The following transcript is a scan of the original and has not been edited. For additional assistance, please contact Archives and Special Collections.
Interview of Wayne R. Webb by Kim Taylor on July 22, 1984, for Smokejumpers Oral History Project. OH #133-111.

KT This is Kim Taylor interviewing Wayne Webb at the University of Montana Archives, July 22, 1984, for the Smokejumper Oral History Project. Can you give us a brief biographical sketch?

WW Well, I was born in Weiser, Idaho and, uh, went through high school there in Weiser we were born... or lived on a ranch twelve miles out of town. I had to drive into high school, in town, twelve miles all four years. I went into the service shortly after graduating from high school... volunteered for the paratroops, went through basic training at Fort Benning, Georgia, was shipped overseas as a replacement to Europe, wound up in the 517th parachute infantry battalion... or regiment... I'm sorry... I was in the headquarters company as a radioman in the service. Came out of the service in 1945 and the Forest Service was hiring civilian smokejumpers or paratroopers as I thought of them in those days, at that time. I applied through the ranger at Weiser, who worked for the Forest Service, and he got me in contact with... the foreman at McCall at that time was Lloyd Johnson, and uh, for some reason he evidently liked the looks of me or something but he hired me along with, ah, 32 other people for that summer and, uh, that was the starting of my smokejumping career. I worked my entire thirty years at the McCall base. I was grounded from jumping for a short period of time because of the forty year age limit that came into effect. On my fortieth birthday... I had made two fire jumps that summer. I jumped on Tuesday and my name came up on the roster on Saturday and I was too old, I couldn't jump anymore. So, I was grounded as I said for the rest of that summer and then the age limit was lifted in 1973. I got reborn and had three more seasons until I retired in August of 1975 and briefly that's what I done.

KT And what have you been doing since you retired?

WW We have a trailer that we go to Yuma, Arizona in the wintertime and then come back to McCall and spend the summers there... in McCall. Oh, during that thirty years I was, ah, elevated to a loft foreman... well, I'd better go back to the start. I started in the 1946 and 1947 since we were, ah, all new outfit, they needed squad leaders and I was selected to be one off the squad leader trainees in 1947... evidently passed the probationary period because I've been a squad leader then until I was... assumed the foreman duties of the parachute loft in, ah, 1950 when our parachute loft foreman, one of the original two civilian jumpers at the McCall base, got his degree in engineering and went on into forest engineering, left that slot open and I assumed that position as loft foreman in 1950 and continued in that until I retired in 1975, along with being the Region 4 parachute technician. That part of my career probably is one of the most, ah, satisfying from my personal point of view in that I was involved with the design... manufacture of new equipment, taking advantage of new technology and new materials as they came out and we got to redesign the jumpsuits and the
parachutes and all of the related equipment that we worked with. I was responsible for the manufacture and repair and care of the equipment at the McCall base for all those years.

KT How did you go about altering the design?

WW Uh, we, uh... most all of us that had jump for awhile had some pet designs that we thought might improve the equipment. For example, we would always be trying to lighten the load for carrying back off of the fires. In the earlier days before the advent of helicopters into our retrieval, most of our retrieval was by our own shoulders carrying the pack off. So, we were continually looking to lighten the load but the necessary equipment that we had to have for protection and for doing the job and putting the fire out. But, that along with the idea that after you smashed into Mother Earth a couple of times a little rapidly you try to lessen the impact by improving the design of the parachute itself. I was instrumental in several changes and got to participate in the workshops where some of these changes evolved through the combination of ideas by the technicians all getting together every three... four years.

KT How did they go about experimenting some of these new designs?

WW Well, ah... in the earlier days we would call the chief's office... the Chief of Fire Control and they would give us approval. Then they instituted the Missoula Equipment Development Center, which had the overall control of new equipment and all fire related equipment and then they had the control. They could either assume the project themselves or give us the go ahead to experiment within certain guidelines and try something new. But, most of it was pretty well curtailed after MEC (Missoula Equipment Development Center), ah, became involved because they were set up primarily as a test unit to try new equipment and new materials. I think, ah, possibly through the years there was a little provincial jealousy developed. They didn't want anybody infringing on their capabilities or their responsibilities. So, for several years we had a tough time trying to make anything new go, except through the workshops, which were conducted by MEC and all the combined units throughout the Forest Service.

KT Now you were jumping at this time as well?

WW Yes.

KT Right?

WW Yes, I jumped until my fortieth birthday, as I said and then I was grounded. At that time I retained my duties as loft foreman and parachute technician, also, as an active spotter, dropping para... ah, smokejumpers to fires. In addition I acquired several other duties as regional air attack boss, got on the original fire team out of Ogden, Utah and was sent to several major fires throughout the whole west as air attack or division
boss or whatever capacity that I was qualified for at the time. I also got to go to Alaska on several different occasions, while I was grounded from jumping, as either a parachute rigger or, ah... maybe a sew shop operator or kind of coordinator, if you want to call it that and also on some safety inspection tours. I went to in Fairbanks at the request of the BLM... cause they'd... I'd got these folks at the workshops throughout the years and evidently I had something that they thought they wanted. I told Al Dutton one time that all he needed was a little confidence up there with some of his people and he said "Yes, but we'd like you to hand carry it up here, if you would please." (laugh). That made me feel pretty good.

KT Now, how did you feel about this forty year old age limit at that time, when you turned forty?

WW Well, we... when several of us throughout the Forest Service smokejumper project, in all the different bases started approaching that age, well even ten years before that we had done everything we could to get that restriction removed and I don't know what else we could have done but it took the Civil Rights Act of 1964, I think, probably seven years to filter down to the smokejumper program so that we... that was one of the civil rights that, in our opinion anyway, that was discrimination on account of age and as long as we were physically capable we felt that we should go ahead and use our expertise that we gained through the years to continue as doing the best job that the unit could put out.

KT Now during those seven years that you weren't jumping, did you feel that you would be jumping again?

WW No, I didn't. I thought that was it, that forty years age limit was going to stick because as the years went on, after three or four years... I thought up to that time, well this is just going to be a temporary thing, I'll be back jumping before I probably am ready for it. I'd have to get back into shape and all of that. Well, I really never got that far out of shape but it's a little tougher if you know your going to be banging on a hillside. So, as the years went by though, when it got up to sixth or seventh it was a real pleasant surprise when they did remove that restriction and all of us that were still involved in the project and had the information were very happy that they had finally seemed fit to allow us to make the decision when we were no longer physically capable.

KT How did that first jump feel after that seven years?

WW That was one of the best feelings I'd had in seven years, and it was great! I've still got a picture of one of my fellow jumpers. He hadn't been grounded for any length of time. He was about a fifth or sixth year man, and as I landed and stood up and raised the face mask on my helmet, he has a picture of me and the grin is clear from helmet to helmet, it was... I still have that picture and it's one of my... my fond pictures that I have. We
had... a lot of good people came through there and fortunately I got to meet and rubbed off some of the qualities of many people that came through the McCall base and my associations with the other bases also.

KT OK... going back a little bit, you had some paratrooper experience before you were a smokejumper but can you kind of compare the two experiences?

WW Well, there's a completely different concept or, ah... I should say, ultimate goal in the two types of jumping. The military is a mass entrance of a bunch of people on the ground in the same area. The equipment was designed for that. It wasn't designed to get a small number of people... in the smaller the number the more important it becomes that none of them are unable to do their job after they get there. When you have a battalion jump, for example, a casualty figure of say five percent was completely acceptable to the military. Therefore, they weren't really that much concerned about the continued improvement, until later years, with the equipment. The protective equipment for the military was almost zero. There was, ah, very little done to protect the physical body of the man from landing on the ground. Jump boots and helmet was about the extent of it. The parachutes, of course, through the years developed and improved somewhat. They went from a twenty-eight foot flat type to a thirty-five foot parabolic shaped canopy, to try to lessen the impact of the people getting onto the ground. That helped quite markedly in reducing the amount of injuries that the military had. As I said, their philosophy of getting a mass of people on the ground in one place, as opposed to the Forest Service getting a very few selected people into a very selected area to do a specific job, is entirely different. Their concepts are miles apart. As far as the training part itself, the only similarities, possibly, and those were even different, was the physical fitness program of both units. That's in my opinion of course. The military stressed, ah, probably more than the Forest Service the lung capacity. We had long runs. The graduation run from B stage was a twelve mile run, at double time, in step with the entire company. Where with the Forest Service it's an overall physical program where we test the arm strength, the lung capacity, the leg strength, and the entire body because there is a variety of jobs that you have to do after you get on the ground. In the military all you had to do was get on the road and go from here to there to take your objective and fire a couple of shots on the way.

KT Did you ever experience any injuries when you were a paratrooper?

WW Not as a paratrooper in the military, no.

KT How about as a smokejumper?

WW Yes. I've had several, ah, knocks and bruises. The only serious injury that I sustained was on my eighty-ninth jump,
which was a fire jump. I tore up my shoulder, I... with a severe oscillation picked up on a gust of ground wind that was unforeseen. Nobody else in a plane load of eight jumpers out of a Ford trimotor was injured but just myself. But, as I recall it... of course things maybe changed a little bit through the years, but the first thing that touched Mother Earth was my right elbow, and the full oscillation was as I was coming in on a twenty-eight foot canopy. And as a result of that, two years later I had my shoulder practically rebuilt. I went back jumping the following summer and in the course of a summer and a half, my shoulder jumped out of place four more times and so I decided that's... that's enough. The last time it came out, it was on a job. I was working stacking parachutes into a bin and got it in the right position. It snapped out and the injury was such that once it went out I had to go under sedation and have a doctor put it back in, because it just wouldn't go back in like a normal trick shoulder would go back in. So each one of those trips to the doctor... after four of them I figured that was enough. So they reconstructed it and put a pin in there and the hold things back together.

KT Now, how did they get you off the fire after you hurt your shoulder?

WW I walked about a half a mile down to the, ah... jeep road, that they had driven a jeep up. The ground crew came in after we were there... oh I would guess... as I remember it now, this was in 1952, there was probably a half hour after I was on the ground that the ground crew came up to the fire and the closest they could get to us was about a half a mile, on this jeep road. I walked down there carrying my arm in the other hand and got on the jeep and carried it all the way back down to Council, Idaho where... with the nearest hospital and that was probably, on this jeep road, as I remember it, about five miles. It was just a pioneer jeep road, not anything fancy. Then we got to improved gravel road for about ten miles and then a paved road for the remainder of the distance into Council. I went to the hospital and they gave me a shot of pentithal and told me to start counting and I counted three numbers and woke up about three days later.

KT Well, when you first started smokejumping, what was the first big fire you can remember?

WW The first big fire? Well, I was on several. The year 1946 we had several project fires out of the McCall base. Ah, the one of the most memorable, of course, is my first firejump, the first one that I made. That was on the middle fork of the Salmon, on the Salmon National Forest. There were three of us that jumped to a 9.2 acre fire and then we packed our gear down to the middle fork of the Salmon, which is about four miles straight down. We were up on the ridge on the east side of the river. The packer brought a string of pack mules from the nearest roadhead, which is eighteen miles down to where he could get to the river on the other side. He brought a surplus rubber raft from the military,
a little yellow rubber survival raft, rode across the swollen middle fork... this was June 28 when we were retrieved off of there, so the river was running pretty high. We rode across and ferried us and our gear, one at a time, across the river, got on the pack string eighteen miles down to his truck and then I believe it was sixty-four miles from there to Salmon, Idaho. That was my first fire. On the way out from that fire... well right on the fire itself we saw wildlife and I thought, "Boy this is really living, out here." We saw mountain sheep, came right up to our fire while we were working on it. Chances are that if they had seen humans they were at a distance and they didn't know what we were and we weren't too sure what they were but we figured out that they were mountain sheep. We saw an elk and deer and several game birds, grouse, and partridge and different types and it was just... I thought this was the greatest thing that had ever happened to me. As you get out there, especially after working, ah... ah, reasonably hard, it was a pretty good fire, about... a little over nine acres, then the pack down off of the hill was actually more work than the fire itself, because we ran into some pretty steep country, rocky bluffs and that type of thing. I kept my pack intact all the way back to McCall and put it on the scales. It was one hundred and twenty-eight pounds. That's one of the reasons why we kept trying to reduce the equipment and my pack was just one of three that came off of the fire. There were several other memorable fires I've.... really large fires in the McCall area. The first year of project fires, you might say was 1949, which was a bad fire everywhere in the northwest and I either jumped to or spotted people on seven fires that we had going at one time, on the Payette National Forest, in the month of August. I jumped one of them twice, the Circle N fire on the south fork of the Salmon River and we jumped it, ah... or I spotted the two jumpers on the initial fire, which was about a half acre and it was in grass country and the wind came up and away it went. About ten days later I jumped in with a crew of eighteen on one spur of the fire to seal of a ridge to keep the fire from going on down the river. Through the years that's about the story, that's the way it was. You jumped on a fire, if you didn't get it the first time you might have to go back in again the next time.

KT What was one of your most pleasant fire experiences?

WW Well, I think just being out there was, uh... there was another time, ah, a little two man fire, where we had a pretty tough little fire for two men, and we were in a remote area and our instructions were to wait for the pack string, cause that was too far to carry your packs, and it was twenty-two miles to the nearest airport, which was in the middle of, what is now the Bitterroot No Return Wilderness Area, Chamlin Basin. We put the fire out that first afternoon, got it down to uh... by working pretty good there. We jumped a just shortly after daylight in the morning, had the fire out early, saw our last smoke about three in the afternoon, and it was a day and a half before the packer got into retrieve us. We just laid out there on the hill and watched nature happen all around us and that was... that was
really great. We saw a lot of animals on that one. Deer came right up within twenty feet of us. A bear with her cub came up through a berry patch just around the hill. We heard them talking to each other and walked around, watched them come up through the berry patch. Just being out there among the natures, it was really nice.

KT Now, most of the guys that got hired on in 1946, were they... most of them veterans too?

WW Uh, yes. I'd say probably about thirty-three men, who went to work in 1946... I can only recall, off hand, two of them that weren't veterans. There may have been another one or two that wasn't but... two is the only two that come to mind right now that weren't veterans. We had uh... not necessarily paratroopers, there were only about... out of the thirty-three, about ten were ex-paratroopers. The rest of them were Navy pilots, just good old infantrymen, tankers and the armored columns, the armored tanks. Oh, just you name it, we had a cross section of the military practically. We had one fellow, we still call him 'Ace', he was a navy flier. I don't know that he ever got out of the United States, but since he was the only actual combat flier we had, he was 'Ace'. He still is.

KT What kind of feelings generated in the crews after the Man Gulch fire?

WW Well, I think that as far as the McCall unit was concerned, there was no change in the attitude there because that was all part of the risk and it had nothing at all to do with the jumping part of it. That could happen to anybody and at that time we were starting to pick up firefighters with experience to become trainee smokejumpers. In fact, that became one of the requirements just a few years later, after that Mann Gulch deal, was the firefighting experience. So, each of them that had been on a fire situation, knew the potential of that same thing happening to them. The only... probably... as far as the spotters, which I was one of course, at that time, as far as our attitude toward the Man Gulch disaster was that we were a little more cautious about getting directly above a fire in that same type of situation, and we do have a lot of that same type country in the Salmon River breaks and the Hell's Canyon area, where the grass slopes take off at a tremendous rate. But, we had all been there before, all of the spotters at that time had actually been on the fire. Had been on one my first year, 1946, one of the... I'm not sure what number now, I have it in my book at home, but it was probably number six or seven fire jump. It was in Hell's Canyon, on a grass fire and the fire was leaping out ahead of the grass as far as two hundred yards before it would touch down and start a new fire going on up from that point, but we just made sure that we weren't out in front of it, whenever possible. On those type fires we would back off to the side and then start working from the bottom up, more or less, pinching it off, quite similar to what the crews did when it started up the hill on Sentinel mountain yesterday. Because there's... as long as the
fire is running, generating its own speed... and the heat up in front of those fires is tremendous. I've been on a few smaller fires where we had a chance to stop them by getting into the lead and trying to knock down the grass before it got away from us and got into something that we couldn't handle. We'd go in and maybe in, uh, two or three minute stints, go in and hit it as fast as you could, for as long as you could stand it, then go back out to get a breath of air, then maybe rotate, if we had more than one person in the area. There were a couple of times, one that I recall from talking about this, I'm rambling on here but, uh... it was a fire that I was on in Silver... or out of Silver City, on the Gila National Forest, and it was a grass fire. It was running fairly good by the time we got down to it, but there were only four of us on the fire and at that time it was probably two acres, so we just kind of spread out from the four corners and tried to pinch it off. Well, the wind shifted a little bit and my corner started going right at me, so I had to get in and out and it was a matter of probably ten minutes before one of my partners saw the problem I was having and worked his way up to where he could come in and rotate with me, and we did stop the fire and then... proud of that type of accomplishment through the years, we always did the best we could with what we had and sometimes it turned the tide and sometimes it wasn't quite enough. We can look back... or I can, and all the people that were in it for any length of time and pick out several cases where they did save, uh... whether it's that valuable or not, maybe it was just more grass, who knows. It might have gone on and cost millions of dollars, like some of them have.

KT What...

WW Go ahead, I'm sorry.

KT What was it about smokejumping that made you want to stick with it for so long?

WW Well, I think, ah, once you become a smokejumper, even with just one season, you develop, uh, I guess a closeness to the people you're working with because you are in rather hazardous situations, not only just with the jumping but on the fire itself. The jumpers are a little bit different in that they have, especially in the first twenty years, we didn't have that good of communications back with anybody on the outside, so we were on our own. If anything developed that we couldn't handle, we had to figure out some way to get a handle on it because there was no way to get any help without quite a lot of effort and a lot of time expiring. One of the cases in point was, ah, my second fire jump, I felt it was a fire jump, after I had made the one over on the Middlefork, we got back to McCall and we had a couple of little lightning fires that came through on the second of July but nothing... or not very much came out of the storm so everybody got the 4th of July off. At one o'clock we got the call that one of the men that had jumped on the second, or on the third of July, I'm sorry, had become injured and they needed some help. So, we jumped in the pickup, went to the airport, flew to
Council, picked up some blood plasma, and were jumping on the fire and as I recall it know, this could be wrong, but I think it was twenty-eight minutes from the time the phone rang at the parachute loft, but nobody was working. So we just got the people who were there in camp. There were six of us that wound up jumping from the Ford. The last spotter or the man that spotted us was our foreman Lloyd Johnson, and he spotted himself and the last man and the pilot pulled the static line back in. But, we were on the ground... we had got to the ground, and what had happened, they were sawing a big pine tree down, it was burning about two thirds of the way up. In those days there were no chain saws, it was crosscut saw so we always had three people on the ground when this happened and the one that was standing off to the side watching the top of the tree hollered that it's coming down, so the two men sawing took their escape routes, that they had picked, and started running, and one of them tripped and fell. At least that's what we surmised because one of his ankles was sprained quite badly but the top of the tree hit the ground in upright... in the upright position, where it had burned off of the tree and then fell over and a stab of the tree hit him in the back of the head hinging part of the skull into the brain. It didn't kill him but he died on the operating table about two days later, after we got him off of the hill. The six of us jumped in, administered the blood plasma, put him on the stretcher and carried him about three miles across country to a trail where the ground party, lead by the doctor that we had picked up the blood plasma from in Council, met us at the trail. Three of the jumpers that were dropped in and the... to get the word, I skipped over that part of it... this happened late in the evening, just before dark. So, the two extra men that were on the fire stayed with the injured man overnight but he was unconscious all of the time... not completely subdued because he would move around and try to help himself but he was unconscious. Then, one of them left at daylight to make his way down to the road, hitchhiked into town and called us. The other one stayed with him and he was still there when we got there. After we got the injured man to the trail, we went back to the fire and the three of us then finished up the job putting the fire out. That was in 1946, and that was Lester Licklima. There are several other people who have told the story and one of them asked me about it and he said he had made some statements that weren't quite correct as he remembered them but they're in your tapes also. That was Lester Licklima, he was from the Meridian, Idaho area and he was killed.... he died the following morning, the 5th of July after we got him to the operating table. These are as I remember the incidents that happened on that particular case.

KT How did that seem to affect the crew?

WW That was just part of a job we were on, had nothing to do with the jumping as far as that goes. All of them, uh... I think the whole crew went to his funeral and we missed him. He was a good fellow, had gone through the training with us and was one of us and we missed him like we'd miss any friend. But as far as
affecting our job or mental outlook toward the job, I think it had nothing... no affect at all. Or at least that would be my assessment of the situation. Through the years I have been involved in several other rescue operations in addition to my fire jumps. I have two that were out and out rescue operations. The ones that I have listed as fire jumps, three of those were originally rescue missions but they turned into fire jumps because I stayed and put the fire out, as I did with that first one in 1946. That's listed as a fire jump.

KT Now were all those rescue jumps attending to smokejumpers that had been injured while jumping?

WW No. Several of those were to plane crashes in our back country there. We were the first call as far as the... ah, what is now medic evac which, ah... the unit in McCall now works in conjunction with the military on Mount Home as far as removing victims or rescuing people, who are injured in that type of situation. There is a vast area in the River Of No Return Wilderness where accessibility is quickest by parachute. That was where the function of McCall base comes in. They do a lot... or I shouldn't say a lot, but they are on call for that type of work. I jumped to, I believe now that it's four plane wrecks, four plane crashes to either help the survivors or remove the deceased and that is not one of my favorite jobs.

KT Well you jumped for almost thirty years and during that time what are some of the most radical changes in the outfit that you noticed?

WW Well, probably if you compared the equipment in 1946 to the equipment in 1984 that would be physically the biggest change that's happened in the parachute project. However, I think another change, in my mind, equally as important, or maybe even more so, is the mental attitude that has changed through the years and it is not only in the jumpers. I see it through any other walk of life. It's not... in with the early days, at least the work ethic, if you want to call it that... the people were proud of the accomplishments that they were able to put out, by either putting out a fire, building a house, building a road, whatever their job was, they were proud of the finished product, in most cases. They did the best they could and would be glad to put their name on it and sign it. Now, to me, this is my opinion of course, the attitude isn't, "Let's do the best job we can, let's get this job over with and go on and do something else that I like better." Especially if you don't like the job. I don't believe there is the pride in accomplishment and the... well, I'll say the esprit for the good of the corps, at the bottom of their intentions, that there was in the earlier days. But that, as I said, is not only in the jumpers, it's throughout the entire United States society, in my opinion because it's so much easier now to become eligible for unemployment insurance and sit back and make almost as much, or in some cases more than if you were out working on a job somewhere. So, I think our own society has brought this on by making it too easy to do nothing,
rather than to do something and be proud of it. That's... be a little philosophical here, that has nothing to do with the smokejumpers project.

KT Who are some of the more memorable people that you worked with?

WW Well, if I could name about 1500 people, they'd probably be them. There were a lot of them, a lot of people. Some of the people that I admire for their attitudes and capabilities, I'd hate to single out any one person, there have been so many but probably people like... I'll just name a few.... Dick Tracy, for example, who is retired as a project foreman; Hal Samsel, who... that was the loft foreman at Missoula for years; Al Cramer (Albert Cramer), one of his predecessors and then later on he was the foreman of the Fairbanks unit, for the BLM; Jack Nash, for his capabilities under conditions that not a lot of people would have stayed around that long. He was one of the prime movers in keeping the pride in good accomplishments, as far as the parachute rigging part of the program, one of the original loft foreman here at Missoula. My mentor, who says the first year when we lined up down at McCall, after we had gotten through training, he says, "You, you, and you are going to go work in the loft and learn how to pack parachutes." He was the squad leader who was in charge of the parachute loft, at that time, John Ferguson (John T. Ferguson). He also made the first fire jump in Region 4, in 1943, when they started the base down there. But, he was my mentor, you might say. He was the one that took me by the collar and forced me into the parachute loft and what has turned out to be a... I think a good career. I'm proud of all the work that I did and the accomplishments that I had a hand in. It was a good life and it gave me a retirement that I won't get rich on but I can live on it and I'm having a ball!

KT Now how many jumps have you done?

WW I had for the Forest Service, 283 jumps. 177 of those were fire jumps and then two out and out rescue jumps on top of that. Some of the fire jumps, as I said were combination rescue and fire. I counted them as fire on my list. Some of the practice jumps that we made actually were as rough or even tougher than some of the fire jumps. For years in the McCall base, the graduating jump for the new men in class, their seventh training jump, was a simulated fire. We'd ring the buzzer at 6 o'clock in the morning and it was actually a fire jump to a training fire that had been set earlier that morning by some of the squad leaders or whoever was in charge of setting the fire. The trainees would have to go through the entire routine of a regular fire jump and with the only difference that the trainers and the squad leaders were standing around behind the trees or in front of them watching the progress to see what they did. If they made any mistakes or glaring mistakes, they could jump right on them and show them why or whatever and that was the only difference between a real fire jump and that. So, some of my
training jumps were actually fire jumps also, if you want to classify them as that. We called them training jumps because we had pre-selected the spot. That would be the only difference between that and a fire jump. Now on some of my fire jumps, I jumped on a spot that I had been to previously on another fire and you're... ahead of that some, uh.... I think through the years, my 177 fire jumps, there are ten places that I have been on twice. I have that all written down in my records that I have at home but I don't have those with me but I believe it's ten of those that I jumped the second time in the same spot. So, I knew where the rocks were anyway.

KT What kind of mishaps did you have with your jumps?

WW Personally?

KT Did you ever have any trouble with your chute?

WW I had two inversions, complete inversions. There was no lack of drag on my parachute because the full canopy was inflated. They were just inside out. Those were both with the FS-5 canopy. In the earlier years when it first came out, before the netting skirt was added around the bottom to cut down on that happening, I had two of those. The first one was accidental, on a fire jump. I went out of a Beech aircraft. We used no step at the McCall base at that time, and I slipped with one hand as I pushed off from the floor and kind of rolled over on my left shoulder instead of being vertical, up and down, facing the tip of the wing like I like to have my position. I rolled on my left shoulder and when I looked up my parachute was backwards and I had a fairly tight spot. It was a probably 25 yards long and maybe ten yards wide that we were trying to get into. Well, after I took one look at the canopy and saw this loss in front, I started really checking around for alternate places and there weren't any so I backed it into a spot by maneuvering the parachute backwards. The second one that had happened was that same year about four fire jumps later. We had a big drop spot, where we had a lot of room to play with, it was on a larger fire too, and they were backed off away from the fire. So, I tried to get that same position out of the aircraft, on purpose. I did almost identical, with the identical results. I had an inversion again, the same way but I had no problem getting down to the larger spot. That was uh... at workshops after that, I expounded on that theory that body position was important, in as far as malfunctions of the parachute that we had at that time. There were other factors involved, I'm sure, but that was one of the factors. The only one that I had control of, that I could duplicate and it was just my luck that I got it. I tried to and did it.

[END OF SIDE A]

[BEGIN SIDE B]

KT Did you ever have any problems with a let down?
No. No problems of any kind. I made several let downs. Well in fact I made, uh... actually on fire jumps, 15 let downs. There were two of them that were less than three feet from the ground and with the old snap and v-ring hookup on the shoulder between the harness and the parachute. I couldn't get out without going through the let down procedure, at least a portion of it. So, I counted those as let downs too. There were a couple of them in training jumps in tight areas where we dropped the new men for their tree practice jump and I didn't always miss the trees either. Had no problems as far as let downs and since I, uh... the second year that I jumped I was a squad leader, instructing a squad, going through training, I think you learned a lot more about any particular job, if you teach it for awhile, than if you do if you just sit and listen to it. So, I learned all of my jobs, I think quite well, because of the fact that I was teaching them all, most all of the time. That included rigging of parachutes, running of sewing machines, all of that type of thing. I took pride in my work and doing it the best way I knew how, if it wasn't right I'd rip it up and do it again. The same way with a parachute. If I was packing it and things didn't come out quite right I had no quarrels about tearing it clear back to square one and starting all over again and I instilled that in all of the people, or tried to, in all of the people that I trained to do those jobs or any jobs that you train. So, I never had any problems with let downs per say. I did have a few problems with, uh, my.... I'm really not adept as a tree climber and especially in big yellow pine country. Thank the Lord that I was in McCall, Idaho instead of out of Cave Junction or Redmond, Oregon, someplace where they have big trees. I thought yellow pine were big until I got over and saw some of those over there, those big coast fir. But, I did climb the trees and retrieve my parachutes and got them all back down. But that was the worst part of the tree landing. After a couple big yellow pines they, uh... and I'm sure over on the coast, if you're in the top of one of those big coast fir, you start working a little extra hard to try to get down to the ground, instead of having to go back up and get that parachute out again. Tree climbing is probably not one of my strongest forte.

Now, what kinds of differences did you notice in the organization over that thirty years?

In the job descriptions, ah, the only.... well the big basic difference, I think, is the added paperwork that has gone into the units through the years. When I first started as loft foreman in 1950, this is as I remember it anyway, I could probably do all of my records keeping and paperwork in maybe a half an hour a month. When I retired in 1975, if I didn't put in at least a half a day every week I would get behind to where I would have to take a whole day and sort things out. So, the added lot of it, to my way of thinking, was unnecessary. I think a lot of the reports that we had to fill out or forms and some of the reports that we were asked to turn in, were probably read by one other person and then either put in the wastebasket or in
a file and never looked at again. And we used to... or I did anyway, sweat over some of those reports as much as I would sweat out on the fire line. Because, you try to get them to say the things that you want them to say without leaving loopholes that they could... anyone that wanted to could put different meaning to and then come out entirely different than what you had intended to write. So, I worked on those to get the word, to say the thing I wanted it to say a lot of times. And I think probably, while I was working, the biggest change, in the outfit, was that increased paperwork. And going back and visiting with the people, who are supervisory people now, the foreman of the McCall base is almost 100 percent administrative now. Very little does he get out to do things that we all learned to love while we were doing them. Get out on the fire line and not necessarily fighting fire but to do the jumping part of it and get out among nature and watch it happen, out on the hillside.

KT What were some of your last fires like?

WW Well, the last season I jumped, 1975, I was fortunate in being selected to be the foreman for the booster crew, from the lower 48, to go to Alaska, jump out of Fairbanks until the last five fire jumps I made, which were the five that I got in 1975 were all made in Alaska. I came... returned with the booster crew on the 27th of July and retired the 2nd of August, 1975. So, I didn't get anymore jumps in the lower 48. Those were different. I had jumped a couple of fires in Alaska before and Alaska is a different experience. I enjoyed it. It's a different concept up there too, as opposed to the Forest Service in the lower 48. Their terrain is entirely different and the fuels are entirely different. Reaction to wind is the biggest difference. The wind is all important in Alaska. The top layer is tender dry and any wind will take it at a very rapid rate in any direction, whichever way the wind's blowing. So, I enjoyed the difference in that and, uh... well the idea of the people though I think is the same. You do the job according to the situation, the best way you know how. That's the way we played it, I think.

KT What are some of your most unbelievable fire experiences?

WW Unbelievable? Well, there's a couple of them that I still don't know how we got them stopped, like the one in New Mexico. It was unbelievable that we could make that thing lay down, with the conditions the way they were. Ah, other unbelievable things... well one comes to mind, right off hand, we jumped with, ah, I believe, a 16 man crew out of a DC-3 on a fire, on the south fork of the Salmon. I was in charge of the crew and one of the jumpers hung up between two big yellow pine. We have some pretty good sized yellow pine. Nothing, as I said, like they have over on the coast, but they're big enough to make it scary to climb. But, he was hanging between two of them with the chute hooked on both sides and he's in the middle with nothing but space under him, except right in front of him is a limb off of one of the trees. So, he gets a hold of that, with one hand, and
he was hanging on to that trying to make his let down and dropped
the rope. There he is 92 feet above the ground, I measured it
later, when I went up to get him and he doesn't have his rope to
get down and he's hanging on to this limb for dear life because
any slight move and he feels... by looking he can see he not
really hooked that well. So, I was the foreman... looked up to
the climbers... found them were they dropped down the hill a
ways... climbed the tree with an extra rope to the limb that he
was hanging on to. I was still about ten feet away from him. He
was out at the end of this limb about ten feet away from the
trunk of the tree. I threw the rope out to him and he managed to
free one hand from the limb long enough to catch the rope and tie
it to his harness. Then, I pulled him in to the trunk of the
tree, unhooked him, tied one rope to the parachute and threw it
to the ground, so that we could retrieve it later, and helped him
get down the tree. He had no climbers on, only had the one set
of climbers. I had those on and I wasn't about to give them up,
being up there 92 feet in the air. So, I helped him get down the
tree through the limbs by tieing the rope to him and belaying it
down to where he could get onto another limb. The last 20 feet
he had to come off the bottom limb with me holding the rope and
letting him down. We got him to the ground about... ah, I think
it was a little over an hour, I'm not real sure, but as I
remember, a little over an hour after he left the door of the
airplane before he touched the ground. Two fellows, after I had
dropped the rope from the parachute to the ground, two of them
grabbed a hold of it and took it out at about a 30 degree angle,
gave it a slight tug and it came off of both trees and fell to
the ground, tore one little hole in it about the size of a
nickel. That was all the damage it done to the parachute, so it
wasn't hung very good. Any movement there during that half hour
or whatever it was that he was hanging there, while I was finding
climbers and climbing the tree could have dropped him that 92
feet without any parachute. That was quite memorable. In fact,
the more I think about it back, why it was. And there has been
several others probably that have, uh.... let's see if I can
think of one right off hand... another, uh... now this was while
I was not jumping, while I was too old after 40, I was sent as a
crew boss to Southern California and that's an entirely different
fire game down there than it is in the Northwest. That brush down
there, I'd heard about the brush in Southern California and the
brush fires that burned. This was on the Laguna fire and I
believe the year was 1972. It burned something like 185,000 acres
and made most of the run in about 12 hours. Burned that entire
country in just one big woosh like that and we got down there as
a crew to build some hand line and some of the people in Southern
California said it's impossible to build hand line through that
brush. We took the crew from the Payette National Forest, which
included a couple of smokejumpers, but most of them were district
crew, worked on the ranger districts and we built hand lines for
three miles through that. One shift would work... then we got
a letter of commendation from the regional forester in Region 5
and that's one of my proud possessions also. The manzanita brush
or that... whatever they call it down there, I didn't believe it
when I first saw it. There was nothing that could grow that thick
and be that dry and still not burn where the fire had burned, the wind had taken it and you could almost lay a string line along the edge of the fire. It had fanned out from the starting point to get to its 185,000 acres. But, it would go right over a hill and dale run almost a straight line unburned, totally unburned, and just as dry on the outside and burned to the ground with nothing remaining on the inside of the fire line. That was quite impressive to... to me. The difference in the... in fuel types and the way fire reacted to them. Some of the other memorable occasions, in 1974, the year before I retired, I knew I was going to retire, I'd already worked it out with the personnel department that when I got to the last day of work... at that time you could retire at 50 years old. They just instituted the hazardous duty aspect, making jumping a hazardous occupation. We could retire at age 50 with at least 20 years of service. So, I told her about two years ahead of time that my 50th birthday would... I wanted to be my last day of working. Didn't quite turn out that way but close. But anyway, the year before, in 1974, it seemed that every time an out of state trip came up I was on top of the list for going and we took our turn along with the regular jumpers out of the McCall base. The only difference being that occasionally we had to juggle the overhead positions, the foreman and the squad leaders, to leave a little space between them, so that they wouldn't all bunch up all have all the overhead on one airplane load and none on the next one. So, we'd interpose... inter... or juggle those, separating the overhead by five or six positions, regular jumpers. Every time a travel trip came up my name seemed to be at the top of the list. I jumped on 12 fires in 1974 from eight different bases. I got my first fire jump from Winthrop that year; my first fire jump from West Yellowstone; we set up a temporary base, kind of a spike unit at Vernal, Utah, got a jump out of there; jumped from Salt Lake City, from the International Airport at Salt Lake, where we had set up another spike unit; and from Silver City; from La Grande; from Redmond; and from McCall; eight different bases in one year. That was quite exciting to me. I got to get around and see the... I got to meet a lot of my old friends at these different bases. Of course, they usually were in a fire activity bust... situation when we got there and I didn't get to see them all but we got to see quite a few. (Pause). I enjoyed going to Alaska, the... after I retired, having been the booster crew foreman in 1975, Al Dutton asked me if I'd come back up the next spring after I retired and we'd try to work out something... wondered if I could work in the sewing room. They were a little short on people that were trained to use the sewing machines. They were going to try to manufacture their own jumps suits, their protective clothing, and didn't have anybody that had had any experience doing that. So, I agreed to come back for a month in 1976 after I retired. At that time we bought a motor home, so, I took my wife and the motor home up the ferry and that was a memorable trip. I really enjoyed that inland passage going to Alaska. We stayed a month in Fairbanks. We got there, they weren't sure how they were going to pay me so, I says just get my wife a job and I'll put my time in the loft while she's working. I got her a job in the district office
as a telephone operator, a receptionist. After a couple of days they figured out how they could pay me on fair time slips so we both got our vacation paid for that spring. The next year I went back again for a month in 1977, and at that time Dave Pierce (David R. Pierce) and Al Dutton the project foreman and operations officer were, ah, trying to develop or had some ideas about developing a new turn system for the canopies that we had, to replace the FS-10. We were getting, especially in the lower 48, quite a few injuries on the FS-10 because of the unable... inability to maneuver them close to the ground. They would thump you in pretty good. So, I went back and played with some canopies at Fairbanks, they had not quite the restrictions on them that the Forest Service had, as far as experimental work. So, I did most of the cutting and sewing to try different configurations of apertures in the canopy to let the air come out. Guide systems... we tried several different methods of turning the canopy to keep it from swinging from side to side to, ah, set up the oscillation close to the ground. We developed, what I think was the ultimate for turning the canopy by moving the slots from the rear third of the canopy, putting one directly opposite the other on that center line of the axis so one is directly off your right shoulder and one off the left shoulder and it turns the canopy without any oscillation of the canopy. Which is probably one of my proudest contributions to the... and, ah, that is the... well an evolvement from that is the canopy they are using at the present time, the FS-12. So, I had a small hand in maybe even some of the future, even though I'm not there, they still have my stamp on a couple of things.

KT What did your wife think about you being a smokejumper for so long?

WW Well I married her right after I got discharged from the service in the fall of 1945 and so she was well aware that I needed to get a job and go to work so this opportunity came up in the spring, she was quite willing. She knew I'd been in the paratroops and had jumped overseas and Europe. And she went along with it. A lot of times she wasn't too sure of what some of the activities, ah... well we were subject to call 24 hours a day you might say and we'd be gone maybe for weeks at a time too. If we were on an extended trip out of the region somewhere we might be gone for two or three weeks. She wasn't too happy with that part of it but she learned to adjust, I think, along with the rest of us. We all adjusted to those things. It had to happen like that. It was all part of the job.

KT Was she concerned when you started jumping again after that seven year period?

WW No. No. No. We have one son that is jumping now. He's started at the McCall base after I retired and then he is now jumping out of Fairbanks with BLM. He's, I think, he's been there about seven years now. (Pause). When he first started at McCall he was living at home that summer instead of living in the barracks. She says, "I just got through with 30 years of this,
getting up at all hours and having supper on the table and nobody
showing up and now I start all over and doing it again."

KT What are some of the traditions in smokejumping?

WW Well, they're probably too numerous to mention. Some of
the... speaking for the McCall base, some of the, ah... well I
guess you could call them traditions, the new men got their
finish of their rookie training season put on a what we call a
ned party at McCall, they're the new men down down there and they
put on a party at the conclusion of their training period.
That's become a tradition through the years. But, I think
tradition was, uh... of a looking up ex-jumpers or former
jumpers, wherever they might be, is kind of a tradition. As I
continually, especially the ones that I was more familiar with or
better acquainted with I should say, I look those up every year
going and coming from wherever... going to or coming from and
that's always interesting. Our wives get a little tired of some
of the war stories that they've heard maybe 15 or 20 times
already, and we tell them again anyway. But, I think that's
another tradition, is whenever two jumpers get together and we'll
always be jumpers, that there's going to be some stories floating
around. Remember the time when and that type of stories. There
were a couple of other occasions where, ah... oh this one spotter
had dropped, maybe this is also back to my first year of jumping,
about my 4th fire jump as I recall, and I hit the side of a big
fir tree. My parachute did not hold on this side of the fir
tree. I hit it purposely, I didn't like the looks of the rocks
down there. So, I steered, uh... the capabilities that we had at
that time with an FS-1 weren't all that great but we did have...
at least we could point the chute in the direction that we wanted
to land. I did managed to get into the side of this big fir tree
and that taught me a lesson that I never forgot from that point
on. Because the big fir tree, the bows slopped toward the ground
away from the trunk of the tree and there was nothing to catch
the parachute. It just slid off like so much water going off a
ducks butt. I probably fell, not completely freefall because it
was dragging some and breaking a few limbs and my body was
breaking a few limbs off the tree as I went down, but I fell
probably in the neighborhood of 50 or 60 feet before I got to the
ground. Just before I made contact with the ground, coming down
face down, the parachute at one of the limbs that I had broken
off with my body happened to be sticking upright enough to snag
the parachute in next to the trunk of the tree. It wasn't enough
to hold me, to stop me completely but it broke my fall enough
that I picked up and took my jump suit off and just threw it on
the ground and I had a little ways to go and the fire was
starting to run. So, I ran up to get the equipment bundle.
Well, the spotter saw my suit laying down there and he thought it
was me. He'd seen me fall down out of the tree and he got really
concerned. We didn't have too much communication. We did lay out
the signals that we were all right but by that time I was 200
yards up the hill and thought it might have been the other
jumper, my partner that was up in that area, that he had laid the
mountain mistakingly, thinking that I was all right when I
wasn't. He just didn't see my jumpsuit laying on the ground down there under the tree with my chute scrapped down the side over there. So, he went back to McCall, which was not too far, probably in the matter of a half hour he was back, or 45 minutes. Six more guys jumped on my jumpsuit down there. Rather than jumping over where the fire was, they jumped where they thought I was. That was another thing that, uh... our increase in methods of communications or improvements in communications have eliminated that time. We didn't have too good of communications the first few years. It was an interesting career, and I'm really proud to have been associated with it.

KT What were some of the pilots like?

WW We got, uh... just like any other occupation, we get all different types of people doing the same job. It is the same with the smokejumpers. They're all different. They have some of the same qualities, but they're all entirely different. The same with the pilots. We've had really conscientious type pilots and then we've had some that their job was just flying this airplane, land... that's all. So, you get all kinds. We've had some real good ones. Fortunately, I think since Johnson flying service was the original contractor, their attitude toward the job was that they were there to support us, not that we were... just happened to be so much air freight that they were carrying somewhere. They were there to do all that they could to make our job as easy as could happen from their end. So, we were, as I said, very fortunate, especially at the McCall base. Johnson was our prime contractor for the first... well at least 20 years and maybe a little bit more. The last ten years that I was there, we had different contractors that came in after Johnson was kind of... well after they sold evergreen and got out of the picture. But, ah, we still continued to have excellent people in most cases. There were one or two pilots that I would just soon as not be in an airplane with, even today. Sometimes I was hesitant, but we got in the airplane anyway and did the job as best we could.

KT Were there ever any incidents of problems with the airplanes?

WW We had one plane crashed in Region 4 that killed the pilot and the spotter after he had dropped 4 jumpers to the fire. He had made one pass, dropped one bundle of cargo and was making his final pass to drop the other cargo, but he never got back to the fire. He crashed and killed both the pilot and the spotter before he got there. That's the only major incident. We had several other cases. I was being retrieved from a fire off of a back country airstrip in a Travelaire and one of the tires blew out when we landed the airplane. Had to wait for a, I believe it was a 180 or maybe a Supercub, that brought a truck tire in to replace the tire on the airplane, on the Travelaire. We put the truck tire on, pumped it up by hand and flew off the airstrip. [Pause]. There was a minor incidence, nothing that ever turned out very serious though. Dropping cargo a couple of times we had, ah... we were dropping bales of hay to a remote camp, that
had a pack string and they had not that much feed for the pack animals. So, we were dropping a bunch of baled hay out of the DC-3, and the very turbulent air down in this a canyon that we were trying to drop in, had the bales stacked up three high in the door and on the signal, we couldn't see of course, out the door, it was full of hay, but the pilot was up front and he'd give us the signal when to throw the... or push the bundles out. We threw them out several doors with the turbulent air just as we pushed them out the door we'd hit a sinker and they'd hit the tail section of the aircraft or go clear over the top of the tail. A few little odds and ends like that happened once in a while. But nothing ever very serious ever come of it. We had a... did have one cargo parachute hooked up on the tail wheel of a DC-3 and it had two bundles... or actually two parachutes, I guess, they'd dropped them and for some reason the apex of the parachute got hooked onto the tail wheel and they were dropping and he couldn't shake them loose they pulled 30 inches of mercury to get back up over the hill and come in and land at the McCall base with those two bags full of canned goods still strung out behind him on the parachute. They had canned goods all up and down the runway at McCall airport. We... it took us about an hour and a half to cut the parachute away from the tail wheel. When it touched the ground it rolled it all up in there so tight that we couldn't even get the tail wheel off. We had to cut the material out of there and dig it out from around the wheel. Those are things that could have been serious, that we laugh about now.

KT Well, did you have any memorable walk outs from fires?

WW Yeah, quite a few. One of the... of course the first one, packing the gear down to the river with a 128 pound pack was quite memorable. I personally wasn't on another one that was a 12 mile pack out with no trail, it was completely cross country. It was quite memorable to the two people who did it. My longest pack out was 11 miles and... but it was all good trail. All except maybe a quarter mile to get to the trail. The pack wasn't all that heavy, 106 pounds I believe, that time. We've had, ah, several where we came out by jet boat on the Salmon River. One fire, two of us jumped on the north side of the river, on the Nez Perce Forest. Carried our gear down to the river about a mile and a half or 2 miles and they picked us up not with the jet boat but with a... just a little propeller boat. Paul Filer, this was before the advent of jet boats on the Salmon River, he took us up to the nearest airstrip up the river from his place and we had to get out and carry our packs around the rapids because he couldn't go up through the rapids with the extra load on. He could go up with just himself and the empty boat, up through the rock rapids, but he couldn't with us on the boat, we drew too much water. So, we'd take our packs out and carry them up to the head of the rapids and he'd run up through and he'd still lost... managed to shear the pin on his propeller twice, while he was running by himself through the rapids. He'd have to drift back down to shore and put a new pin in the propeller and go again. That was quite memorable. We got up to the airstrip and then flew back to
McCall from there.

KT What would you do when you had to stay the night on a fire, and you'd already had it contained? What are some of things that you would do?

WW Well, build a good cooking fire and cook up some stew... make a meal of whatever we had. We, ah... at McCall we're, I think one of the first that had individual fire packs, where each man made up his own foods supply and later years, several of the other units adopted that. Now they've gone back more to a standard food package that they drop to a 2 man fire or whatever. But in those days we were making our own fire packs, our own food supply. Our only restriction was the weight because we'd get each guy carrying 50 pounds of food, the airplane's going to be overloaded and we wouldn't have room for anybody else. So, we made a limit on 18 pounds of food to start. Then we later cut that down to 12. 12 pounds of food is enough to carry a normal man through 2 1/2 to 3 days on the fire. That was quite interesting to see the selection of food that some of the people would bring to a fire. I always, ah, fixed up... where I could carry a fresh onion and a fresh potato and make stew. Anything that made the stew turned out pretty good. One 8 man fire, speaking of stew, I sent this fellow that sprained his ankle a little bit, so I sent him down to the fire camp to... where we were setting up camp, to start cooking supper. And I said, "Make up some stew down there. I got a bunch of stuff in there, and get whatever you need from the rest of the guys to make up a stew." Well, he made a kind of... they had all tasted my stew by then, they knew about what I put in it. Well, he put all that in it, but he also dumped in the sardines and canned salmon and I don't know what else. That was one of the few stews that wasn't hardly fit to eat that I've eaten out on the fire.

KT So, what kind of reputation did you build for yourself, while you were working for the smokejumpers?

WW Well, I guess I better not blow my own horn too much, but I will say that when I retired on the 2nd of August, 1975, which is practically the middle of the fire season, there were planes from every base operating at that time, brought people to my retirement party, on Saturday night, including Missoula. They had to come back that same night. Most of the rest of them stayed overnight because they were further away and didn't have night flying capabilities. There were more Twin Otters on the McCall airport the night of Saturday, August 2nd, 1975, than has ever been before or since. Several bases brought there Twin Otters loaded completely with jumpers to my retirement party. There were, in the guest book that somebody started that night, people signed in the guest book, there were 471 signatures in my guest book from the night of August 2nd and if that's any measure, then a few people know who I am anyway, and they thought enough of me to come to... or maybe they were just glad to get rid of me, I don't know. [Laugh]. But, I'm really proud of that, that enough did come to my... or that many people came.
It's a good feeling to walk into a hall, like up here at the University Center, and start talking to different people that I had made acquaintances with through the years and, uh... well my wife got a little unhappy because I never did come and sit with her very much. I was always circulating and talking to people. There were a lot of people that I had known through the years and at least they all seemed to be glad to see me the next time they see me. So, I'm proud of a lot of my associations too.

KT Well, I heard that you had the most recorded number of fire jumps, and how does that make you feel?

WW Well, I think any record is made to be broken. If I hadn't of missed that seven years in there, they'd had a little tougher time doing it. I was fortunate, in the fact, that our McCall base, all the overhead took their regular turn at fire jumps. There were several years, by being there early and staying on late, after some of the crew had gone back to school or through other endeavors, that I was the top man on number of fire jumps, because I was always there, always available, always took my turn. Even some of the overhead got to the point where, well, they didn't care whether they went to the fire or not, you know. If it wasn't the right time of the day or something, why, they might skip it. But that wasn't my philosophy. If it was my turn, I was there. I think that's one of the reasons that I do have 177 fire jumps and as I said, if I hadn't missed that seven years they'd had a little tougher time. There's a couple of fellows right now that, both in another season or two of reasonable or better than average, are going to pass that number. So, it's just another record that will go down as being. But, one thing I can always say, I was first. I was first there.

KT Do you have any... looking back, do you have any regrets?

WW No, not really. There's, ah, maybe a couple of things that I'd have done a little bit differently, but generally speaking, I made the decision at the time and that was the way the circumstances presented themselves and I tried to do the best, as far as making the decision. I backed off and changed my opinion in different cases. But, most of the time, it was the way it looked to me and I went through with it and I turned out probably for the best, that way. My first impressions, most of the time, whether they be with people or a set of circumstances, usually turn out to be as near right as I could possibly make them. So, I'm... I think I've been fortunate in, ah... that most things that have happened, usually turn out for the best anyway.

KT Are there any other comments you'd like to make about smokejumping or about the outfit itself?

WW Well, I think it's probably all been said pretty much by some of the other people. The people involved in the administration of the jumper project, I feel sorry for them now, the ones that are coming on at this time in the history of the project because they're giving up part of what has made it a good
job. By having to go into administration and be tied up so much with that, when they'd a lot rather be out, even if it's sweating and getting dirty on a fire line. That's still the part of the job that has made it special to most of us. I feel sorry for those people that don't get to participate in that way, and get out among the troops. Some of them handle it quite well. Some of them kind of loose contact with their... their troops and I feel sorry for that type of base too, because they don't have the, ah, communications between the management and the people on the ground, a lot of times that they really need to function properly.

KT I'd like to thank you for this interview.

WW Well, I appreciate your interest in the project and I know that you've taken it on as a... with a little interest in the project, or you wouldn't probably be here and talking to guys that ramble on like we do about things that probably don't make too much sense to anybody except the people that have done it. So, thank you for a pleasant afternoon.

[END OF INTERVIEW]