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Interviewee: Gregg Phifer  
Interviewer: Rosa Stone  
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Rosa Stone: Interviewing...

Gregg Phifer: Gregg Phifer. P-h-i-f-e-r.

RS: And we’re going to talk about the experience of being in CPS [Civilian Public Service] during World War II, and particularly the experience of being in smokejumping. So let’s start off, Gregg, with your religious background.

GP: Well I’m not member of the historic peace churches. I’m a Methodist, have been a Methodist since the very beginning. My parents were Methodists, my father edited church school publications for many, many years, and became an ordained Methodist minister, although he never held a charge. His work was always editorial. So my background is Methodist and, well, there were a lot of Methodists who were in CO [Conscientious Objectors], as a matter of fact. Almost as many as there were Quakers.

RS: But as a Methodist, did you have any trouble getting your 4-E classification?

GP: The people who came from the historic peace churches generally did not. Those who were not from the historic peace churches very dependent upon the local board. In my case, in Cincinnati, Ohio, my local board just routinely rejected my application, so I went to a hearing officer and it happened that my parents were in Nashville at the time, so that’s where the hearing was held, and after a hearing the hearing officer recommended the 4-E classification. So I stopped at the second level. Had that not occurred there, I would have been permitted to make a presidential appeal.

RS: And then where were you first assigned?

GP: Buck Creek Camp. CPS 19. That’s near Marion, North Carolina. Beautiful country. I was there for about five months.

RS: And then you were transferred?

GP: I was transferred, yes. A large group of us went to Coleville, California. The fire season was about to start, out in the far West, and the people, authorities, Forest Service authorities in the far West were very much concerned about the availability of manpower for fighting fires. So they asked for volunteers from Buck Creek to go west. I had been in California, went to school...
Gregg Phifer Interview, OH 163-021, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
RS: And do you have any fond memories of that training?

GP: I wouldn't say fond. As a matter of actual fact, during the first training operation I injured my shoulder, fell pretty bad. I remember playing volleyball and suddenly hitting the thing and the shoulder was the wrong way, I just had to pull out of that. But I trained with Unit D, they had a number of people brought in to fill up the ranks after some other injuries, so I trained with D and had no particular trouble the second time through. I remember the tower jump, of course, that jerked you around. I saw that on the tape here. A little different time, the kind we're accustomed to, but ours was nevertheless quite an experience. It did give you the kind of jerk you would get on leaving the airplane.

RS: Now you had a volleyball injury on your shoulder.

GP: Oh, we had a lot of fun with volleyball, yes. Well I think the injury itself occurred somewhere in one of the training, maybe doing the roll or something else. But we'd play volleyball a lot there. That was one of our favorite after-dinner sports.

RS: Any injuries with your jumps?

GP: None at all. I had perfect luck on 20 jumps. I didn't even hang up in a tree once and no injuries of any kind. I was lucky.

RS: Nice not to have to report injuries, like some of the others have.

GP: Quite a few of them did. I know I jumped in after some of those injuries. On one jump I was on, high meadow country, a man jumping immediately ahead of me crashed into some rocks and broke an ankle, so they took him out and the rest of us stayed to fight the fire. On that particular jump, I came sailing in over some large rocks and hit beautifully the nice grassy meadow. Lovely.

RS: Were there memorable jumps like this one, where you just sailed over the rocks and onto the meadow?

GP: There were a good many memorable jumps, yes. I would say every one is memorable in its own way. The first jump for example, first fire jump, up the Clearwater. That was sort of a strange experience. I'd never been in that territory before. Chuck Chapman and a couple of others were with me. We fought that fire for nearly a week before we finally put out everything. But they dropped—the plane came over and dropped sandwiches to us, and we think the bears got every one of those sandwiches.

RS: Oh no!
GP: Yes. We were on short rations. Except they did send some boys from the local ranger station, brought in some food for us. We hunted and hunted for the crosscut saw they dropped for us, and I think finally we simply resorted to chopping down the big tree in which fire was established high in the tree, chopping it down with an axe. And to do that at a big tree, you've got a whale of a job ahead of you. We had lost our crosscut saw somewhere along the line.

RS: Never found it.

GP: Never found it, not in that jump.

RS: And what were some of the other memorable fire jumps that you had?

GP: Well I remember my last one, there jumping the Nez Perce. Nez Perce National Forest on the River of No Return. I don’t know whether that’s the Snake River or the Salmon River, but they call it the River of No Return. I think a half dozen, maybe eight of us, jumped on that particular fire. It was toward the end of the fire season. The rains began to come not long after we were down on the ground and so we really didn't put out that fire at all. The water did it for us and we were on the ground and, oh, we did a few things with snags and other things in the fire, but that was a really easy one except for the rain, which made things very uncomfortable. However, they sent a packer in with a real fire camp, so we had all the food we wanted on that particular camp. Ham, don’t know what all else.

RS: Oh. Not C-rations.

GP: Not C...Oh, I ate my share of those. The difference between the C-rations for the military and the C-rations given to us is simply there were no cigarettes in ours. Otherwise, as far as I can tell, they were the same thing. The one C-ration that people liked very much was, I think, the dinner ration, which had a bar of chocolate. Now in those days, chocolate was rationed, was very hard to come by. You didn't buy it, [a] chocolate bar, just walk up to the counter and get one. It was hard to come by. Now this chocolate was not the delicious Hershey's chocolate, but it was chocolate and people loved that chocolate. We made up songs about some of those things. I remember in the back country the chopped pork and egg yolk. Little can of chopped pork and egg yolk that we would have to eat, and sometimes we didn't particularly like it but you had to have something while you were there. Incidentally, on some of the fires, where the fire was still burning, and after we got it controlled, we could heat up some of that stuff in its can, or work at it in some way. That always improved things a little bit. But those crackers. Oh, I still remember. I was sure they compressed sawdust to make them.

RS: And heating it was better than just the cold—

GP: Oh yes. Yes, if we heat up a chopped pork and egg yolk, or whatever else it was—they had different kinds of combinations for different meals, in the different C-rations—but if you heat it
it’d be more nearly edible, that’s right. Sometimes we ate it anyway, because of edible or not, you had to have something.

RS: Right. Especially for that hard work, doing the fires.

GP: That was, now not there’s no question about it. Most of our fires were on sharp slopes of one kind or another. By the time you walk around that a half-dozen times, depending upon the size of the fire of course, by the time you’d be in a trench line at the bottom, so that rolling pine cones would not carry the fire from inside to outside, you really needed something. That was exhausting work.

RS: Did you have fires that had a lot of jumpers on, and some that had just a few jumpers on?

GP: Oh yes. I was not on the really big jumper fires. The first year Bell Lake was the biggest one, with about 37, 38 jumpers on that one. I got in on one pretty big fire where they sent in two or three loads, I probably about 25 of us, but that one blew up on us. There’s nothing we could do about it. We were controlling one little side, but the fire was already much beyond the smokejumper size. Before they got through with that, they must have brought in two or three hundred blister rust boys and some farmworkers, Mexican farmworkers from the territory, so there must have been five or six hundred men working on that fire before we finished. Incidentally had quite a few the military on that too because they ran out of manpower. They drew upon some of the military bases for manpower also. That was the largest fire I was on. That one blew up on us. I remember, I was on the radio for a while there, and one of my memories now is, “SPF 21 to Missoula.” I was on the radio calling Missoula, asking for things. And because of the Mexicans who were working there, they asked, what do you want? What do you really need now? And they all were asking for smoke tobacco, to roll their cigarettes. It was Prince Albert, PA. They could say PA, and they might not be able to say much else, but they wanted PA. So I was on the radio asking Missoula, please drop us some PA for these men.

RS: And then you had small fires too?

GP: Oh very tiny. The typical smokejumper fire ought to be a two or three man fire, where the lightning had struck, that’s started by lightning, and really you have nothing much more than one tree with a little going around it. That’s a smokejumper fire. That’s where we’re efficient. Because we can get to it before it would blow up, before it’d become a larger fire, and we could control it and put it out. That’s really what the smokejumper advantage was. Otherwise all we were just advantage of transportation, and once you’re on the ground you were no better and no worse than anybody who walked in.

RS: Did you have any interesting companions on these fires?

GP: Well everybody was interesting. The CPS men in general are pretty interesting group. And quite a varied group. Some like myself, for example, had a lot of college background. I don’t
know that we had any with a doctorate in hand. I probably was about as far along as anyone. We had number of people who'd had graduate degrees, and then we had a lot of farmers and Mennonites and Amish who really didn't think that much of education. So it was a widely varied group, but amazing enough we got along pretty well.

RS: What was your most interesting experience as a smokejumper?

GP: Oh my. Oh...

RS: Perhaps you can’t select one.

GP: I remember the first jump, remember the last jump. I suppose the most frightening, really, was that huge fire we got on, where we simply had to get out of the way. It was coming through the treetops at us, and we simply moved over to the side. I empathized, a few years afterwards, when I read about the death of a number of smokejumpers caught in a raging fire that came at them and they didn't get out of the way. The foreman on that particular fire, Wag Dodge, was also my foreman on a couple of projects of my own.

RS: Is that Red Skies over Montana, the movie?

GP: I have seen that, yes.

RS: Did you set a back fire that time?

GP: We’ve used back fire on occasion. Not very much. In fact, we probably did more of that in practice, and also more of that on walking fires that I went to outside of CPS, outside of the smokejumpers. I’ve used a backfire more on those fires than I did on any other smokejumper fires. Remember, the typical smokejumper fire ought to be a very small one. That's where we have our big advantage. Once it gets large, we have not that much advantage. We, I say “we” as though I were still in the smokejumpers [laughs].

RS: It’s part of the fiber of your being, having been a smokejumper.

GP: Oh yes.

RS: Did this have any effect on your life since then? These men are interested in coming to the reunions, they’re interested in talking with each other—

GP: Oh yes. And recalling joint adventurers, things we’ve been on together. And, yes, that’s right, talking about the training and about places we’d been, places we’ve gone. I would say that my case, no, probably not. As a Methodist, the people knew I already had a graduate degree, so when I left CPS I found out that the Commission on World Peace of the Methodist Church had set out a list of CPS men who had graduate degrees to the colleges sponsored by
the Methodist Church. So as a result of that I had two interviews and could have had two more. In fact I had two job offers. One was at Wesleyan College, which is the girls’ school in Macon, Georgia.

RS: To teach?

GP: Yes, I’d have taught there. Very interesting. I had known that Wesleyan College produced Miss Georgia, and I think Miss USA, a few years earlier than that. I was a bachelor at the time. I suppose I was a little bit tempted. I went down there for an interview, took the bus down. Then I was interviewed next at Baldwin-Wallace College, which is a Methodist-related school of about 1,600, at that time, outside Cleveland, Ohio. Small town of Berea. Well, he offered me 600 dollars more than Wesleyan had. Even so the sum, princely sum of 3,000 dollars—doesn’t seem like much today, but remember, this is 1946, and 3,000 dollars went a long way of those days. I got a room for perhaps, oh 30, 40 dollars a month, spend the same amount on food, and I saved money on 3,000 dollars a year at there at Baldwin-Wallace College. So my first job was really quite easy. The Methodist Commission on World Peace sent out our names, and another Mennonite, Dave Lindsay and I both went to Baldwin-Wallace College. Very nice school. I remember it with pleasure, my experiences there. It was interesting, by the way, in my class—I was teaching public speaking or basic speech there—it was interesting, I had a number paratroopers in my classes. Former paratroopers.

RS: Yes, and you could identify with them, having—

GP: I could understand some of things they were...that’s right. We talked about jumps. Some of them had done ten jumps, and when I had done 20 that was a little bit different.

RS: So then it didn’t affect your work life at all. The career area that you went into, you would have you would have gone into the same kind of thing whether or not you had been in smokejumpers.

GP: Say it perhaps interrupted me for about four years. I’d have taught much earlier, but that was one of the...everybody had the interruption, circa the military and that interruption, and we had about a four-year hiatus there, where I was in CPS. But afterwards I picked up essentially the same lifestyle that I had left, taught at Baldwin-Wallace for two years, went back to the University of Iowa to finish up my doctorate. Taught there as an instructor from one year, and then went to Florida State University in Tallahassee. It had just been made a co-education University. Because until 1947, it was the Florida State College for Women. So I went there two years after it became co-educational and participated in its growth from about 4,000 students to 22,000.

RS: Now you could find a reference point for the paratroopers, but has the experience of being in smokejumpers enriched your life inwardly a great deal?
GP: Well it certainly was a unique experience. There’s no question about it. Something quite different from anything I had done before or afterwards. Now, I had enjoyed physical activity. I was a track man in college, mildly athletic at least, had played some volleyball, and that’s about it. Ever since that time I’ve officiated at all of our home track meets here at Florida State and I’m now certified by the Athletic Congress, which is the certifying agency for track and field officials, United States. My most recent experience is going to Orlando and officiating at the Junior Pan American Games. That’s a first international meet I’ve ever officiated at. Very interesting. A large delegation from Canada, and a surprisingly large delegation from Cuba.

RS: Okay, one more question here on my part. The expertise that you have on the intellectual level was matched by the expertise that you could pull up and function with during smokejumpers. Would that be a fair statement to make?

GP: Well, let’s say that I was able to absorb what they were trying to tell us in the training program. After all, I’d been doing a lot of training program, and they did a training program on us. And I guess I went through that all right. There’s a lot about fighting fires I don’t know and never will know, but I think we did pretty well. I think by and large, for a group without a great deal of experience before, we did pretty well in fighting fires.

RS: But you will never have the innate love for wilderness packing that one of your colleagues talked about last night.

GP: No, I suspect not. This is not my bag. I enjoyed very much being in the wilderness area, but remember, a college professor is dealing with people. And so that really is what I do much more of. I’ve never gone backpacking into the wilderness. My wife enjoyed going out and camping, as long as she had a motel bed and a bathtub. Shower wasn’t really her thing. So I did not have the encouragement to going in and do any camping on my own. I might have [unintelligible].

RS: Now to backtrack just a little bit, we didn’t talk about the assigned projects that you were on at all.

GP: Yes, oh yes. Well I had some interesting projects. One winter, I was assigned to a ranger station where we were building a bridge. Apparently the equipment for that bridge had been moved 30 miles from some other place. Well I didn’t know much about that. It was State Road Department Montana, SRD Montana. We were building a bridge at Lozeau, Montana. I did that pretty much all winter there. We got the pilings in, and we got a support in the center of the river. I worked on all kinds of things there. My, walking those little streamers, hitting across a river. That was quite an experience, at that. Worse in some ways than jumping out of a plane, walking those little tiny planks. But we got quite a long way with it before the fire season started and we were pulled off that job. I didn’t know what had happened to that because I knew we left the bridge unfinished. I learned at this reunion that after we left it, they brought in some German prisoners of war to finish up that bridge, and one of the men here tells me he...
drove across the bridge just the other day. Bridge that we worked on there at Lozeau, Montana. So that was one of the projects.

While we were at Ninemile, one of our big projects was in the hay, at the Remount station. Because especially in the day we were there, the mules were an important part of Forest Service operation, mules and horses. It was just wonderful, when we were on a fire, we got it controlled, we were doing the last stages of putting it out, to see how a string of mules coming down a trail somewhere near us, close as they could. Two reasons: one, they brought in food, which is better than C-rations, I must say. Those rations got mighty tiring after a little while. You mix up about so many packets of lemonade and you’re sick of the stuff. You eat so many chopped pork and egg-yolk and you couldn’t choke another one down if your life depended on it. They’d bring in food, usually, and then they’d be able to pack out equipment. So we didn’t have to carry the parachutes and some other equipment, which we sometimes did, but we did it reluctantly. And it was wonderful seeing the mules come in. But we worked at the Remount station, in hay. So I did a number of days there, working in hay, packing it up, trying to make little bales of the hay, or—I don’t know what else I did, don’t even remember what else I did there, working with hay on the Remount station.

A third project I was on was Savenac nursery. That was the farthest away from home base. The people who were chosen for that particular Savenac nursery, I think were looked upon as not the favored few. A few men were in Missoula; that was heaven. Ninemile was next to it, then there was another camp, I’ve forgotten what that was, and then we were way out, toward Washington. We were on the main highway there, near Haugan, Montana. And we worked in the Savenac nursery. Our job was to plant trees in the nursery. We had some girls, high school girls, who would put them in the trays, and we take the trays that they’d put the trees in, little baby trees, we’d stamp them into the area so they could grow still more. Then after that, of course, they’d be taken out in the wilderness and planted by whatever agency did that. I had done that too, by the way. Not at smokejumpers, but when I was at Camp 37, Coleville, we went up into the Mono Lake and planted a lot of trees there. A lot of them. So I imagine the same sort of project—

RS: Was this the only project assignment where you weren’t isolated into all-men groups? You said you had high school girls—

GP: So far as I know, that’s right, yes. I don’t remember any women. Now, the film today showed a woman smokejumper. We had no women there at all. We had the cook, of course, and the high school girls setting trees. That’s, as far as I know, the only contact we had. Now the people in Missoula, of course. I was never assigned to Missoula. I came in and out of Missoula to jump, that’s all. I might have spent a few nights in, the Missoula. But the people in Missoula established contact with some of the sorority girls, and some of the students at the University of Montana, and perhaps others. So they were the favored people there, at Missoula. We were way out in the back country.
RS: Did each of the projects have their own assigned cook, or did you fellows have to take turns cooking?

GP: Well, most of us had KP [Kitchen Patrol] duty, but we had cooks assigned most of the time. Now, I was trying to think, my only cooking duty was after leaving the smokejumpers, at CPS 149, in Olustee, Florida. Which is about 75 miles from where I’m now teaching. This was a Forest Service research unit and there we have no assigned cooks, so one of the men had to do the cooking. We had a man named Don Clark who did most of cooking, but when he went on furlough, the rest of us had to chime in so I had my turn cooking there. Aside from that I’ve been on KP duty from time to time, but that’s all. I did not do any real cooking. And at Lozeau, for example, we had a regular assigned cook. At Ninemile, we had assigned Forest Service cook. And, I must say, the food there was excellent in my judgment. Certainly far better than we had back in the base camps I’d come from. But this was an excellent. One unfortunate consequence is that I barely made the minimum smokejumper weight—about 130 was minimum and I made about 135 when I came into smokejumpers. I don’t think I gained much while I was in smokejumpers, but I gained eating habits that made me gain sizably once I left the smokejumper unit.

RS: When you weren’t as active physically.

GP: I wasn’t active physically. I wasn’t chopping trees, riding a buck saw, and jumping on fires, and so forth. Even there at 149, I did a lot of walking. It was a Forest Service experimental unit, and I was assigned to one of the men. We were measuring trees, measuring the growth of trees in the experimental forest, Olustee. So I did a lot of walking there. Physically active. We did forest fire fighting there, but not very much. So after I left that, that’s right, I...I shouldn’t have. My eating habits had been established.

RS: Yes, yes, of course. And you’ve maintained those?

GP: No. As a matter of fact, my last few years I’ve done very well with this. My most recent interest is a fiber diet, so I eat Grape Nuts this morning and a lot of fiber.

RS: Very good. How do you remember the smokejumper experience, and how do you remember the CO experience? Would you again now choose to be a contentious objector?

GP: Well my ideas along that line probably haven’t changed. I would say, if anything, they’ve been strengthened. Remember, a college professor deals with many issues and I was debate coach for 10 years. So I really dealt with many issues, including, of course, nuclear weapons and all the rest. And I think that that simply reinforces my feeling that we can’t afford the luxury of another war, and that if we do, our species is not going to be around any longer. So we’d better either learn to get along together or forget it. One of the most interesting things to me right now is the sister city program, which my town of Tallahassee, Florida, has established with Krasnodar, Soviet Union. That is also a capital, a regional capital in the Soviet Union. It has a
circus—I guess many large Soviet cities do—and Florida State University has one of the few, perhaps the only, major circus, as an activity for the students. We've had a circus since 1947.

RS: They take care of this?

GP: This circus has gone all over the world. Performed in Greece, performed all over Europe, and on CBS television; it's been all over, and is still very much alive. Partly for that reason, I think there's some affinity between the much larger city of Krasnodar, and Tallahassee, which is perhaps 100,000 people. We've made three trips to Krasnodar. We—citizens of Tallahassee—have made three trips to Krasnodar. One's there probably right about now, at Krasnodar. My choice was between coming here and going possibly to Krasnodar, except that the Krasnodar trip would have overlapped with the beginning of school. I'm supposed to teach this fall, so I just passed the offer up this time, and may go next year. Incidentally, on our part—that is, Tallahassee's part—this is very much official. That is, a city commission, the mayor, city officials of all kinds, have supported this. The publisher of a newspaper, I think, is going on this year's trip. So this is really a city—

RS: Establishing some good relationships with the Russian people.

GP: Now they're jumpy about this. Soviets are very jumpy. Under Jimmy Carter, a number of sister city programs were established from the top, by fiat. "Here, Philadelphia will be a sister city with so and so. Here, Boston, you'll be a city with so and so. Denver, you'll be such and such a city's city." There's sort of a from-the-top operation. And those pretty much died out with the invasion of Afghanistan. Almost all of those were wiped out at that time. So this is bottoms up. Quite a different approach. But they're jumpy about it. If they do it, they have appropriations, they have money established for this. They've already officially, that is the officials in Krasnodar, have already received our delegations, and entertained them and so forth, there in Krasnodar. Soviet Life, which is a magazine circulated in this country by the Soviet Union, where we circulate America in the Soviet Union. That circulates in English, of course. Beautiful pictures—I have subscribed for some time. They sent a photographer and a reporter with our last delegation. Have a three-page spread.

RS: Now this is a nice extension of your firm beliefs, the things that you have thought through.

GP: Oh, yes. We have, at Florida State University, a Peace Studies program. And I have been on the Peace Studies committee since its inception. We have a minor now, so you could major in some department and minor in peace studies.

RS: Wonderful.

GP: At Florida State. And I have been on that. I have had a part in some of the courses we've taught, both as moderator and also I did one of the sessions each of our times. I talked about
the rhetoric of the Soviet Union and the rhetoric of the U.S. Pretty interesting. Talk about what Gorbachev says and what Reagan says.

RS: Yes, yes. Fine. Have we left out anything? Would you have kind of a thumbnail encapsulation of what your smokejumper experience was?

GP: Well, we did have a unique experience, there’s no question about it. Looking back from the standpoint of a smokejumper, we were the transition. Whether the people now in control like it or not, we were the transition from a small, tiny, experimental unit, the smokejumping, to a major thrust in Region 1, and throughout the far West. So really we were the transition from a tiny, experimental unit to a major part of fire control in the far west. And that’s interesting to me. I like to look back at that and say, here’s something we did.

RS: You were a part of a movement there that was very important.

GP: Well, for fire control in the far West. The regional forester sent a letter, when CPS was just about through, when we were closing up CPS 103, sent a letter in which he thanked us for the control of the fire season. ’45 happened to be a very tough season for them. And there’s no question that far more of the West would have burned had we not been around.

RS: Yes.

GP: ’44 much less. I made three jumps in ’44, seven in ’45. In ’45, much of the summer we were just in and out. You’d come into Missoula, truck you into Missoula from Ninemile, perhaps, be there a day, or maybe overnight, and then bang, out the next day. Come back in from the fire. If you got out to Ninemile you were lucky because you had a little relief, and then back into Missoula and go out again next fire. Sometimes in and out. Some people had more jumps than I did. I was gung-ho, I suppose, but not nearly as gung-ho as some of the others. Some had 10, 12 jumps and I had seven that last year.

RS: Sitting here in this setting of these beautiful pines at Camp Paxon, and realizing that everyone wants the reunions here, at Camp Paxon, makes one aware that we really want to preserve this part of nature. This is a wonderful part of nature, and these fellows have done their share in preserving this for us.

GP: As I remember that very well, and some of the fires, after we got a line around them, there wasn’t much to do except watch and see to it that it was not going to get away, especially during burnier period, we’d watch it that way. And after the burning period was over, maybe late, beginning of the night, we would go in and try to knock out some of the hot spots. Or do that in the early morning, before the burning period began at 10 o’clock. Well, I remember sitting up on top of these mountains sometimes and looking out at the purple mountain majesty. They are glorious.
RS: Yes, yes, they really were. That’s what we sing about.

GP: We certainly do. And the purple mountains I can well understand that, because I saw them with just that sort of tinge on them.

GP: Our first jump, by the way, was taking off in the morning. They routed us out the bunkhouse, about 4:30 or so. We went in the mess hall, got a quick breakfast, they trucked us into Missoula. And we took off either with the first light or shortly after it. Because I remember flying and we were watching the sun come up as we were flying over the Clearwater National Forest. There are some beautiful sights associated with that. Some of the photography that Ed Nofziger and Phil Stanley took are just tremendous. I have some slides of those days, and there’s some beautiful pictures. Well, smokejumping is a photogenic operation. You saw that in the tape today. It really is.

RS: Yes.

GP: Now that tape today, the chute they’re using: colored. We never had a colored chute. The slots had—we had two slots for guiding the chute. This is a slotted Irvin, it’s quite different from a paratroop chute they were using. We could guide this. They changed between the ’44 and ’45 years. So you would change direction in different ways between those two years, use different ropes, different load lines in order to change the direction of a chute. So they were making improvements right along. The first year, 1943, they had a lot of Eagle chutes, with a big porch and a couple of big ears, and those were used for steering. I never jumped one of those. By ’44 there were just a few of the Eagles left. Those were silk, I believe. Ours were nylon, Irvin, slotted Irvin, and just a few of those left. Some of the men from ’43 loved to jump the Eagle. I never did.

RS: You didn’t like the Eagle?

GP: Oh, I just never had a chance. There were very few left.

RS: Oh, I see.

GP: Very few left. And I mean some of the men asked for them, wanted to use them. I’d never jumped one, didn’t know much about it, but I was more comfortable. I was acquainted with the slotted Irvin. But the one that we showed today, with color and with the many slots around, are quite different. I’ve watched some jumping there in Tallahassee, for example, because they send down jumpers, you know, big celebration. They land on the track right where I was officiating the track meet, land right in the center thing. My, I would never have tried that with my old chute, but the way they guide them these days! They come down slowly and can stand up! We were trained never to stand up. It was hit and roll, hit and roll, hit and roll, we practiced over and over again. You saw that in the tape today. They were trying the same hit and roll. We got that engrained into us very well. My first jump I came down and I—it was a fire jump—
came down on the side of a hill, and I went over backwards like this. I was all right, what I was supposed to do. Sometimes a roll was not really within your control. You didn’t know which way you were going to roll, but you were ready to roll, so you went—whoom. One way this way, the fire’s this way. Depending on which way you were hitting.

RS: That National Geographic film was a very nice one to show.

GP: Yes.

RS: Very colorful—

GP: One woman they were showing there, in the film today, very interesting. We had no women, of course, in the CPS days. No women jumpers, no action for it. The men who volunteered were self-selected. I don’t remember any washing out, except by injury. Certainly no refusal to jump. And a few men were injured, ankles or otherwise, went up on fire towers. Joe Osmond (?) was one of those, was in the fire tower part of the time. This was a volunteer, not a... Forest Service I guess was glad to get us. Most of us had come up through CPS with pretty hard project work, so we were fairly hardened. I had been on, I don’t know, 10, 15 fires before coming to smokejumpers, and I was [in] pretty good condition when I came here. But they didn’t try to wash anybody out. That was not the effort. They indicate today they have far more volunteers than they can use, but that was not true in the CPS days. They were looking for more than they could get. They even brought in the last unit there in ’44 to fill the ranks from some people that had been injured. Around 200.

RS: But no one refused to jump.

GP: Oh never. Never.

RS: No one. Yes. It was only injuries that kept them from it.

GP: That’s right. I think it was very clear, as far as we’re concerned. We were just determined to jump. I had it easy my first jump. Harry Burks had come from Nashville [Columbia], my own home town. He was many years with the AFSC [American Friends Service Committee], and died some years ago in the Pacific Northwest. Anyway, Harry and I, we’re good friends, he was from Nashville and we’d talked a lot about it and he’d asked me if I really wanted to jump and so forth. On that first practice jump of mine, he rode the step and I was right behind him. When he stepped off that step, boom, I was right after him. That was easy. I told him afterwards, he made that jump for me.

RS: He led the way, didn’t he?

GP: He led the way, he certainly did. By about the third jump, I rode the step. You know, you put your foot on the step, you were right there, you could watch the whole blame thing in front
of you. If you’re back there, you really don’t see the ground the same way. Riding the step, you can see everything down there, all the trees and blank spot and everything else, see what you’re heading for.

RS: There was always tension when you jumped, is that right?

GP: Yes there’s no question about it. I had a perfectly operating chute every time. On the other end, I watched a number of men go out who didn’t, for one reason or another. Some of them had the line over. The military, they named that the Mae West. I don’t remember hearing that term at the smokejumper unit, but maybe they used it. Anyway, line over was something which would allow the chute to come down much faster, and you’d come down with it. And a few times, we had the chute get tangled. Some man had to use his reserve chute. I never cranked my reserve, on 20 jumps. Never had a line over, never had any problems. I was lucky that way. Only once or twice did I slip my chute, strongly, to try to get in to a particular small spot. When you slip your chute you pull down the lines that collapse the chute a little bit, and you’re always a little worried that the lines are going to get tangled with your feet. When they come up again you have to let them up very slowly, so as not to let them up real sudden, so that the lines don’t get tangled. I did, oh, two or three times, I guess, a little bit of slipping. A lot of planing. Pull down those front risers, and that increases your forward speed, so that you can reach an area, or get out of an area. Once I remember, they jumped us square over a lake. Because the chute indicated the breeze was going this way, towards a nice grassy spot up there, and so they jumped us right smack over the lake. I wasn’t going to land in that lake. We had nothing to handle ourselves in the lake. There was nothing, lifejacket, or anything of the sort. We were out of luck if we landed in water. But I planed to get back to that grassy spot, made a nice—had no problem. As I say, I was lucky. On 20 jumps, no injury, no serious problems.

RS: All that weight would have dragged you down under the water, if you had gone into the lake.

GP: Oh yes. They were heavy equipment, yes. No question about it. We were using a football helmet, very similar to what you saw. I’m sure that they’ve improved the fabrics they use, on the equipment we had. Probably heavier in our day than it is now. You talk about space age fabric, and I’m sure we didn’t have anything like that. But it was strong equipment. The most dangerous jump, from my perspective, one that gave me the heebie jeebies before I jumped, was one time when we were called out as a rescue unit. We got the message there in Missoula that a crew had gone in and one of the men had hit a snag, and had fallen. The word we got was broken his back. I really don’t know how bad the injury was. But that’s the word we got in Missoula. And we were sent in, theoretically as a rescue unit. By the time we got there, and got on the ground, we found out that the other crew had already taken him down to the trail. So we fought the fire. We weren’t the rescue unit. We were sent in as that way, but we really did the fire fighting and the other unit carried him out.
But jumping into that area, with a lot of snags, very tall trees, was about the scariest jump I had. I knew that we’d already had one man caught his chute on the top of one of these snags, broken it off, and fallen heavily to the ground, broken something, we didn’t know what. As I say, I got to the ground, I don’t know how. You could call it a bit of luck and a bit...there’s a little bit of skill and a lot of luck involved in that. Because you don’t really dodge these things. You try to head for the open spot, but dodging snags is a lot of luck involved there too. And I was lucky, I’ll confess that. Even when I tried to hang up. On our fifth practice jump, fourth or fifth practice jump, we were instructed to head for this area of pine trees there. Not too tall. We were instructed to hang up. Well I headed for it, I smacked into it, and I smacked into the side of a tree, maybe that tall, checked the side of it. And then little by little I slid down until I finally hit the ground. I couldn’t [unintelligible] procedure, anything. Couldn’t hang up.

RS: So it was water that would have been deadly.

GP: Oh, deadly, that’s right.

RS: Snags would have been very injurious.

GP: Snags, well, you were taking your chances. You just didn’t know what was going to happen with a snag because it could very easily have killed you. Some of the men tell about part of a snag just falling down, and here they were, snag fell here.

RS: Oh.

GP: Fell this way, they’re dead. Fell this way, they’re alive and perhaps a broken bone or something of that sort. So we all have stories like that.

RS: Rocks would have been very injurious.

GP: Well, on one jump in a high country, Ed Harkness—did I tell you about Ed Harkness jumped, immediately ahead of me, hitting the stone, breaking his ankle?

RS: Oh no.

GP: Well he did, right ahead of me. And—

[Break in audio]

RS: Now we’re ready to finish the story of Ed Harkness on this side of the tape.

GP: Oh yes. Anyway, I came planing in off of that lake, I was determined not to fall in that water. And I came planing in. Really the wind was with me, so I was not in danger. We came toward that grassy spot and I was shooting for i, and I just came a little bit short of the main...
open meadow. So I missed a couple of trees, very nicely, and sailed over some big rocks, big rocks, and hit nicely on some flat sod, had a very soft landing, not difficult at all.

RS: Very good.

GP: Then I got out of my chute and started to get out of my equipment and the plane came over low—I think it was Earl Cooley was in that particular one, jumping us out—anyway, came over low and yelled, “Harkness hurt.” So I heard that and got out of my equipment quickly and ran back to I thought he was and he had broken his ankle. So we made him as comfortable as he could. Wasn’t much we could do for him then. The pack train was coming in, we had learned that, and we went back to fight the fire. Little bit later we saw the pack train come in and take Harkness out. I imagine they probably sent the pack train about the same time they sent the plane from Missoula. The pack train would often times start at the same time we did. We’d fly in, and they’d walk in with the horses or mules. They took Harkness out by mule-back, and repaired him at the hospital. That fire, I remember as one of those which I talked about earlier, where I saw the purple mountains. Very lovely. Fire itself was on a steep slope. We had to trench the bottom part, so the pinecones wouldn’t keep carrying fire from the fire into the unburned area. But that’s another one of the experiences.

RS: This whole smokejumper experience seemed to be a psychologically strengthening thing for the fellows that were here, it seems.

GP: I think that may well be true. You got a confidence, among other things, you could do it. You do it. Not everybody would, not everybody could. Talk about jumping out of an airplane, lot of people say no. Now some of my friends, of course, there in Tallahassee, have their own parachute bond, jumping unit, jumping on the air field there, near Quincy.

RS: Just for fun.

GP: Just for fun, yeah. A lot of people have made a lot of jumps, far more than I have. But this is different, and jumping on an air field is different from jumping in the back country.

RS: Oh yes. Oh yes, very different. There was a lot of real, live adventure here for you.

GP: Oh yes, there’s no question about it. We had fun in some of the back country, coming out. I remember one time, we must have walked out 30 miles or so. You jump in the back country, you sometimes are heading for a ranger station, which is maybe five miles down, or you might be heading out a long way more than that. Now when we were there, the trails had been cut through by the CCC [Civilian Conservation Corps] boys, back in the 1930s under Roosevelt. So the trails were there by the time we were there in ’43, ’44, and ’45. I was there in ’44 and ’45. Those trails were already pretty badly battered. Logs across them had not been cleared, growth was coming up through them, so the trails were often times very poor. And, for example, carrying somebody injured out was a major operation. You get a stretcher in there of some
sort, drop it by plane, and then you start carrying them, and you’ve got a major job. I know, I did it once.

RS: Who did you help carry out?

GP: Well this was in California, really. Before I came to smokejumpers.

RS: Carrying anyone out was a big job.

GP: Out of Mammoth Lakes, yeah. This was a mountain climber, and we were at 8,000 feet at Mammoth Lake, so they sent a group of us to help bring him out. I was not a mountain climber myself, and I didn’t go up on the mountain, but when they got him off the mountain, we were still on a big glacier. And so I carried him across that glacier. Six or seven of us did. Oh, that was a job! Freezing, water, and you move about a couple of steps and bang, you just—that’s as far as you could go with him. So we carried him out there, we got him to the trail, and then the doctor decided we had to carry him down because a horse would be too much for him, so we carried him down the trail too.

RS: He had more than a broken ankle, didn’t he?

GP: Oh yes. He had, I think, at least one broken leg, maybe more. I was not on the most adventurous part of that, and probably the most dangerous part of it, bringing him down off the mountain, but I helped to carry him down. That’s a job.

RS: For my first interview, this is delightful to have someone that had no injuries, that was fortunate all the way along, and still thoroughly enjoyed this adventure and excitement, and comes out with this sort of awe of the beauty of the West.

GP: Yes, we remember it. I think all of us remember that. That’s one of the reasons why people come back to reunions. Because you remember the country here. This is my first trip back to the West. I’ve been to conventions in Los Angeles and that’s not the same as Seeley Lake. I’ve been to a convention in Denver and that’s not the same again. Although you get some of the mountains there. But this is my first trip back to Montana since I left the smokejumper unit.

RS: I see. Thank you so very much for sharing your time here. This has been a very good experience.

GP: Well I enjoyed it. Thank you.

[End of Interview]