up here in that there was a lot of rain so a lot of the people didn't return the following summer. So I started spring of '64 and there was... what... 35 total jumpers then? And that year we had 15 rookies. Half the crew were rookies. And, uh... well, that was my first year. Trained up here. I know, uh... what do you want me to elaborate on... on that year, you know...?

JH Yeah, '64, that was only five years after the Alaska Smokejumper Project was established. Were they very settled by then, training facility wise and operation wise?

RL Well, yeah, pretty well. They... it was a small crew, but they, of course they had their, uh... facilities out at Three and a Half Mile, near International Airport and, uh... we were using DC-3's and a Grumman Goose for aircraft. The, uh... equivalent
was the FS-5A and FS-3A and the H-3 Harness.

They also had so called engineer jumpers up here that... that worked, uh... for Cadastral that, uh... would go out for the whole summer and, uh... they would... jump in and build heliports for the Cadastral crew so they could do their surveying. That outfit used the... I guess it's the FS-2 or FS, whatever it was, the 28-foot tall canopy with Derry slots and tails.

JH The candy stripe?

RL Yeah, candy stripe... flat back. The uh, FS-5A we used for smokejumping was a... it had a deployment bag but it had the old bungee covered type of a... backpack, whatever you want to call it. I think we used that for the next couple, three years and it was about '65 or... '66 I think we went to the four flap container that we use now.

JH What was the training like then?

RL Oh... Well, Jim Black who was an old Missoula jumper was in charge of the rookie training. His philosophy was, uh... was a whole lot of emphasis on, uh... calisthenics. More so than any running. We didn't do all that much running, but there was a pretty rigorous, I thought anyway, rookie training. It lasted, oh... seemed like it was a couple weeks. I can't remember exactly how long it lasted, but there was pretty strenuous. But there just wasn't that much emphasis on running like there is today. Uh... I don't know how much you want to elaborate on the actual training. It was thorough. I mean, what else... I don't know what else I could say, it was typical.

JH You had the seven practice jumps... training jumps?

RL Yeah. Just like it's always been.

JH Did you have much, uh... fire training like they do today?

RL Let's see... I can't remember what we did back then. Oh! I... Yeah, come to think of it I do now. We didn't have so much... an awful lot of, uh... at least I don't remember going out to the field that much, we may have. I can remember, we had a real good classroom type of a fire school that was put on by, uh... Jim Thurston and Bill Adams, the guy that was in charge of McGrath at that time. I was pretty impressed with it.

I had gone to a fire school the year before that with the Forest Service down at, down near, in the Madison Forest or Beaverhead Forest down in the Madison district but uh, this was a pretty, a lot better school you know, it was, you know, it was pretty good, actually. A lot better, I think, classroom environment than there has been today, I think anyway. Of course it might have been that I was fairly new to the, to all that and it just probably didn't make a big impression on me. I don't recall actually, we probably did, but I don't recall going out into the field and doing that much before getting on fires. It was all, an awful lot of uh, uh, put the individual in a typical
fire situation and see how he'd react you know. It was good.

JH What was the fire organization in Alaska back then, like today the jumpers are the initial attack for the state and federal lands of Alaska?

RL Well, back then, there was, there was nothing but the jumpers and it was all, you know, almost all the land was Bureau of Land Management, there wasn't any state land that I... that I knew about anyway. There was a National Parks Service, but we had the same, they must have had an agreement that we took action on their land just like we did anywhere else. It seemed like whenever there was a fire, we'd go to it. There was never any question about land status or anything like that, like there is today.

JH Did they operate out of uh, Galena and McGrath, the sub-base concept like they do now?

RL No, not really, McGrath at that time was in a different district. It was part of Anchorage district and they even had their own smokejumper organization, they had their own separate jumpers. And Galena was a, wasn't a sub-base, we had gone in and out of there, but there were no facilities whatsoever. When we were there we just stayed in the hangar there, Air Force hangar in transient quarters and that was it. There was no, we would have our meals in the Air Force mess hall. There was nothing else there. I don't even recall if there was a retardant site there then. I don't think there was. There wasn't a whole lot of emphasis on retardant back then. There wasn't any big airplanes. They had six B-25's with uh... carry borate, calcium borate with a, one tank, 1,000 gallon one tank and that was it so they weren't real effective.

JH The Anchorage organization was independent from the Fairbanks jumpers?

RL Yeah, I can't remember who was in charge then, let's see, I don't remember who the foreman or whatever it was, was back then but uh... the Anchorage jumpers were a total separate entity from Fairbanks and they operated out of McGrath. That's all I can really remember. I can remember a few of the names, but I don't remember what the actual organization was.

JH Both operating policies from, probably '59 when they started, through the early '70's were almost a 24-hour standby policies weren't they?

RL Well, what do you mean by 24-hour? I mean you could go out and get as much...

JH Almost go get as much overtime as available or they'd have uh... aircraft and people standing by 24 hours a day.

RL Yeah but uh... there wasn't any, any restrictions on overtime
like there is today. One thing that was interesting was that there was a different pay scale, a different type of set up than what there is today. It was called the Inter-Alaska Service Schedule and then you'd have IASS dash grade, and it was a much higher pay scale than what it is today and that was in effect for the, those first three years I was there and then when I went into the military, came back, it had changed. It was no longer that set up, it was back to the GS then. You'd probably have to go and do some research on exactly how that all evolved because I don't remember that much about it, but I know it did, there was a major change in how that was set up and when it, when it was changed it uh... we lost out quite a bit on hourly wage.

JH What years were you in the service?

RL Oh, uh... from uh, well I went in, what, November '66, got out November '70.

JH And so there was a time period in your jumping career that you had an opinion of the jumpers uh... before you went into the military and then came back uh... I would imagine your attitudes had changed during that time period towards the jumpers or policies.

RL Well, I don't know if it changed that much, I, of course, things had changed in the organization as far as people in charge and things like that when I came back. Uh... I don't know if my attitude changed that much. I mean, what exactly do you mean?

JH It seems like uh... people uh... who've jumped before the military uh... there's kind of an idealism involved with the jumpers, the romance of the job, so to speak, and then when a break is made, when they go out, either into the military or real world job and then come back, they...

RL It doesn't have the appeal, is that what you're saying?

JH Uh, that's the impression I get.

RL For me it was quite the opposite. I uh... when I went, I got, was drafted, OK? This was, you know, when Vietnam was cooking up and I uh... decided to just let, you know, I had ROTC in college and all that stuff, but I didn't want to go that route, anyway. What things have to come as it goes to see what would happen and I got orders for Vietnam and I decided that, go ahead and go to OCS and went that route. It cost me an extra year and then I got assigned to Germany and uh... my experience with the military as an officer had made me want to come back that much more to this outfit because uh... I wasn't impressed with the way the Army conducted their affairs even at the rank that I was, that I had. Yet they wanted me to stay in six months, make another grave, but uh... it wasn't worth it to me. I actually, I was looking forward to getting out and going back to this. I figured this was a lot better than what I was experiencing in the army for sure.
JH  Was Orville Looper the uh, project superintendent or base foreman here when you started?

RL  When I started, right.

JH  How many of the old people, the original jumpers who uh... founded this organization in 1959 were you able to work with?

RL  Well, Jesus, I'd have to go look at the, look at the charts to see who was here then, but uh... Oh, let's see, Hans Trankle, he was one of the originals I believe, but he was in the engineers the year I started so I didn't really get to work with him that much. Uh... God! I can't remember all these guys, probably not that many really, not the first group because I think most of those guys had already moved out into other jobs or whatever. Phil Clark, of course, he was here then. Uh... I don't believe there was that many more still working here that had been here when I started.

JH  Of course, in those days they had a higher turnover. People would only jump two, three years and go on about their business.

RL  Yeah, I can't remember if uh... what the hell this guy, I'd have to go look at the, I can't remember this fellow's name, but he eventually went down and took over the Toke area.

JH  That's Toke Junction, Alaska?

RL  Yeah, I can't remember if he was here with the original group or not. One thing that is interesting uh... who's the fellow that's uh... down there in charge of Missoula?

JH  Larry Asna?

RL  No no, I mean not the smokejumper base, the uh,...

JH  Mike Bowman?

RL  Bowman, yes, Mr. Bowman was up here when I was, the last couple years I was jumping before I went in the military. I can't remember what his, I think he was a training... he was not in the smokejumper organization, he was for the, the other side of the fence so to speak. I think he was, he was involved in training, but uh... it was interesting to see him go from this thing here down, end up down in Missoula.

JH  What was the relationship with the booster crews from down South back then. I noticed they uh... sent their first booster crew up in 1961 and I didn't realize that booster crews went back that far up here.

RL  Well, what do you mean, what, what was the relationship?

JH  How would they handle booster crews, everything was at Three
and a Half Mile, they had dormitory space or...?

RL Oh yeah, they would just stay and live right there, right along with the rest of us and there was enough room then. Uh... at least those early years anyway. Uh... they just fit in, it was like, you know, into the list of, it was just like an extra group that made us that much larger. There wasn't, really wasn't anything uh... unusual about it. Seemed like in years past they would, they ended up getting put in motels or something like that because we didn't have that much room. But those first couple, three years were, you know, nothing really particularly unusual about it.

JH What changes in the, the BLM organization uh... can you recall that took place during the time that you were in the service? Just increase in personnel or different politics, policies?

RL In the actual organization? I probably didn't pay that much attention to what was really happening. Uh... I know that when I came back, in the actual smokejumper organization, there was a few people that I was surprised to see were up there in charge or second in command. Uh... let's see uh... there was quite a bit of shoving around of personnel apparently when I was in the military. A few things happened up here that, that pissed people off or whatever. I don't know exactly what took place, but uh... Bill Robertson had apparently had been in uh... Bob Weber, were the two that had worked up into the foreman.

Well there was a situation that happened the last year I was here, '66. You're probably aware of it, and I don't know if I can really relate all the details, but there was a Orville Looper and Phil Clark had a conflict or disagreement or whatever you want to call it with the managing people, you know, above them and I'm only saying what I think took place, I don't really know exactly what took place. But those people had, because of this conflict or whatever you want to call it, Orville Looper, Phil Clark had a choice of either accepting a job somewhere else or quitting. And I believe Orville took a job somewhere else down South and Clark decided to quit. I don't know the circumstances around what brought that all up cause I was just a pole at the time and didn't know what was going on. But there was someone by the name of Bert Silcock who was the, what it would be called, the FM, I guess it would be the equivalent of an FMO today or whatever. I don't know what the job title was then, but that was the, was a conflict with him, whatever it was, you'd have to do a little more research with some other people. You probably ought to go try to get a hold of Phil Clark, I mean, I'm sure he could tell you a lot of good shit about this.

I had some good conversation with Phil at the Officers' Club over here. He came back and worked for us one summer, I think it was '76 or '75 and he related a lot of what happened then, but I can't remember all the details. Obviously he knows cause it happened to him. But it was a real unfortunate thing that happened because those two people who essentially established this base or were very influential getting it going, personally I
felt got shit upon if you mind my terminology.

Anyway, that happened there in '66 and I left for the Army, came back, and when I came back there was a lot of other shuffling around of overhead people and Bill Robertson got involved with it and apparently had some work conflicts and when I came back he was really not in charge, not the jumper foreman, I believe it was uh... Well when I came back in '70, they'd all ready had all this worked out or wrung out as to what the problems were, but uh, Larry Cravens was the foreman in charge in 1970 which really surprised me. I trained with him and I didn't think he was the type of person that would ever have the capability of moving up into a position like that, so I was pretty amazed.

JH I remember Larry, he, in that same year, 1970 or winter of '71 died in a...

RL Seventy-one.

JH trailer house fire.

RL Seventy was, Cravens was the foreman and Al Dutton was the assistant foreman, second in command and then you had all the, I can't even remember who the, all the squad leaders were. I know Vern Goedeke was also involved in a, in some kind of an incident prior to '70 which brought all these personnel changes and I'll tell you what I've heard, what I think happened. It had to do with Robertson and this is all hearsay, stuff that I heard. Apparently in a DC-3, Bill Robertson was the spotter in charge and I believe Goedeke was the assistant spotter and they were on a fire where there were jumpers on board the aircraft and they were, they were trying to get some retardant planes into this fire or something like that. Anyway, the story goes that they were using a DC-3 as a lead plane so to speak, flying low and flying it radically and uh... Goedeke really essentially blew up and had a big confrontation with, with uh... Robertson on the airplane and it almost came to blows. I don't know all the details, this is what I've heard and because of that and a few other whatever was going on during those years, they had a big shuffling of overhead and it ended up with Cravens being in charge in 1970 with Al Dutton second in command. I think at that time, Robertson was the loft foreman. I believe that's... well, I'm not sure about that, he might have had another job there too. I can't remember when Al Cramer came into this picture, to be honest with you. I do remember uh... Al Cramer coming up, I don't know if that was 1966 or 1970 or whatever. I think it was '66. Supposedly he came up as the foreman in charge, but uh... he never really did much and he ended up being, being slid into the loft foreman's job. But when all this happened, I just, you know, it's a long time ago and I can't remember all the details.

JH But as a result of that Al Dutton became a project superintendent in 1971, '72?

RL Yeah, it was a result of the trailer house fire where Larry
Cravens died. It was the following spring, this happened, actually happened I think in January or February, somewhere around there. Anyway, that following spring, Al Dutton, the responsibility of the jumper foreman was thrust upon him and he kind of took charge and, well, the rest is kind of history.

JH Well, he seemed to definitely do a pretty good job of it.

RL It was a stroke of luck, I think. I don't think uh... Dutton ever knew or realized his potential at that kind of job, but it was lucky for us that he ended up getting in there, for obvious reasons.

JH Could you go into that, some of the changes that Al implemented, some of the policies?

RL Oh, God! Like uh... it's a lot of shit, you know.

JH Alaska had the reputation of being the low lifers, so to speak, of the jumper organization. I don't know whether that was just personal base animosity or what, but when Al took over, he just literally built a new program that changed.

RL Well, a lot of that attitude, I think, happened during the late 60's and early 70's when... well, after... Phil Clark and Orville Looper left. I think that the whole outfit got really, just kind of went downhill a lot, this lackadaisical attitude developed over a period of years there and it got pretty bad, got real bad there and it's [inaudible], a lot of it was uh...

Well, a good example of, I won't say it was encouraged, but it wasn't discouraged by the overhead people. We, 1970, we no longer operated out of International because the of the pipeline boom. The aircraft, I mean the air, the traffic at International was such that we had to go somewhere else, so the obvious solution was to move up to Wainwright right? So in 1970 when I came back, at that time we were operating out here at Wainwright on the south side of the runway in nothing more than a trailer house and a Butler building, so everyday the routine was to get up and be to work at Three and a Half Mile and get in a bus and drive out to, to Wainwright and there you were. You did nothing but sit there until you got a fire call. There was absolutely nothing to do out here at all. So uh... you know, it wasn't much encouragement for jumpers to show their... their worth. And also at that time, oh... I remember what the deal was. Robertson was not actually in charge of the loft, he was, he had taken a job as a, in charge of support up there at Three and a Half Mile and Cramer, Al Cramer was the loft foreman, but uh... Robertson was calling the shots as far as policy and they had taken all the jumpers totally out of the parachute operation and they had hired women in there to do the rigging and sewing and whatever. So the jumpers never even went there at all, and that was kind of a bad deal for obvious reasons. So that was a further indication of not having anything for the jumpers to do but sit on their butt, you know, and I think that carried over out on fires too.

And as soon as Dutton took over in '71, things rapidly
started going back the opposite direction. I can't uh... really uh... relate any specific things that he did, you know, but uh... I think it was more of an attitude change than anything. It's a long time ago. I have a big master log book, look all this shit up, it might be different.

JH When did they move to the facility out here at Fort Wainwright?

RL Well, that was a long, ongoing situation. We moved across the runway to the north side, seems like either '72 or '73, somewhere in there, but we were... we still had very, very limited facilities. I think, I can't remember the first year we moved into the T hangar. We operated out of a few of the, what are now warehouse buildings, just uh... you know, extra large Butler buildings for a couple years there. One year we were in one building, the next year we were in another one you know, we just got kind of shuffled around. (We) still had all of our loft facilities and a lot of the warehouse, and a lot of that crap was still back at Three and a Half Mile. We come out here and set up, you know, with our fire packs and stuff like that out here ready to go and we slowly got rigging tables and stuff like that, so we could some work out here that pertained to what we were doing.

But I think those first several years here was strictly cargo chutes. The actual rigging of mains and stuff was still done by the women. I can't remember what year we switched back to actually having, it must have somewhere after Al took over because I think that's one of the first things he did was to get the jumpers back in the loft so that must have been around '73, somewhere in there, '72. I can't remember exactly. All I know is I remember the women being there in '70, maybe '71, but then after that I think we started getting back in there.

JH When did the heavy cargo operation split from the jumper organization or is that still part of the organization?

RL OK, seems like that was also some of the doings of Robertson. He took the paracargo out of the jumpers. Well let's see, back in the old days we didn't really have any paracargo except, you know, it wasn't a separate type of thing. Whenever we were out on a fire and they needed something, then the jumpers would cargo it up and take it out there. Seems like about '71 or '70, Robertson had established a separate paracargo organization, or he was trying to, but he was doing it, he wasn't using his head that much. What he'd do is he'd hire four or five extra people to work in the warehouse that were not smokejumper or parachute people and he attempted to train them to be loadmaster, paracargo specialists and uh... it wasn't very successful because they didn't really know what they were doing, they'd mess up left and right.

I can't remember when we started the separate uh... smokejumper paracargo. It must have been around, it was when we were first in the T-hangar so it must have been around '74 or '73, somewhere. I remember George Smith was the first person to get,
to be in charge of that separate outfit there, and he was the one I think that, that instigated using the large parachutes and, you know, dropping rollagon and heavy air paracargo-type work. And it came about from his experience with Air America. Now, once again, I can't remember one of the, I remember doing some of our first test drops with rollagon with the 100-foot cargo chutes we got from the Army, but what year that was, I can't say exactly. Probably it was around '72, '3 somewhere in there.

JH When did the helicopter start making its inroads into fire up here?

RL Well, reverting back a little bit... this is where Bob Webber comes into it too. I think '70, 1970, Webber had moved up into uh... he was over on the other side of the fence, so to speak. He was out of the jumper organization and he was in a fire patrol officer's-type position and he was a big instigator of the heavy helicopter situation. Nineteen-seventy was when we had, we got our first uh... 205 type helicopter. We had two of them that year in Fairbanks operating there as, in a helitack situation and there was big talk about, you know, going extensively to the heavy helicopters and then, with the idea of doing away with the jumper operation. That may have not been indicated at the time, but that was the scuttle butt or the word that they were talking about doing and it sure looked like it cause '70, '71, '72, each year they were getting more and more of the big helicopters and that was also the time that we had the the emphasis on rappelling. The accident we had up here in, I believe it was '70 with Dave Liebersbach who fell out of the 205 on a demonstration out at [inaudible]. Uh... there was a lot of emphasis on learning how to do the rappelling prior to that, it must have, I think it was 1970 because Dave Liebersbach had done quite a bit in Vietnam and was a major part of trying to get that developed and uh... what was the other fellow that actually got put in charge uh... I can't think of his name, ex-Redmond, or a Cave Junction jumper. You know him, can't think of him. Anyway, I think that uh... possibly if we hadn't had the accident there, that they would have, they would have pursued the rappelling to a real extensive degree and that would have also, you know, helped, I shouldn't say eliminate but de-emphasize smokejumping.

JH What happened on that accident?

RL Uh... they were using two types of rappelling devices. One was called a sky slide and was called sky slide and one was called sky jean [?]. OK, uh... sky slide was a device that used one-inch tubular nylon, you know, same as let down rope and it went through a series of wraps inside there and it had a lever uh... a breaking lever that you used to slow your descent down. The thing was, this was a device that was put together with two pieces of metal that was riveted together and what had happened, it was very prone to entangling and they'd had trouble with it prior to the accident, I don't know all the details because I wasn't involved with it, but apparently they went out to Peedee [?] Road which they were using at that time for our fire training
and we were going to put an a uh... demonstration for the public. I was going to be, I was at International on a DC-3, we were going to jump into it, they were going to go out there and put on a rappelling show and they were going to touch off some grassy area and put it out you know just to, a demonstration for the public and Liebersbach was uh... he was one of the rappellers. He apparently left the helicopter about, they were about 50 feet or something like that, 75, whatever it was, it wasn't that high. But he got out of the helicopter and was down about 10 feet and this sky slide entangled and he was reefing on this breaking device trying to, trying to break it loose and apparently what happened was the, the rivets broke loose and the thing spread apart and as soon as that happened it released him. He just free fell for about 50 feet. Now that's, that's what I've heard as to what exactly happened, I don't know specifically how it broke or whatever. I'm sure somebody does somewhere if you want to really want to delve into it.

JH What type of injuries did he sustain?

RL Well, he landed in a, kind of a kneeling position, landed on his, both knees and his hands. He broke both wrists real bad. It drove the hand bones or wrist bones, you know, just jammed it right up into his arms essentially. So he really smashed up both wrists and both knees pretty bad but he did survive and he's still around working today and he's recovered pretty well actually it seems like. He's not that badly disfigured or crippled or anything. His wrist, it's obvious he's got something wrong with it, but he manages all right.

JH What year did the Gene Hobbs accident happen?

RL OK, I think that happened in '73. Yeah, it happened in 1973 and it happened out in McGrath. And, you want me to go through the whole, explain what I, what happened? 'Cause it, because of this Gene Hobbs incident, it uh... we had a, some real major changes in some of our operating procedures in the air, in the airplanes which I think was a real vast improvement.

What had happened was uh... I believe he was wearing, well, anyway, he was on a fire run somewhere out near McGrath, fairly close to McGrath and he was wearing the normal smokejumper back­pack, spotter backpack, he was the spotter in charge in a DC-3 full of jumpers. And apparently they were having some problems with telling the pilot, you know, where the spot was going to be or whatever and Gene had gone up to talk directly to the pilot and on his way back to the door he was going to drop some more streamers. And he turned around and was facing the opposite direction of the door and he reached down to pick up some streamers and when he did that, the container popped open. I don't know if it was an FS-8 or what it was, it was some backpack that we were using at the time. When he bent over, of course, the pilot chute, the pins pulled free and the pilot chute came out, went out the door and you can imagine what happened next. Parachute of course went off, opened and literally drove, just pulled him right through the door and uh....
He uh... there was some interesting things that happened as a result of this, uh... fortunately he wasn't killed and which is very amazing because according to uh... what I've heard why this didn't happen or some real contributing factor was, number one, he wasn't wearing a helmet which is amazing cause they were supposed to be wearing helmets. The doctor that uh... that worked on him later on that winter or whatever said that the fact that he wasn't wearing a helmet and the fact that he was in very good physical shape because he was a real active wrestling instructor at the high school where he taught. When he hit the door, his body essentially bent around it instead of stopping. If he'd have had a helmet on and his helmet had hit first, it probably would have killed him right there, it would just drive his head right down in his spine. But apparently he kind of molded around the door just right and it jerked him outside and he got a broken neck out of it and one of his knees was, the leg was broken up pretty bad, I don't know exactly what happened there but uh... Fortunately there was uh... a McCall, not McColl, Winthrop jumper on board. Can't remember his name exactly but he was an EMT, a real qualified EMT from Vietnam or something and they tried to jump in to where he was at right away, but the door was so badly damaged that they were afraid they'd have static line problems so they radioed to McGrath and they had a, they got a helicopter up there real quick. They went, I guess they must've went there and landed 'cause this same fellow went out with the helicopter and got to him and was able to save him, get him back to McGrath and get medical attention. But as result of that incident and through the leadership of Al Dutton, we went to a completely different type of uh... system in the aircraft where we don't, the spotter does not wear a parachute during dropping and this is where I got into the picture quite a bit.

During these years I was getting more and more involved in the parachute loft as far as learning stuff and everything. I uh... was asked by Dutton to uh... come up with a uh... type of harness that we could use to, well, actually I, I'm getting ahead of myself a little bit, actually uh... Gordy Henson came up with the first prototype. Al Dutton wanted to use some other technique to keep the spotter from having the potential of falling out of the airplane, right? That's why we wear the spotter chute. So we come up with a restraint system where the spotter would wear a harness or belt or something like that and a pigtails to hook on to the overhead cable and Gordy Henson, who was an ex-Missoula jumper, came up with the first prototype and essentially what it was was a, just a waist belt, a heavy duty, about four-inches-wide belt that a person would put around his waist, strap on and it had a pigtails and that's what he'd hook to the overhead cable and it worked fine, but it was a little bit cumbersome to, to hook up and there was some question as to whether if a person actually got out the door, the guy would stay with it, he could actually, if he got enough shock, just slide through it. He may not, may not hold your, you know, your arms may slide through it.

So Al talked to me to, wanted me to try to develop a better system which I, which I did do. I uh... came up with, with a harness that's very similar to a, well it is essentially like a
parachute harness with leg straps, a chest strap and, you know, conventional harness. What I had done is I had taken and also combined the possibility, the feasibility or the, whatever you want to call it, of using a parachute with it also if you wanted to. The parachute would be just a chestpack that would be stowed at the back of the airplane and if the person had to leave the aircraft because of emergency like an in-flight fire or mid-air or something like that, you could quickly grab a parachute, snap in the rings and go out and uh... that's now in use, and has been ever since about '73 or '74 when we started using it, so I think it's a lot better system than, than using a parachute because you totally eliminate the potential of having a parachute deploy in the airplane, having the Gene Hobbs incident happen all over again. So that was one good thing that came out of it.

JH Were you here when uh... that individual died making a let down?

RL Oh, yes, 1965. It was kind of interesting how this happened, you know, throw a few opinions in here as to "maybes" and contributing factors. Uh... I'm not doing good on names today, what was his name anyway, I forget, can't remember. If it wasn't for an interview I probably would remember this, an interview type of environment.

JH Let's take a second and I'll change the tape and you might be able to remember it.

END SIDE A

BEGIN SIDE B

RL ...as of '72 on, a lot of things happened, fires and shit. I could tell you about the Red Devil fire where some people almost got fired, and kind of interesting. That happened back in the old days though, I don't know if you want to hear that.

JH Sure, we can follow that after we go on with the uh... letdown incident.

RL Is it on?

JH Mmm mmm

RH Yeah 196-, no it must, it was 1966 it happened, that's right because what had, it happened to Arden Davis who trained with me in '64. He was a, he was also a forestry student, graduate actually, he'd gotten his uh... master's at Missoula, University of Montana. So he didn't come back to jumping in 1965, instead he took a job with Weyerhauser, out in Washington state somewhere and which turned out to be a very uh... demanding job apparently. Took a lot of, took a heavy toll on, and he disliked it so much that he finally quit and he came back to jumping in '66 and he was not in very good shape and it was kind of disappointing because the year he trained with me he was in excellent shape.
But, he wasn't in particularly good shape and he was having, he was very, the effects of the job of the previous year had, was really showing on him. He was real nervous and uh... you know, he was drinking and you know, trouble like that. Anyway, during, during the uh... train, refresher training, he didn't seem like he did particularly well on a lot of things. I can't pinpoint anything and I might, this might not be essentially true but I think the fact that he was having some problems with uh... with uh... the leftover effects of that job was a contributing factor to this accident. But anyway, I'll tell you what happened in the accident and I was not there, I did not find him but I was at the drop zone or at the spot, whatever you want to call it, when it happened. We'd, I think we were making, it was our timber jump, that's what it was, we were making a timber, is that what it was? Anyway, the drop zone was out by the University where there was some trees. I can't remember if it was an actual timber jump, I don't think it, it must not have been that because we were doing refresher training, there was no need for us to make a timber jump unless there was some specific reason. Anyway, what happened was, it must have been a timber jump, I'll say it was because we were all supposed to land in trees and there was a, John Stewart was on the ground, he was, he drove out there with the truck and he was assigned to go around and check on everybody as soon as they were hung up to make sure they were OK, 'cause this, this was an interesting factor. So uh... we did this and we were in what, probably 75, 80 foot white spruce trees, tall trees. Anyway Arden was uh... one of the first sticks out, the first people on the ground and John Stewart had went over to check on him and hollered up to him, "Are you OK, Arden"? "Sure I'm OK, I'm just starting to leave my letdown". So John went on to check somebody else and uh... it seemed like there was a, a full airplane, was quite a few people out there. Anyway, everybody made their timber jump, did their letdown and were getting back to uh... you know, meeting place, ready to go back and all of a sudden everybody realized that uh... Arden Davis wasn't there anywhere and they started checking around figuring out where he was at and they went back there and they found him.

He'd been hanging there, been there for probably 45 minutes and what had happened was he was hung up in the tree, hung up well, no problem there but he was only about, his feet were only about, you know, I'm going to say maybe six feet off the ground and he did several things wrong, several things that he shouldn't have done if he'd have, you know, if he'd have followed the training procedures that we had gone through in our refresher training, this probably wouldn't have happened. Uh... number one, first thing he did wrong is he uh... took his reserve off completely and dropped to the ground so that right away there he lost his reserve knife. OK, and, I'm thinking that, well, this is probably an opinion thing here but, thinking the fact that he was, that the effects of his uh... job and the fact that he, he'd missed a year jumping, were probably some contributing factors as to why he went about what he did. But apparently he felt that he could uh... because at that time we were only doing one letdown procedure and that was a harness letdown, that was the second thing he did wrong. He didn't even attempt to do a harness
letdown, he just reached up and released his capewells, letting himself, thinking he could just drop the last four or five feet to the ground and be OK. Well, what he didn't realize was that there was a suspension cup, one or two suspension lines, or whatever, underneath his collar, he wasn't aware of and I'm guessing that he may have gone through this in a rather quick procedure thinking everything was o.k., I'll just get out of this thing and get the ground. Reached up, popped the capewells and fell, you know, three or four feet until they'd cinched up and there he was, caught. Now who knows, he may have, it may have been enough to just burn right through him, you know, it might have been a real quick thing, or if he'd have had a reserve knife, he might have been able to cut lines. I don't know, but when they went back to find him, he'd been hanging there for 30 minutes at least, maybe longer and he was all ready dead.

JH What effect did that have on the jumper organization?

RL Well, you can about imagine how we felt about that uh... probably the biggest effect was that it really changed the attitude towards training I think the next year or anything beyond, after that. We started the whole new, much more stringent uh... training technique on letdowns, you know, taking this into consideration. Uh... making a specific uh... part of that training as looking for suspension lines, taking your glove completely off, raising the mask, checking with your hand around your collar, making sure there are not, there aren't any lines there before you go on to your letdown. So that was probably the major, major thing. Plus the fact, I think that there was getting to be a little bit of a lax type attitude towards the refresher training prior to that and I think that opened a lot of peoples' eyes about that sort of thing.

JH Tell me about that fire that you mentioned.

RL Oh, the Red Devil fire? It was kind of interesting. Uh... fire was uh... somewhere down near Red Devil which is on the Lower [inaudible] and uh... back in those days, this was I think 1965, it was a pretty wimpy year, we didn't have a whole lot of fires that year. Anyway, it turned out to be I think a full DC-3 load. At that time it was either 14 or 12 jumpers on the fire and it was about a 30 minute flight from the fire to the town of Red Devil and the only helicopter they had available was a small Bell type which would only take, I think, one jumper, one or two jumpers, I think just one actually, that was Gear. So there was a lot of flying in this helicopter and the helicopter pilot was sitting there at Red Devil and he had his girlfriend or wife, nice, young looking blonde which he had left behind, and while he was retrieving the jumpers he was hauling the AFF in and bringing the jumpers out so it took a long time to do this, took all day long. So, as soon as the jumpers got off the helicopter, the town of Red Devil by the way had a, had a bar there that had lots of, you know, uh... things you could do while you were waiting, whatever you want to call it, bar uh... juke box and all. Anyway, that's the first place the jumper headed when he got off the
helicopter and the helicopter pilot's wife was very friendly and, you know, everybody commenced to uh... have a little fun, whatever, and so everybody got pretty well shit faced to say the least. I think I've got some pictures of this, this thing too, it'd be kind of interesting to see. But uh... this turned out to be, turned into a real big stink or whatever you want to call it because apparently the big wigs in BLM figured we were making a very bad impression in front of the native people, we had crews over there waiting to go on a fire and I can't really disagree with this, but who am I to say? I was just a second year man just doing what everybody else did.

But anyway, everybody got pretty well shit faced and uh... finally when the DC-3 showed up to pick us up uh... I remember uh... Jim Black was on the aircraft, was one of the spotters that went with the aircraft and I can remember him looking at all of us with very, very uh... you know, disgusted look in his eyes. Then we flew from there to McGrath and uh... there was a couple people, I guess they figured were the instigators or whatever that uh... they wanted to fire on the spot and uh... they finally got it uh... brought down to where they didn't get hired back the next year. They got to finish out the season but a couple of those people didn't come next year and I can't remember what, who they were or whatever. It was uh... the first real so called incident I got involved in I guess. That was only my second year.

JH Kind of a minor Missoula incident?

RL Yeah, you could say that's what it was.

JH During the 1970's when they went whole hog to the helicopters with a lot of uh... temporary at that BLM uh... helicopter types, what affect did that have on the jumpers? Did they eventually find out that helicopters were not going to work or do you think just the program that Al had started to instigate brought the jumpers back in the forefront?

RL Well, I think it really boiled down to economics, you know, if you really want to get into it. Possibly if they'd have used, if the, if the rapelling would have got off the ground and would have been successful and proved out to be safe, the heavy helicopters might have, might have worked out. I'm skeptical, I really don't think they would have. I think they would have eventually have killed themselves anyway and a lot of this, my own opinion on this, but I think it's pretty valid and I think Al Dutton realized it then and that's why he pursued his program.

Sure you can take a state, a state as Alaska, you could go out there and you could figure, figure out 100 mile circles everywhere across the state and you could cover the whole state with helicopters, but it's going to take anywhere from seven to ten 205's and they're going to be going out there, there going to be sitting in some small place, and I guess you could probably just EFF crews that are there or whatever, but you're going have a... your going to have a problem with getting people to go out to all these various places. But that's what you're going to
have to do. And if you start getting fires all over then you can run your helicopters out, drop them off, go back, but the problem with doing that is that uh... your... number one, your helicopter is not very fast, you're not going to get there all that fast, I don't believe and you're not going to be able to have, be able to repeat that very fast. I mean the helicopter is going to go out there, he's going to have to go back and fuel.

Anyway, the biggest thing is that it's going to cost a whole hell of a lot of money. You can imagine what it's going to cost with seven to ten 205's on a contract for the whole summer. It's going to be a, it's going to horrendous and then, during those first years, two... we had two 205's at Fairbanks in '70, the next year we had a lot more, the next year a lot more. We had them I think uh... people never looked, in charge of the budgeting or whatever, began to look at what it was costing and what they were getting out of it and also at the same time, Al was looking at different aircraft besides the DC-3 for, you know, getting there faster, quicker turn around, stuff like that and that's when the Vopar started getting into the picture.

I the first year we had the Vopar was 1974, we had one and during that year, we were working out of the T-hangar so around '73, '74 was when we first started working in the T-hangar apparently. I can remember the first Vopar we had, had that one, that year we also had the BLM [inaudible], DC-3, 645 and I think we may have had another contract DC-3 in McGrath or whatever, I forget exactly.

Anyway uh... the philosophy there was to use the smaller aircraft which was much, much faster thinking that we could get out there to the fire much quicker and our get away times were much, you know, brought them down to a six minute or less get away time, all these things. Thinking then, the quicker we got to the fire, the much better off we'd be as far as getting the thing under control and the Vopar worked out so well that year that the following year I think we got another one and we finally got to where we eventually had five. And it worked out so well and the whole key to that idea, I think, in my opinion is, you can do a much better, a much better job with many small aircraft carrying fewer jumpers than you can with say one large aircraft with a lot of jumpers because of the flexibility. You can have five airplanes going in five different directions and if they're fast airplanes they can get there, drop their jumpers, then they can get back, get more and go out somewhere else, all five of these doing this at the same time. You can cover a lot more area, a lot faster and a lot more effectively that way than you can with say two big aircraft or one big aircraft. You can't, you just can't go all those places, even if it's fast. (If) you sit down and think about this, I think you'll see what I'm talking about.

JH I can remember the days in the DC-3 where we'd go on ten and twelve hour patrols, fly all over the state and people were just wasted by the time they did get to a fire.

RL Granted the Vopar is not very comfortable to ride around in, but it is faster, you can get there quicker so you don't have to
end up riding around on such long patrol flights as much as we used to do in the DC-3. Granted the Vopar philosophy, the small aircraft, small amount of jumpers was a large contributing factor to our effectiveness, but there was also other things that came into the picture. We were getting a lot better detection during those years than, the detection program was, you know, kind of evolving also so there's a lot of things like that. Uh... but I think that was a major, major change that really helped us, you know, start to be very effective and make us look a lot better than we did in years past.

JH When did they Alaska jumpers go from the 5-A, the 35-foot flat canopy to the T-10?

RL Seems like uh... '71, '72 sticks in my mind. I think it was right around then, but I'm not really sure on that.

JH And then the T-10 was replaced by the Ramair?

RL Well, actually uh... of course the FS-12 come into the picture too, during that, those times also. I could probably get into a little bit of development. We've done uh... about a year or two after the T-10 come out, we weren't really convinced that the T-10 was all that much better than the 5-A as far as performance, you know, it was just something that was somewhat uh... I won't say forced upon us by the Forest Service, but we had to kind of go along with what they were doing, it was... it seemed to be an improvement. Performance wise it wasn't all that much better, so we were still looking at something, trying to come up with something better. And I'm going to say this was about uh... '75 maybe, '75 or '76, one of those years. We uh... decided to go into it pretty heavy. Uh... Dave Pierce got involved with it, we arranged to have uh... Wayne Webb come up for a month in uh... in that summer to work with us on this project. And essentially what we did is we bought I think maybe four or five un-cut T-10's from Paragear to work with and we tried various uh... configurations of, of modifications to try and come up with a canopy that performed better than the T-10 and we did that.

At the same time uh... they were developing or working on this thing at Yuma, where it was with the, you know, trying, there was actually money appropriated and spent on a private agency to develop, to essentially do the same thing. And uh... we come up with a, a couple of modifications that were better as far as turning, you know, the canopy would turn quicker. Essentially what we did was had a, we put a couple of slots up on the side of the canopy, much like a paracommander so that made the canopy turn quicker, but it didn't really increase any forward speed or decrease rate of decent or anything like that. So essentially we didn't really come up with anything that great. Kind of like the same thing that happened with this private outfit that come up with FS-11.

Anyway, it was right after that that uh... Jim Beech who uh... is a... quite an innovative individual, started looking at the Ramair parachute. His first uh... and his uh... coordination
with Al Dutton on this, I mean, Beech approached Al and talked to him about this thinking of the possible potential of maybe using it and Al, the first thing that was done towards this project was Al arranged for Beech to go down to uh... some kind of a skydiving, whatever down in uh... Elsinore, in California. And the whole purpose of that trip was for Jim to go down there and find out what he could about the Ramair or about anything, any kind of a parachute that would be better than what we were using and that's what he did. He went down there and he talked to some skydivers, manufacturers that were located there in California. And he was, he was not real impressed with what uh... what he found as far as personalities and what they did. He'd talk to one person and they'd say one and he'd talk to somebody else and they'd say something else. And so essentially he had to kind of decide on his own and he came back with the idea, thinking that the Ramair parachute would probably be the best, the best one to pursue. At that time there was also, of course, the Paracommander, they had a thing called the Paradactyle which was kind of like a [inaudible] design which he looked at also, but the Para, the uh... the Ramair parachute looked like it had the best potential because of its speed and its, its uh... capability of reducing the rate of decent, you know, significantly. So, the next thing that happened was Jim uh... started uh... doing a lot of telephone calls of various manufacturers and uh... telling them what it was that we were looking at and what kind of an application we wanted to do with it and... Yeah, I said that we were fooling around with uh... the rounds, the T-10, I think in '75, I don't, some of these years might be messed up as far as times because it was 19..., the winter, the late fall of 1978 I believe it was, that Jim had contacted Paraflight uh... which is a Ramair manufacturing company and made arrangements with uh... with them for them to send us a uh... a uh... system that they were making for the uh... for the military. What is was was a uh... a piggy back system that uh... they made for the Army for high altitude, high opening jumps. In other words where they open up high and fly for 30 some miles into a, some sneaky country they wanted to whatever, you know. So what Paraflight had done, Jim made contact with the president of Paraflight, L.A. Pooscus and L.A. uh... agreed to loan us this system to just, to evaluate and uh... he sent it out to us and this is interesting because it was somewhat, I won't say it was unauthorized because uh... we got, we got the system to look at and then we went to the North Pole which is a local place they do sport jumping and uh... Jim decided to try this, this system just using his own money, you know, renting the, the airplane and stuff like that on our own.

And uh... this was a uh... like I said piggy-back system that had a Ramair main and a Ramair reserve, piggy-back system. And Jim just went out there on his own, he, of course he'd done a lot of research as far as how these things fly, a lot of reading, so he had a pretty good background as to what, what to expect. (He) went out there and uh... went up to something like 6,000 feet, whatever it was and just, it was a static line deployed system. Nothing more than a uh... it had a pilot sheet inside there and the static line, just pull the rip cord and the pancho
came out and opened and he gave it a shot, gave it a try to see what it was like to fly one of these things. And, you know, worked out beautiful. Came in, landed right on the runway and did a nice stand-up landing right there, first time he'd ever jumped it. He was a little bit late on the flare and he lit and skidded his feet a little big, but it was, you know, he didn't have any kind of a hard landing.

So that was essentially the first jump that anybody in the smokejumping world, as far as I know, at least made a jump on a Ramair, there might have been some skydivers, I'm sure there was. But anyway this was in the idea of looking for using it for smokejumping. So that was the beginning, that was the fall of '78.

O.K., the next step on this Ramair project was uh... to get some money from uh... the BLM to maybe buy some riggs or do whatever. And during this time I had been doing a lot of development on uh... you know, harnesses and containers and stuff like that and I had some pretty good ideas. Beech, Jim Beech, myself and Matt Kelley and other people were working on this, all contributing to the joint effort. And uh... we uh... had to put out on bid for, you know, anybody out there in the parachute manufacturing industry to, we had to spell out what it was we wanted and... and then uh... let them come up with a cost. Well we were, we were anticipating, hoping that paraflight would be the one to probably get this because we had contacted them and everything so what happened was, we only received two bids on this. We were, we made a bid, we made an offer for I think it was six, six riggs right? Six harnesses, six mains and six reserves just for a, you know, prototype system or whatever. The bids came back, we only got one from paraflight, we got one from North American Aerodynamics which is the chute shop, it's just another name for the chute shop in Flemmington, New Jersey. Their bid came back lower so that's the ones we had to go with. They're the manufacturers of the, the uh... Parafoil 252 square feet and uh... so we ended up going towards the chute shop or North American I should say.

John Higgins was the president and there was a lot of telephone conversation with him and bla bla bla. They were also working on a military system just like paraflight, you know, the piggy-back, two large Ramair canopies with the same type of uh... mission that the Army wanted it for. So essentially that's what we ended up doing. We ended up buying, I think we only got uh... oh I can't remember, I think, I guess we did get six. I don't know if it was six or four. Anyway we did get, I think it was only four uh... of their riggs to evaluate for that next, next summer. We made arrangements, we had spent the money and was essentially in their hand as to what they were going to give us. We told them what we wanted it for.

O.K., that was our first uh... whatever you want to call it, first attempt at looking at this system and what they sent us was a uh... not really a very good system for uh... for our use. I look at it now, I look back now knowing all I've learned about parachutes, skydiver riggs, whatever and it was a very, very unsafe system, especially with the type of application we were using. I don't know how much you want me to get into... this
could go on for hours if you really want to get into it.

JH Oh just the basics.

RL Well, the system was not very compatible. Uh... it worked fine as far as opening shots out of a slow moving aircraft like the Grumman Goose which we were using a lot then. And, but out of the Vopar, because of the uniqueness of where the deployment system was, it would cause very hard opening shocks and very unsafe deployment. The canopy was essentially free packed in the container, the reefing system was not, was not a sale sign, or the pilot chute was the reefing system and it had a real long uh... bridle or reefing line which, in my opinion, had a great, tremendous potential of entanglement during the deployment and we eventually had an incident like that with Matt Kelly.

So we realized that uh... hey, this system is not going to work and it was about this time that uh... we'd also gotten exposed to the Russian Drogue system and we... Jim come up with the idea of possibly using the drogue deployment system they used for this Ramair, Ramair parachute. So that's what we pursued and essentially it was left up to us to develop our own ideas on this and there was, there was a lot of stuff that took place. The first drogue we looked at we were using a pilot chute off of a 100 foot cargo chute you know, and uh... I won't go into any details on this cause it would take forever.

But essentially that's what happened. We, we uh... that fall and winter I spent a whole lot of work on coming up with a uh... with a system that would work, would work with a drogue. We still approached North American with this, this philosophy, that look, your present system will not work, we want to go this way and we physically sent them uh... equipment that we designed and wanted like this, but they failed to take advantage of that and they went on their own and they sent us [inaudible] riggs or canopies the following summer, quite a few more in fact and they were paid money for developing a system that would work using the Russian Drogue and they came up with absolutely nothing that was compatible. Their harnesses and containers that they sent to us we could not use at all. We had to totally shit can em. The canopies we did eventually use uh... cause they were, they were O.K. They're not as good as what we use now but they're, we're still using them. They're bigger, they're bulkier, hard to work with.

But anyway, so what essentially happened after that was that we approached Paraflight and we sent them an example of a harness and container system using the drogue, using a reserve with a lot of neat, nifty ideas that I developed and they picked up on it. They... that following year they made us six riggs. Harnesses, the uh... the main containers I think we made, just the harness and the reserves they made and sent to us and we eventually used that system with a lot more refinements now and that's what we're using today, and we're working exclusively with Paraflight because they're giving us the best canopy performance wise. They've also given us the best cooperation as far as, you know, development and stuff like that and uh... our last group of canopies we bought, we were able to get from them because no one
else could get cheaper or provide the type of performance we wanted. They now have a much bigger canopy which is even better yet and it looks like it's going to be our standard. It's a great big 375-foot Goliath. So that's kind of how it, how it developed. There's a lot more to it than that but uh... I wouldn't want to get into it.

JH But a lot of that technology was developed by smokejumpers up here from the BLM?

RL Almost all of it was, was done right here uh... all the various little problems we ran up against we had to solve ourself. Essentially all that the manufacturer provided was the canopies and the uh... the TSOing uh... giving us a canopy that had all ready been TSOed so could fulfill the FAA requirements. But as far as the deployment uh... the design of how it works, the design of the harness and container system, it was all done by us and right now we manufacture everything except the canopies. All of the, well we don't manufacture the drogues anymore. We got Strong Enterprises this last winter to make our first contracted uh... drogue manufacturing which, the drogue is such that it's real hard to make, it's very complicated so a manufacturer can do a much easier job. We don't have the manpower, you know, we've done it. The first group that drogues were used was made by us. But we were having trouble with falling control and consistency so it's better of to do it this way.

But everything else, the reserve container, the harnesses, the main container, everything was made right here, developed, figured out and whatever. We've had numerous problems developed with it that we've had to solve. Nothing to cause any, any uh... you know, fatality or I shouldn't say fatality uh... reserve rights, directly anyway, but uh... you know, something would come back damaged and we'd have to look at it, why'd that happen, oh yeah, we'll have to change this. This went on for a lot of, a lot of years until we come up with the final configuration. But not it's a pretty nifty system. We're still, still got a lot of refinements we've got to work out on. I think the next two or three years we'll be a real, top-notch, you know, simple, easy to wear, the whole works, you know. It's an on going development project really.

JH Looking back over the last 20 years that you've been involved with the jumpers, can you detect a change in the philosophy of the jumper organization or in the types of personnel that are coming up here?

RL Yes, uh... it's changed considerably, both attitude and the personnel. Uh... I think, probably in the early 70's, there was a, there was a uh... a bad attitude I think, don't give a shit type attitude that was, was developing, you know. People would go out on fires and not really give shit whether they put them out, you know, right away or whatever, you know and try to stay out there forever. And it was just a general, you know, Alaska is a good deal, go up there and make as much money as you can and
get by with what minimum amount of work you have to do.

And I think that's changed a lot and I think Al Dutton probably was one of the major contributing personnel's, personalities to have that come about. There was a lot of, through his charisma or whatever you want to call it, he was able to instill a uh... desire for the infant jumpers. He went down to the GS-6 level to, to do a lot better job than what had been done in the past and that plus a real strong uh... job of recruiting, good people, uh... trying to get rookies, trying to get them trained, of course, the way we wanted them to instead of trying to, there was an awful lot of people from the... I think the attitude was, down South the Forest Service jumpers if they got fed up with the way that they Forest Service were running their programs they could always come up to Alaska where it was, you know, real lax and you could just pretty much do what you wanted to. Well, I think we, especially the last, I'd say seven, eight years, we've tried to get more people from right here, you know, coming up through the Hot Shots and stuff like that and if you were to look over the past three or four years at the personalities, people that we've got working with us now, they're much younger, but they really are top quality people.

And it also works along these line; in a group of rookies, it seems like the people that excel are not necessarily the ones that are super physically qualified, you know, we have a very rigorous rookie program as far as physical training. But uh... it's the guys that really want it bad enough that will put out that much more and will make it through the training. It's strange, these same people also turn out to be the people that produce the best performance as far as, you know, doing the job too, you know. It's an attitude thing more than anything. If the person doesn't have the right attitude, he's not going to make it through the physical training part and he's not going to do well as far as the overall organization, as far as getting out and doing the job, excelling in leadership and whatever you want to call it. So I think that's changed a lot in the past ten years for sure. There's not, the type of people out there, the bulk of the jumpers are much more professional, give a shit type attitude. They want to do a good job and they do their damndest to do it. That's one of the biggest changes I think's happened in the past ten years.

JH It seems like uh... anymore there is a pretty hard cadre of semi-professional smokejumpers in the lower 48. People who basically do nothing else but jump. It's not uncommon to find 10, 15 year experience jumpers. Is that the same up here?

RL Yeah, I think uh... that's probably true. I think if you were to do a uh... you know, run through all the jumpers and figure out an average age, it's probably going to be up in the mid-30's somewhere. There's a lot of guys that come back year after year uh... and I think that's probably gotten more prevalent in the last five, six years than it has before that. Uh... people are just wanting to come back and not necessarily just jump for a couple of years until they get out of college and then go on to something else. But, yeah, I don't if it's just
because this outfit is turning into such a professionally run or professional outfit that they feel like it is a good place to work. But that's the, I think that's probably the reason that this is happening is the desire to make it into a, keep it that way.

JH How many jumps do you have?

RL I don't know, I really don't. I have ... I stopped keeping track, probably 250 plus, I guess. I know how many skydives I have but I don't know how many ... [laughs] how many smokejumper type jumps I've had. There was... there's probably a lot of it that didn't even get recorded also during all this development. Ramair jumps I'm sure because there wasn't ... a lot of times when there, we didn't fill out any spotter reports, you know, we were just pressed for time and stuff but...

JH Have any idea how many fire jumps?

RL No. [laughs]

JH Can you remember any unique fire jumps or fun situations?

JH Well, I can remember a lot of the ones that happened in the 60's. I can still remember all those because they made such a strong impression, but, ah, from about 1970 - 71 on... they're all... they've all run together... uh... no... I can pro... the ones this year, but, uh... [laughs]

[INTERUPTION]

JH Were you ever involved in any aircraft or helicopter incidents that might have been a little spooky?

RL Yes, not too bad but... uh... oh I had a hard landing in a helicopter one time down by Neenanna. Al Dutton was on board too, in fact he was the guy in charge. It wasn't all that serious... could have been. It was a situation where you had a fire in a... uh... slash pile at a lumber yard and they needed assistance so we went down there. It wasn't all that bad apparently, but we decided to land there and check it out. Unaware to us there was, uh... about ten inches of real fine dirt or whatever you want to call it in the area we decided to land in so... plus there was huge piles of lumber all around there. So, when the helicopter came down to land of course that's the first thing that happened was this dust just came up just... and we went high far like that [snaps his fingers] and were about probably 25 feet off the ground, somewhere in that vicinity. So the pilot immediately lost visibility... and, and then he did the only thing he could do... he set it down as quick as he could, and we hit pretty hard, spread the skids, but nobody was injured. It... uh... it could have been a lot more serious if he'd a tired anything else... if we'd a drifted into any of those piles of lumber. That's one, uh... oh, I had... a... the vertical cable get ripped out of an airplane, a DC 3, once on a cargo run;
that was pretty minor, no big deal there. But, uh... had a
little... had a scare in a Vopar one time during a practice jump
right up here at Birch Hill, and that was, uh... I believe the
reason that happened was very, very turbulent air caused by a
localized thunder storm, and I think what happened was we were on
a streamer run and we were actually jumping into the party... pig
party... had come back from McGrath or someplace like that. And
we were on a streamer run and the airplane hit this real
turbulent air over the top of Birch Hill, and the first thing it
did was it, uh... it rolled up into a roll 90 degrees to the
right, maybe a little bit past... past, uh... 90 and shaking it
your know... it was like the airplane stalled. The pilot
immediately, you know, put power into it and dove down and pulled
out of it, and then it happened again that thing rolled
completely inverted. At least it appeared to me to be inverted
by looking out the window... and, uh... the pilot was able to,
uh... recover, you know, and we were... we were not anywhere near
any kind of a, uh... you know, dangerous speed, we were on at
that time I think we were using 95 knots for a streamer pass were
from jump run. And, knowing the pilot that was flying it, a very
competent pilot, uh... I seriously doubt if it was, uh... if he
was, you know, pushing it for any reason because there was no
need for it. But, uh... that's probably the scariest situation
because of the... we were low altitude, you know, and if it had
gone inverted or if he had lost control of it, it would have been
a pretty serious... it would have been fatalities... total,
everybody. But that's the only one I can think of that was,
uh... anything, uh... you know, close call type thing.

JH  You ever been injured?

RL  Oh, the only injury I've ever had that I can recall was a
sprained ankle, uh... on a jump, a fire jump, where I came down
in timber and, uh... hit this... hit a branch on a tree real
hard, it sprained the ankle... had to be brought off the fire,
but that was, you know, it was a minor injury... I was... I
could have been back to work, uh... probably within a week. I
ended up going into dispatch because they needed somebody in
there, but, uh... it wasn't because of the injury. That's the
only injury that I can recall getting in smokejumping, you know,
that's anything result of this, you know that amounted to
anything. I've never had anything beyond that.

JH  Can you think of anything you'd like to add?

RL  [laughs] Oh, I could probably think of a lot of things if
I'd sit around and thought for awhile, uh... no... your going to
have to...

JH  I think that's... we're running out of tape. Well thank you
very much, Ron.

END OF INTERVIEW