Interview with Al Cramer by Floyd Cowles for the Smokejumpers Oral History Project on 7-22-84 in Missoula, MT. OH# 133-23.

FC Al, you've got a tremendously long and colorful career in the smokejumpers starting way back when, give me a autobiography of yourself.

AC Well, I was born in Missoula, October 14, 1922. And the first year I worked for the Forest Service was over on the White Sulphur District as a smokechaser and lookout. The next year I was on a fire crew out of Choteau, Montana and then '43 I started smokejumping. I took my training at Seeley Lake and there were three of us in the bunch, there was Bill Wood, Dave Ratigan and myself. Bill Wood and myself were the first two that ever they allowed to wear glasses jumping. In my training there, well, the three of us actually kind of trained ourselves cuz the rest of the Forest Service overhead that was there were busy jumping the CO's [Conscientious Objectors] which had already taken their ground training. So we were kicking each other off the shock tower and doing our rolls and actually training ourselves.

They took us up and dropped us and I remember my first jump very well. It was an old Eagle parachute which opens real hard and when the parachute opened I went out relaxed and I'd seen stars and black and I lit alongside the airport and swamp standing up and I didn't know what was going on yet. Next day I couldn't hardly turn my head, my neck was so stiff and right there I decided, I'll try 'er once more and if it does that to me again, the devil with this. So the next day I pulled my neck and head and everything in real tight and it never hurt me after that.

FC Jump in, give a quick appraisal on your career before we get into specific years. In other words, were you in '43 through something else, and living up in Fairbanks or whatever, and then you're in Sandpoint now, you might say you retired, when and so on?

AC Yeah, I was at Missoula up until '66 and I moved to, I switched to the BLM in Alaska. I went up there and headed the jumpers in Alaska and was up there eight years before I retired in 19, the end of the year in 1973. Now, I'm just wondering what...

FC Well, let's start out, what are you doing now?

AC I'm a, actually I've been driving school bus over in Sandpoint, Idaho. That's where I live now. And at the present time I've been babysitting a golf course that we acquired back, still keeping real busy.

FC Let's start out in your first jump year then, '43 and tell me about your experiences in those days and so on?
A C  Well, the chutes we had were the Old Eagle. And we called it the, it was just a 28 foot canopy with two seven foot slots in the rear which they call Derry slots and that was the, named after Frank Derry. The one that pioneered the, or talked the Forest Service into dropping 'em in on fires. And I think, one memory I had on my seventh jump, I was spottin' and jumping out of the Travelaire. I was spottin' and jumping third following the other two men out. When we had, our static table used to bounce up and down, we just had a snap that wasn't safetyed or anything. And once in a while one of them snaps would come off. But anyway, the two guys went out ahead of me and they threw my snap off. So when I went out I had, my static lines come unhooked and there was nothing for me to do but use my reserve and I was comin' down on a 24 foot reserve.

F C  How come your hook got unhooked?

A C  Well, we just had a plain, ordinary snap and, but the cable we hooked it to in the old Travelaire, whenever a guy went out, he would pull down on it, It would snap up so fast it would throw those hooks off sometimes. After that we put a safety pin through them so it couldn't do that.

F C  Were you involved in the development of the safety pin on that?

A C  Oh, I suppose, [laughter], because I had to use my reserve and if I hadn't I probably wouldn't be here today.

F C  What about your training? Where was it?

A C  I was at Seeley Lake and we more or less trained our own self because the other overhead, there's only about ten regular Forest Service overhead, then the rest the jumpers that we had were conscientious objectors, And the war was going on and we just couldn't get regular men.

F C  You recall the names of some of these people?

A C  Oh, yeah, a few of 'em, like... there's a few in town. I think Phil Stanley's around here and I'm trying to think... there's, well I... just don't really want to, can't think of, oh...

F C  Jack Nash?

A C  Well, Jack Nash wasn't a conscientious objector. He, matter of fact, he wasn't there in '43. Jack come back right after the war. I think he come back in, probably '46. Of course, he was a rigger, he learned that in the Navy. I became a rigger in '43 also. I still have my master rigger card. I still remember the number. [laughs].

F C  What kind of facilities did you have to work with?
AC  In Seeley Lake?

FC  Well, you know, over 40 years ago?

AC  Well, at Seeley Lake we stayed at the Ranger Station and the CO jumpers stayed in tents. Then in '44 we moved to Nine Mile and the old CC camps that we had the barracks and the whole Nine Mile CC cookhouse and rec hall and the whole works. That's, I don't, we trained at Nine Mile up until they built the facilities at the airfield. Actually in, see in '43 we operated off of old Hale field which is right next to the County Fairgrounds now. We had a parachute loft at the airport at the fairgrounds. Some of the jumpers stayed in the horse barn right across the road for the first year or so. Till they finally decided that jumpers shouldn't stay where horses normally do. So they got some facilities out at the old Fort Missoula and moved out there.

FC  Do you, you mention you were almost self-trained which I sure appreciate. But who was helping out that had a couple years before you? That helped out in the training too?

AC  Well, uh, actually they kind of showed us what to do and they were busy.

FC  Who was that?

AC  Well it was Frank Derry and there was Earl Cooley and Wag Dodge and Jim Waite. That's the main ones I remember. And there wasn't too many more than that in the regular Forest Service. And then I'm sure that Derry probably showed us how to make a letdown and then we went ahead and just practiced it while they were gone.

FC  Well, what did your training consist of, fire fighting?

AC  Well, that was the jump training and most of us had already done a lot of fire work. We'd been in fire for at least two years or so before we ever went to jump.

FC  So most of your training was involved in the actual parachute handling and so on.

AC  Yeah, right. I don't remember ever getting any fire training there that year because we had real good fire training. I did when I was a smokechaser and then we had a fire crew, I was on a fire crew the year before which we done a lot of training. We took at least a half a day and, you know, pull the line and step up the ol' step up method of building line.

FC  What are some of the things they told you about chutes and how to exit, and make new jumps?

AC  Well, you, to make a jump you had to be checked over. I mean you'd check each other or usually you had a squad leader or somebody to check you and be sure all your harness snaps were
fastened and your chutes are okay and you're all hooked up good
to your parachute. When you was ready to be jumped, the spotter
would hit you on the back and you would go out. Try to go out,
you hold your arms across your reserve so that isn't, so that you
won't get your arms tangled in lines when they're coming out,
the parachute lines. And then wait for it to open.

FC What about your first fire jump?

AC Let's see, my first fire jump was up in Nine Mile Creek on a
small fire and actually there was no, just two of us jumped it
and it was no problem. My next fire jump was way over on the
Powell District in the Lochsa. I jumped alone on a fire there.
They'd call for four jumpers for two fires, but when we got over
there there were three fires. So I jumped alone on one and one of
the other fellows jumped alone on one. Earl Cooley was spotting
and he made a mark on a map, says here your fire. But there was
no instructions on how to get out of there. I was way up on Warm
Springs Creek. They dropped my fire pack on a burlap chute which
didn't open and I didn't even know where it was. It lit in a
small creek, but I found it the next morning. A short-handled
shovel and a short-handled pulaski and I had about twenty logs to
cut on that fire with a short-handled pulaski.

Then my grub was gone, we had K-rations in those days, of

course. They were soaked, I salvaged a little bit out of it and
decided the next evening I better get out of there. I had it
well-lined and I'd of stayed another day, but I didn't know how
far I had to go or how long it was going to take me. So I walked
out over Gray's Peak onto the end of a road that, well it's about
six miles from Elk Summit and I walked on into Powell Ranger
Station. That's thirty miles I walked, well, mostly the night and
part of the next day. That was my second fire jump. Then I lit
in, another thing I remember about that particular jump, I had an
Eagle parachute and I made a bed up on this flat rock and the elk
come in there and they were stomping all around the bed
a'snorting at me. [laughs]

FC You didn't spook them then?

AC Not too much, they were spooky of me, they didn't know what
was going on, I guess.

FC How about the next jump?

AC I don't remember, it probably was a easy one somewhere.

FC How many total fire jumps do you think you have?

AC I don't know, there may be 50, 60 or so. Later on when I
become a squad leader and a foreman, especially when I become a
foreman they'd only let me jump the sixteen man fires and over.
And that way you didn't build up jumps very fast. But you took,
actually most of them fires, the bigger ones, come in the after-
noon when the wind was blowin' and probably a little tougher
jumping than the smaller ones.
FC  Anything else in the '43 season that comes to mind?

AC  No, not really. In, I think 1944, then I took the crew into Cayuse Landing field.

FC  At Kelly Creek?

AC  Out at Kelly Creek, where the open Kelly Creek. And we built a parachute loft, that was our project, was in there most of the summer. Whenever we got a fire in our area, which was on the Clearwater, well they usually brought a Travelaire in and we would take it and go jump it.

FC  Travelaire came in from Missoula?

AC  Yes and we also had, that year we had a squat at Big Prairie which was about the same size and one at Moose Creek and one at Cayuse. We had the three satellite bases that year.

FC  Who was with you at Cayuse?

AC  They were all CO's except myself. I was, I think I was still the squad leader then. That was in '44.

FC  Were they pretty good fire fighters?

AC  They were, a lot of 'em were real good help. They got paid no money except their churches might send them some money. But as far as the Forest Service was concerned, all they did was feed 'em and occasionally they might buy 'em some clothing that they really needed. Maybe gloves, or shoes, or shirt or something.

FC  But they didn't get any pay from the Forest Service?

AC  No, they got no pay from the Forest Service, just their board and room and clean clothes.

FC  What did you do, Al, when you were waiting for the next fire call, project work type?

AC  Well, out at Nine Mile, they used to have the mule strings there and they had lots of hay to put up and that was one of our main projects. That was in '43, '44, '45, we used to put up most of the hay and bale it and then in the fall for 'em. And then, of course, we always, we burnt wood out at Nine Mile and the CO's stayed there all winter so we had to cut a lot of wood. So we used to teach the jumpers how to use the old cross cut saw. Sawing wood, that was part of their training.

FC  What about, there were no more fires in '44 to speak of that you remember?

AC  No, just a few small ones.

FC  How about '45?
'45 was a busy year as I remember in fires and I'm not sure. But I remember one rescue jump in '45.

What type of jump, what type of injury?

It was a Forest Service fellow on a fire up ahead of White Cap Creek on the Bitterroot. He'd fallen off a bluff and fell in some hot ashes and was burnt pretty bad. So we jumped in there and it was a real bad place to jump, snags and rocks right in the high country.

You don't remember his name?

Yeah. Ward was his last name, Bud Ward? No, it wasn't Bud Ward, Chuck Ward and he had a crippled foot, I remember that. But we packed him all night up out at Tin Cup and down Rock Creek to Darby. Twenty miles on an old Army stretcher. We cut poles in order to lengthen the handles out on the old stretcher and then we put flashlights down under each end. I remember tryin' to, some of those old switchbacks on that trail were kind of hard to get that old stretcher around. But we were one tired crew when we got down to the end of the road the next morning.

How many of you were packing him out?

There was eight of us and actually I hurt my knees, both my knees on that, takin' the jump. My chute caught three snags and the wind was blowin' hard and I swung out and then all the snags broke loose. I hit a big spruce tree with my body and I come back head first down in a washout. My legs lit across a bunch of logs and it bent 'em both the wrong way and they both swelled way up. So I wasn't able to sit down for very long, I had to keep moving in order to keep from gettin' stove up.

You should have almost been packed out.

[Laughter] Yeah, I kept going, though. [laughs] That's really some of the, probably one of the worst injuries I ever had and that wasn't that bad. But I got over it awhile. Course I still felt those two ol' knees for years and usually after that the only time it really bothered me when I was going downhill steep, packing a load or... and they used to bother me. But I think I'm practically clear over that anymore.

Any other fires in '45 that you can think of?

Yeah, but I'm trying to think of 'em though. There was, it was a pretty busy season really as I remember. But I don't remember any that were really bad or hairy. Let's see, '47...

How about '46? That was a pretty...

'46, it was fairly, that's when we got a lot of the new jumpers back from the service. It was, we had no more CO's then, so we had quite a training session that year to get all the new
jumpers back that to... Some of them were ex-paratroopers and stuff. But their paratrooper training was a lot different than our smoke jumping training. They didn't have steerable chutes, they, and we taught a different type of roll and we had to teach 'em, if they got hung up in a tree, how to get out of a tree. They gotta carry a 100 foot rope and they gotta be able string that up and come down the rope. So there's lot of training that has to go into it gettin' a jumper ready.

FC You were one of the trainers?

AC Yes, I was. Right from, well actually pretty much from the start, '44 right on through.

FC What uh, training were you responsible for primarily?

AC Well, I was involved in all of it, really. Shock tower, rolls, and, you know, just about anything that we taught.

FC Fire training?

AC Well, then we had a lot of fire training and I was involved with that, too. We used to do a lot of ax work, shovel work, and saw work and dig cold trails with pulaski and shovels and show 'em what to do as far as fire lines. You build a nice fire line down to the dirt then you come back and cleaned it up inside so that you couldn't get hot. We taught 'em everything we knew.

FC You didn't have lesson plans in those days, was it mostly from memory? Or did you have...

AC Well, I was trying to think, we started making up lesson plans and things about '48, I think, and started writing 'em up. And of course, from then on we did have lesson plans and we kept changing 'em and improving 'em and as things grew and changed. I think we... our wage gauge changed, too. We went from an SP to a GS rating, it was round about '48 or '49. So we all had to fill out our experience and everything. Which give us more a permanent status, really, than when we went under Civil Service.

FC You mentioned the '47 fire season, what a...

AC Well, the only thing I really remember about, mainly about '47, I went to Demming, New Mexico and was on a experimental crew for jumping out of Gila National Forest to see if we could be used down there. It's high country, it's windy country, and they didn't know whether jumpers could make it down there. So I was on a experimental crew and I made the first fire jump in New Mexico in the Gila Forest near Reed's Peak. But what they did that first year just like the first fire, they, pert near all their lookouts and firemen had horses and they'd notify the firemen the same time as they'd notify us and see if we could beat 'em to the fire and we did, [laughs].

FC That was at Silver City?
AC Well, it was at Demming.

FC Demming.

AC Demming then, then I think the year, it was there about three years, then they moved up to Silver City, which was closer to the forest. Demming was an old Air Force Base and we had the big runways and we stayed in their old barracks and that's the reason we were down there the first year.

FC Can you recall any of the jumpers with you then?

AC Yeah, Art Cochran was the foreman and I was squad leader then I remember Gordon Radigan and Oscar Cooke and the other, the other three or four, I don't remember their names right off. But Oscar Cooke and I made the first fire jump.

FC Was that a routine fire or was it significant?

AC Well, there was about, just about an acre, I suppose, fire and the ground there was about 10,000 feet where we hit and the wind was blowin' pretty hard. I think I drifted a good mile and a half and I went over the spot. I was still going backwards pretty good and I landed in the next draw. But Oscar Cooke lit up on top and there was a lot of aspen around that jump spot and he had a camouflage chute. I think it took us an hour to find his chute after we got the fire out and went back.

FC How about, well, are there anymore jumps down in Region 3 in that period of time?

AC Well, yeah, see that, I don't remember how many jumps we made that year. But then the next, from then on we've always had a crew go down there. I went back down there in 1960 just because I wanted to. I was a foreman then, but I just wanted to see the country again and I went down and made five fire jumps in 1960 down there. We's at Silver City then and that was a real nice town. The people treated us real well, just couldn't have treated us any better.

FC You mentioned earlier about your 1948 jump in Rapid City on the 50th anniversary of the Forest Service in the Black Hills. Tell me what happened then.

AC Well, we went down there to make the... just a show-me jump for the Forest Service. They was having there 50th celebration of the Forest Service at Rapid City, South Dakota. We took the DC-3 down, there was eight of us jumped in a little meadow by Nemo Ranger Station. They must have had two or three thousand people there. And four of us were supposed to land right in the meadow right in front of the people and four of us were supposed to go over and land in the woods. And they had two toilets over in the woods. And the one, well Bill Dratz, he had said the day before that he was going to hang over the woman's. Sure enough he did and when he did there was a woman in there and she come a
screamin' out of there.

FC  No roof on the outhouse?

AC  No roof on top, it was just a temporary shelter.

FC  Kind of scared her, huh?

AC  It sure did. [laughs]

FC  What else happened at that celebration?

AC  Well, not too much, except we come back into town and they fed us at a cafe and I had scallops and I got some poisonous scallops and I really got sick. I haven't been able to eat scallops since.

FC  What about other fire jumps in '48? As I recall...

AC  Well, '48 was a pretty slow year.

FC  Pretty wet year.

AC  Pretty wet, we had floods, we had floods in the spring. Then it rained and we had lots of snow that winter. So I think really about the only fire I do remember in '48 was up in the Middle Fork of the Salmon, just up the river from where it comes into the main Salmon. Call it Roaring Creek fire. We were on that for oh, I suppose about a week. No trails in there, all rocks and rattlesnakes. We jumped up on top and worked our way down. We camped on the river, our food came in by boat. I can remember Hugh Fowler and this, I think his name was Smith, Smitty they called him, but, had the riverboat and they'd go down to the main Salmon, at the mouth of the Middle Fork, and they'd load the boat and then they'd bring it up the Salmon, the Middle Fork of the Salmon. Which was real rough and rapids and some places they had to unload the boat and carry it up around the rapids. But the one day they were coming up through one of those rapids and hit a rock and broke a shear pin and that boat went back down through that rapids sideways and knocked a big hole in it. Hugh Fowler, he couldn't swim and anyway it scared him pretty bad. They got everything out, they got the boat to shore before it sunk.

FC  Were you involved in that incident personally or just at the scene?

AC  No, I ... Yeah, they were tellin' me about it. I was on a fire and when they got in there that afternoon or evenin', well, they were tellin' us about it. That was '48 and that's really the only fire I remember in '48 that amounted to anything.

FC  Were you involved in flood rehabilitation work at all?

AC  No, I wasn't, but a lot of the jumpers were cuz they had all kinds of work for 'em and to go out and repair roads and bridges.
They didn't have many fires so they was able to keep 'em busy all summer except for the very few fires we had.

FC  Well, if you weren't involved in the flood projects, what did you do since ...?

AC  Well, I worked in the loft a lot. I was a parachute rigger and a master rigger, I eventually, I don't remember what year, but I eventually took over the loft as the loft foreman. But I worked around in Missoula at the loft.

FC  What type of work?

AC  Oh, parachute rigging and making equipment. We used to make a lot of equipment for maybe tents or packsacks and stuff like that for the rest of the people in the Forest Service. If they wanted something made, why they'd come out and tell us what they want, we'd make 'em up a bunch. It was, we'd put our sewing machines to work. I used to do a lot of sewing.

FC  Were you instrumental in developing new equipment?

AC  Oh yeah, we all were really until equipment development started. I think that started in about '51 or '52, somewhere along there and Bill Wood went over into that. But we used to still help them, the same way with the parachutes. Improving our parachutes, improvin' our jumpsuits. When we first started we had a canvas jumpsuit with felt padding and old leather football helmets. You could make a roll through the rocks with that old felt jumpsuit and you could feel just about every rock you rolled over. So then they come up with nylon cover with insulate padding and boy, that was a lot better. So they were improving equipment all along and the same way with the parachutes. We started with a 28 foot and a 30 foot Eagle when I first started. Then we got to thinking, well we need a bigger chute. Finally we went to the 32 foot chute, slots and tails in it and called that an FS-5.

The old FS-1 was just a plain 28 foot chute with two seven foot Derry slots. Then I think it was Wag Dodge or somebody decided well, if you let more air out of the back of that chute, it would go forward faster. So they added this extra material in the three back panels in the parachute. Which it did make it go faster and you could buck the wind better and then we got, of course, the equipment development got into it, too. And we decided, well, we need a bigger chute so we come out with a 32 foot chute. Put the slots and tails in it and it was a real good chute for awhile. Matter of fact, we, I used that for a long time cuz I was pretty heavy and I thought it was pretty nice.

FC  What about the 1949 fire season? You were a spotter, I don't mean the fire season necessarily, you were a spotter on that trip that Bob Johnson, Skip Stratton, and so on, went to Washington, D.C. to do that, tell me about that trip.

AC  Well, it, I wasn't even gonna go to start with. And they drew names, who was going to jump, who was going to spot, and
about two days before they left, they come to me and says, "Al, you're gonna spot." So I went. Well, we left, ol' Bob Johnson was flyin', we had the old Ford Trimotor 8400 and we took off in the afternoon and we went as far as Sheridan, Sheridan, Wyoming, the first afternoon. Stayed there, the next day we made it into, oh, I'm trying to think... between, there's two towns there Indiana and can't even think of the name of those towns. But anyway just a two or three hour flight into Washington the next day. When we come in there, Bob, our radio wasn't very good, but he talked to the tower there and boy, they held everything at that International Airport for the old Ford Trimotor coming in.

So then we were there about, I think we were there three or four days. We's on T.V. and radio, on radio and different things. I can remember the hotel we stayed in had air conditioning. It was 98 degrees back in Washington while we were there and real hot and there was a colored girl used to run the elevator there and would take us up and down to the room and she never said a word until we dropped four jumpers there behind the White House and then, when we come in after they made the jump, man she was all excited and she was really talkative. I'll never forget that. [laughs].

FC What did she have to say?

AC Well, she just, after that, she just didn't believe that that was gonna happen. Nobody did really. The articles they had in the paper in Washington were all on the back page and everything until we made that jump. Then it was right on the front page. But anyway, we, the morning we were supposed to make the jump we had a 800 foot ceiling and an 18 mph wind which is, makes it pretty hairy and where we had to jump is right behind the White House and the traffic is terrible. There's about six lanes going both ways. They were just gettin' T.V. started in Washington so they had to have their T.V. cameras there all ready. Everything was on time so we had to take off at the airport at a certain time. So they let us go at the right time, we couldn't fly over the White House or the Capitol, the restricted area, you wouldn't even have an airplane in there, but they still wouldn't let you fly over that. Anyway, we went in, we's allowed one drift streamer, I threw that out and then next pass I come over, I dropped the jumper, I dropped two, then I come around and dropped two more.

FC Who were the jumpers?

AC Bill Dratz and Bill Hellman, Ed Eggen and Homer Stratton. And I told them all, being that the buildings were so tall, we really didn't have the clearance we really should, you know, for a safe jump. You need at least a 1000 feet, I had to cut 'em a little short and I told 'em all to hold in to the wind. Boy, they all come in right where they're supposed to and I was really relieved. They took the jumpers in and put 'em in, well, they had two big, black convertibles and two jumpers in each convertible in the back and they haul 'em up to the Press Club in Washington D.C. They went in and they had heads of all these big
companies like Mr. Meyers and General Motors and they presented plaques and certificates to the presidents and the heads of these big companies to show their appreciation for the money they'd spent advertising Smokey Bear and fire prevention program. And they treated us awful well, after they took us to dinner and it was about a fifteen course dinner, seemed like we ate forever. I never was treated any better after that.

FC Keep telling me about this flight then, Al.

AC Well, we left Washington, D.C. the next afternoon. We flew to Lafayette, Indiana, and oh, it was hot there. We had a hotel room that didn't have the air conditioning, lay there on the bed and sweat so we got up, got up real early and took off at daylight with the old Ford and we got to Sioux City, Iowa. Just before we got to Sioux City, well I was lookin' at the ol' gas gauge on the Ford and I says, "Are we gonna make it?" And old Bob Johnson says, "Ah, we got lots of cornfields down here", so he wasn't worried. And we got into Sioux City and he just, I think he had 15 gallons of gas in all three tanks for three engines, so we only had maybe 10 minutes of gas, 5 minutes of gas left. We gassed up and come on home and made it into Missoula that day. It took us, we's 14 hours in the air that day in that old Ford. That, there was no other incidents than that.

FC What were you thinking of when you were flying back?

AC Well, it was something that you didn't know what was going to happen. Things... can't really anticipate what's going to happen or, like I say, the job I got there was one I didn't really... ought to have got. I'd lot rather jump than have the responsibility of gettin' the kids in the right spot.

FC You got back to Missoula and then what happened?

AC Well, then we started to have a pretty bad fire season. I can remember, well, I jumped on a fire with sixteen men at Nine Mile, a pretty good one, and this kind of leads up to the Mann Gulch fire. But I come in off of that and when I got into the loft with my crew they told me to take the day off the next day and rest so that's what I did. I was sittin' at home the next afternoon when I heard on the radio that the jumpers had jumped over at Mann Gulch and that some of them were in trouble. So I went out to the loft and found out about it. So the next day, Earl Cooley got Nash and myself, went over to Helena and worked in the morgue there for two days identifying bodies. Homer Stratton had a crew out there in the field and they were finding the jumpers that got killed there and send them into us. So we spent two days there helping identify the bodies.

Then I no more got home and we had another bad fire down in Plains and I jumped that with a crew and it was a hot one. It took us three tries to stop it. It was going through the ground and we'd get way ahead and start knocking trees down, but it took us the third time before we got the fire down to the ground, then we was able to handle it. Oh, but she got pretty dry and then
the one boy that I dropped in Washington, D.C., Bill Hellman, he was... killed on the Mann Gulch fire.

FC You knew all the fellows obviously?

AC Every one of them, yeah. Two of them had come off of the fire from the evening before that lost their life there. And Bill Hellman was one of the squad leaders that died on that and was, I dropped in Washington, D.C. about a month earlier, I guess, something like that.

FC Did you fly over the Mann Gulch or did you get on site?

AC I did later because I went in and helped put up the crosses and later we went in and put cement crosses in. I was in there a couple of times just puttin' up crosses, helping that way.

FC Did you ever hear about why that happened?

AC Well, ah, the only thing I really know is what I was told by the people I talked to. The fire, when they jumped it, wasn't very big. It was up on the right hand side of Mann Gulch, probably an acre or so when they jumped. By the time they got over there it was gettin' real hot and there was already one man, his name was, I think it was Harrison. He'd been a jumper the summer before, he was on the fire. But he walked in there off the district, and decided well, they wasn't gonna be able to do anything with it. So they started down Mann Gulch and they got down there a little ways and for some reason, I don't know what happened. The fire got down below 'em and that run 'em back out. That was their escape route down Mann Gulch, [it] was blocked.

So then they took off on the other hill, tried to get out that way, and as they were going around up the other side, Wag Dodge stopped. He was an older fella, and probably not in as good a shape as the other jumpers. But he decided the only way he was going to survive it was maybe lighting a fire and let it burn out cuz it was mostly grass fields. So he tried to get 'em to stay, but they decided well, they might make it better if they left, I guess. So they, all of 'em took off and left him and he threw a match down and he said it went right up the hill just right now, right straight up and just a little bit he went up in the burn and laid down. When the main fire come by, well, he said it about picked him up two or three times, but he survived it. And then... this ridge on that side of Mann Gulch had a rimrock right on top of the ridge and it was about, about 10 or 12 foot at least, rock along on that side. There's only a few places where you get over the ridge through the crevices or somethin' and most of the jumpers got caught right under that rimrock because they couldn't get over the top and they got surrounded by fire there.

Two of the fellows, Bob Sallee and Walt Rumsey, they found a place through the rocks and got over on the other side and got into a rock slide and that's where they survived. Then Bill Hellman, he got out of the fire once, but he went back through it to try and help some of the other jumpers. Then he come back out and he died in the hospital the next day. That's just kind of
the way I got the story. I do have the Board of Review report on it.

FC Were you involved in the investigation at all?

AC A little bit, yeah.

FC Who was the interviewing investigating team?

AC Well, uh, there were several of them. I don't remember who all was on that. But I think... no I wouldn't remember all the fellas on that. I know I got to report up there and it probably says right in there. They took it over to get it xeroxed, they wanted copies of it.

FC What effect did that catastrophe have on the jumpers the rest of the year, if any?

AC Well, I don't think it bothered them that much cuz two days later I took a crew down there, to like I say, down by Paradise on a hot fire, no problem.

END OF SIDE A

SIDE B

FC Stick to specific years unless you can tie them down, but you've got quite a few years after '49 in fire experience and pick some of those out to discuss.

AC Let's see, I'm not sure, but Kelly Mountain down by Riggins. We had a, well actually, we ordered eight men for a fire down there at Riggins and it started just above the road and I took eight jumpers down there in the DC-3.

FC You don't remember the year?

AC I think it was '56 or probably right around there. And I got down there and the fire was really starting to get hot. It was right off the road a little bit there. So I decided to drop the jumpers on the other side of the ridge because of what it looked like to me that that fire was gonna really go up through there. So I did and I was awful glad, by the time I got done droppin' the jumpers, that fire just went 40 miles an hour up that hill and burnt everything and then another blast would go and it'd go up. If there had been jumpers in front of it, I don't think they'd have ever been able to get away from it. It run clear to the top where it topped out. But anyway, I dropped the eight jumpers on the other side and I headed back for Missoula.

When I got back there they, one DC-3 was taking off with another load and they loaded up the DC-3 I was on, threw my jump gear on, and I went back and jumped it, too. So when we got back there it was in the evening and we had a real strong down slope wind and it was real steep. But we didn't really know it cuz they were kind of in a hurry. About three airplanes in the pattern,
Two DC-3's and I think a Twin Beech from McCall and they didn't really notice that strong wind right on the ground. We, I think, I jumped first and then a fellow by the name of Bob Nichols jumped with me. And when I got down pretty close to the ground I see there was an awful strong wind. So I turned right around and held into it and I looked backwards going pretty fast and Bob lit in his spot. He lit so fast and hard he broke his ankle.

Then by the time they got all unloaded, I think I had about ten or twelve injuries there and the fire was comin' up. It had worked around below us on our side and I was gettin' worried because I had all those injuries and no way to get them out of there. So we carried the, we had one, his last name was West, I think. I don't remember his first name. But he had a back injury and anyway, we got all the injured guys up on a little bare knob. I left two guys there with him and if the fire got up there, why they were supposed to, you know, keep the fire out. They didn't have much fuel right there. So the rest of us went down and we caught that whole side in just a little while.

FC Ten or twelve injuries on how many jumpers?

AC Well, there was, I think there was around 75 jumpers that ended up there that day.

FC Pretty big show.

AC Yeah. It was out of McCall and there was, let's see, there was 38 from Missoula I know, for sure, and then there was some out of Grangeville. Anyway, I think they had around 70 or 75 jumpers on that by next morning. But we had it all under control the next morning, too.

FC How'd you get the injured out?

AC By helicopter, started by daylight the next morning.

FC Any of them real serious?

AC No, none too real bad. The fellow that we thought was hurt the worst with the back injury, turned out he was just well bruised. We had a broken pelvis, a broken ankle or two, and some bad sprains. I can remember right after I lit, I tore up a lot of dirt and stuff going backwards when I come in. I just stood up and was standing there when a fellow by the name of Joe Lard, a jumper out of Missoula, he hit right up above me, and he was going so fast he just come right down past me. He was only hittin' the ground about every 20 feet. He was rolled up in his chute and he went clear down into the next draw. I went down there and shook him a little and he kind of blinked his eyes and I said, "Are you all right?" He said, "I guess so." He was, [laughs], but I don't know how he survived it. [laughter]. But they were tough, those jumpers.

FC What about some other fires subsequent to that?
Oh, there was one early. I remember we had a lot of jumpers on up in, up by Hungry Horse. I don't remember what year, that's '46 I think. A big one, I think we dropped 75 men on that one and Bob Morgan, supervisor to Bitterroot now, he jumped with me on that pass. We jumped in a, we lit a spot that had lots of logs in it, crisscrossing every way and I landed and, of course, Bob landed not far from me there and I went over and he wasn't saying anything. So I went over and kind of shook him a little bit and he kind of blinked his eyes and "Oh, oh, is it time to get up, time to get up?" [laughs] He thought I was waking him up out of bed in the morning. But what had happened was one of his foot hit a log and his knee come up and hit him in the chin and knocked him out.

He was actually knocked out for a little while?

Yeah, yeah, right. He still remembers, I was talking to him last night about it. Then, let's see, there was, I don't remember too much through the '50's there for awhile as far as any bad fires. I was, I know one year, that had to be maybe in the early '60's, I don't remember. A bunch of the squad leaders and foremen after the fire season ended here and we went down to a fire by Lake Tahoe. They sent a crew, they formed a 25 man crew. We worked on that about a week, I don't remember the name of that one. It wasn't any problem and they brought us back to Reno, gonna ship us home. But we went into a cafe to eat and we come back out and they says, "Well, we're gonna ship you down to Santa Barbara." They had a fire starting at the edge of Santa Barbara, burned up a bunch of houses and took off across country. So down there we went and it was hot and they took us back into that fire. We just unloaded when the old fire was comin' around the hill below us there and they'd taken a Cat [Catipillar bulldozer] and went down the ridge. They scraped that ridge right off for 200 feet, I think, right there and then they were gonna try to stop that fire with a backfire when the main fire come around.

Well anyway they sent this Mexican crew down in there. We'd just arrived and anyway they got their backfire started a little too late and that ol' fire went right over top of them. That old brush down there burned just like gasoline. Well, that Mexican crew, some of them come up the cat trail and we went down and helped 'em up. I remember grabbing one guy by the arm and just peeled the skin off his arm. But we got those out, in a little bit I seen their crew boss and I says, "Are you guys all accounted for"? "Well, I think so." But I wasn't sure they were so Delos Dutton and I went up on the ridge and we listened. Cuz a lot of 'em, that crew went all over in the brush on the other side just to get away from that fire. We listened up there and pretty soon we heard somebody holler down there. Well we knew that they were in trouble and we better try to see what we could do.

We ordered a helicopter and Delos went and gotten that and we ordered all the retardant we could get. I took the rest of the crew and we had two power saws and we started sawing our way down in, in there, try to get down in there, unless you had a way
back out right quick. We got started down in there, didn't go too far and the ol' fire run us out. So we run back up the ridge and started down again and we got down in there a ways and here come an ol' B-17. I don't think he was over 10 feet above the ridge when he dumped his whole load right down that side of us where we needed it. We got down in and we found one fellow crawling on his hands and knees with a broken ankle. We carry him out and then when Delos got back from the chopper he said there were two guys down around the rocks. We got down and got them out and boy, we just barely got back out of there. But we never lost any of 'em.

FC Then it blew up?

AC Oh, yeah, it was right on our tail as we got the last two out. But that ol' B-17 saved their lives, really. While we were doing that, the rest of that Mexican crew was stealin' our gear bags. [laughs] But anyway, I don't know how much they appreciated that. But I think there was about 15 of those people that went to the hospital with burns. But the jumpers, you know, they just tied right in there, and anybody in trouble, they were ready to go and they risked their necks just to get those Mexicans out. That's the kind of people them jumpers were.

FC Were you involved at all in the Sleeping Child fire in 1961 in the Bitterroot?

AC No, I really wasn't. Maybe I dropped cargo on it or something. I did see the fire when it was rolling and I'd come by with jumpers and I had some jumpers on board and I called in and asked if they would like me to put any jumpers on. They said, "Oh, no, we got a crew probably almost there, no use", so I went on in. That probably, I just, I seen it right after it started. But we didn't jump it because they didn't want us to. It got to be a big fire.

FC Involved all on para-cargo drops?

AC Oh yeah. I'd done a lot of cargo dropping. Of course, I've done a lot of parachute packing after I was 40. Well, I'd run the parachute loft and I remember some of them real busy years. I probably averaged 16 to 18 hours a day working out there packing parachutes. I seen times when jumpers are all out and I had no chutes on the shelf hardly and I'd patch 'em, patch up the holes and pack 'em and I'd get 'em, I'd get eight on the shelf and here would come eight jumpers and away they would go with my chutes. So, but we kept a, I had two myself. But then in '66 they come down from Alaska and they wanted a man to go up there and head of their crew so I took that job. They asked me on Thursday if I would take the job and wanted me there Monday morning.

FC That was the BLM?

AC Yeah, BLM.
You transferred over, then.

Yes, so I went up there and spent the next eight years in Fairbanks with Alaska jumpers.

What type of facilities did they have in Fairbanks?

Oh, they had a nice loft building and a barracks upstairs. And the first year I was up there, I think at one time we had a real bad fire season. We had, one time we had 200 jumpers up there helping us that were from the states, like McCall, Missoula. We really had a lot of fires, we were real busy that first year.

In '66?

Yeah. In '67, I think we were real busy, too.

You didn't get down in the Region 1 in the '67 season, did you?

About a month. See, our fire season got over up there, well, it started raining and that's when the bad fires were down here. Like the, what's that one, that was at Trapper's Peak over there by Sandpoint and that other one...

Sundance?

Sundance, yeah the Sundance and of course, I only dropped cargo on those. And then I helped, I brought all my crew down that I had and they jumped fires. There's one thing that happened after I went to Alaska the first winter. I, they didn't have anything in the manual, the BLM manual about smokejumping or age or anything like that. So the first winter I was there I wrote it up and I wrote that you could still, still keep jumping after 40 as long as you could pass the physical. And it wasn't long before the Forest Service took it up, too. So we got rid of the 40 deal. [laughs]

You did it yourself?

I started it up there, yeah. Why there's no reason why you can't, you know, if you're in shape. All the experience you have, that helps you a lot, too.

Well, if you were down in Region 1 during the '67 fire season for a month, what activities were you involved in then?

Well, I done some field packing and they didn't want me, they didn't want me to jump down here, so I drove bus for them. I went and picked up jumpers for 'em and whatever they had to do. I dropped cargo for 'em. Whatever there was to do and then my jumpers they just filled in on the jump list and started jumping with Missoula jumpers. I don't know if some of 'em got 5 or 6 jumps in that month while we was here. Some of 'em had to go back
to school, of course, so they kept dwindling away. But that's one thing about the jumpers, there were, we got old jumpers, lots of 'em, that made their way, made their money to pay their way through school. Like we got dentists, we got doctors, we got lawyers, everything, now that are jumpers. Of course, we've got a lot of them in the higher parts of the Forest Service, too, and BLM.

FC  What would you consider your closest call when you were jumping?

AC  Umm.

FC  Most hairy experience.

AC  [Laughs] I don't know. It might've been that jump I made in up there in head of White Cap on that rescue jump. When I broke all those snags off. I must have fell, went over and hit a spruce tree and that was a big spruce too. I come down head first for about thirty feet and lit into that wash. If it wasn't for that, I would have lit right on my head. I did hurt my legs, but that was, it was kind of a hairy jump all right. That was in '45, I think.

FC  Any other hairy fire jumps?

AC  Well, I, there was another little hairy deal in, I don't remember what year that was. We dropped cargo up in Yellowstone Park and it was real rough. It was in the DC-3, and it was so rough that we'd come across a spot sometimes, it was awful hard to keep your cargo on the floor or anyplace. I know I got all skinned up and we lost one bundle a little ways before we were supposed to drop it. But, which was not too bad. But then we come around, in those days we used to throw the beds out in bundles of eight, just roped 'em together. Being it was rough and the pilot was keepin' up the air speed pretty good. Well we piled our bundle of beds on the leading edge of the horizontal stabilizer on the back, and we kicked out a bunch of beds. Well that set up a flutter in the tail back there and up front the ol' wolf was shaking the devil out of the pilot. So I was ready to leave that airplane anytime because I figured that tail was gonna come off. But anyway, he went on down, he tried to slide that bundle of beds off the tail and he slid it out. He'd slow down as much as he dared and he switch the tail over and he slid 'em out right close to the end. But that was worse yet, it just wouldn't come off. So then we went on in to Bozeman, set down at the airport there and just as soon as the wheels touched down, we slowed down a little bit, and they fell right off.

FC  That was one tail hang-up.

AC  [Laughter]

FC  Any more?
AC Well, I didn't have any like that. I had my chute all over the tail of the Travelaire once, but I pulled it off, no, no bad...

FC Cargo chute or your own chute?

AC No, my own, my backpack.

FC Tell me more about that.

AC Well, in them days we had what we called a bungee cover. We didn't lace a cover on and some of them ol' bungee covers were a little loose. Well, the Travelaire door, I was the lead, well, as I went out the door I think I caught the Travelaire just a little bit and the whole chute spilled right there in the door as I went out. Anyway it blew right back all over that tail. I guess it scared the people in the airplane a lot worse than it did me.

FC Didn't scare you, huh?

AC Well, I didn't even see it. I just felt somethin' that was a little different, you know, and I looked up. But I'd pulled it off by then. We had a jumper worked for me up at Fairbanks that had a real close one. He was, the name's Gene Hobbs, he's over at Orofino now, a schoolteacher. I think he's a principal of a Junior High over there. But he was a squad leader up there working for me, and he was droppin' jumpers over out of McGrath. Anyway, he was standing there when before he was droppin' jumpers and some way the chute, his pack got open and it went out the door and that just yanked him about six or eight feet out the side of that airplane right out with him. And he really got broken up, he had a lot of broken bones and anyway went back in. We weren't sure if we had a dead man or not. It was hard to even drop the jumpers we had left because of the, I wasn't on board, but they's tellin' me that they had to rig up something to hook up the jumpers that were in there so they could go down and see if he was still alive and if they could help him. And they did get a couple jumpers down there and he was still alive and they sent a chopper in and took him out. I think about... he's gettin', this is the best I've seen him since then, in probably about '67 or '68 along there somewhere when he got hurt. He was here last night.

FC That was Hodges?


FC H-O-B-B-S?

AC Yeah.

FC How was he injured?

AC Well, tearing out the side of the airplane.
FC  No, I mean physically what did he break?

AC  Well, he had a lot of broken bones. I think one leg was broken three or four or five places and arms, really had, I don't know. He was really beat up, just amazes me that he's still alive.

FC  How did they get him out?

AC  By helicopter. They sent two jumpers down and they radioed that he was still alive. So they got the closest helicopter that I think was in McGrath and they come and picked him up and took him into the hospital in Anchorage. Really didn't expect him to live, for pert near a week, but he's still in real good shape. Now he looks real good.

FC  Describe the damage to the aircraft.

AC  Well, I didn't see that, but what I heard and I did see pictures. But it took out the whole doorway and several of those panels that goes clear back to just in front of the tail. It just ripped a big hole in it. When you can see a chute going out and then pullin' a guy, that's standing back of it, see that chute goes out around you.

FC  His body tore the plane?

AC  Yeah, that's right, his body tore the whole side of that airplane out.

FC  What did the fellas on board have to say, did you get a chance to talk to them?

AC  Well, they, oh yeah, they figured that probably he was dead, that he'd never make it, even after he got in the hospital. They supposed he'd physically never make it and the damage he done to that airplane, that... you're just amazed that something like that could happen and a guy still survives it.

FC  Do you have any comments about staying with the ship, gettin' out of there?

AC  No, well, it wasn't bothering the ship quite too much because, you know, they used to fly the DC-3's. I used to drop lookouts with it. 22 foot timbers used to be for lookouts and you got a double door in those you can take out and that makes quite a big hole there anyway. So they, as long as you don't turn to the left, no, that's to the right. And if you turn to the right and switch the tail around it throws a lot of wind in the back of the ship and it causes problems. But as long as you're real careful on your turns and everything, well that big hole, and that hole probably that they had there was bigger than that. But it, they didn't have any problem gettin' back in.

Those lookouts I used to drop were pre-fab houses they put in toward the, I don't know, I dropped 'em around Moose Creek, Clearwater. That was a project we used to do in the spring when
snow was still on there and then the timbers, some of those timbers weighed three hundred pounds or so. Twenty-two foot in a DC-3 runs the timbers clear up behind the co-pilot, see. What we'd do is put a chute on the end and we had a plank in that double door and had it tilted a little bit. We'd run about a third of that while we were making a circle, we'd run about a third of that timber out. Then when we got to where we were supposed to drop it, well, usually I was on that end and I'd just run for the door and throw the end and the chute out at the same time and we'd get done dropping the lookout. Well, we'd go back and look and here's all these timbers stuck in the snow. It just looked like we planted a black forest down there.

FC That was before roller systems were developed.

AC Yeah, right, that's just before, we used a plank.

FC So the chute actually pulled the timbers out.

AC No, no. We threw 'em out and the chute was on the end that we put out last.

FC OK.

AC See, we used to slide a bunch of that timber clear out so all they had to do, it didn't take long, was almost at a place where you could lift it up and down, like a teeter-totter. And when the, when we got ready, we'd just run for the door and with that creosote timber it slid real easy. And boy, it would just shootin' out of there. Then we used some of the old Army baseball chutes that were disposable so we wouldn't have to go in and retrieve the chutes. They were made out of muslin and machine packed, so they were, we got rid of a lot of those that we'd gotten from the Army. But I know that one spring we dropped in five lookouts out.

FC Did you ever get involved in other unusual type cargo drops other than routine camp equipment and say, lookouts?

AC Well, I can remember another time where we dropped a sawmill into a place down there on the Clearwater. They wanted to build a bridge, I think that was above Canyon Ranger Station. We dropped in a whole sawmill and they sawed the lumber and built the bridge. And I think they put about four chutes on the engine cuz it weighed about 800 lbs, but she made her fine.

FC What year, do you remember?

AC I don't remember that year, that had to be backinthe, probably the '50's.

FC How about wildlife and Herb Oertli?

AC Well, I just, maybe say somethin' about one time on a, it was early in the spring and it was down by Shear, Shear landing
field up back in, I don't remember what the name of the creek was. But that area pretty much full of rattlesnakes. But anyway, we jumped on that fire, it was early in the spring and there was, I think there was four of us jumped on it.

FC  What forest?

AC  It was on the Shear Landing Field and that would be on the Nez Perce, see. It was on the Nez Perce, remember Shear Guard Station, Shear landing field? It's about 20 some miles above Moose Creek on the Selway and... anyway, we jumped in there. We lined the fire and Herb was always kind of leary of rattlesnakes. So anyway, we got the lines on, we decided we'd go back around the top there and have some dinner. We'd already laid our beds out, his was just above mine. We had leveled off a spot on the hillside so we could put our beds out and we come back there to eat, well, here was a rattlesnake curled up on the foot of his bed. [laughs]

FC  Somebody put him there?

AC  No, no. The snake crawled up there by himself cuz there was nobody around to do that. First, that kind of scared ol' Herb. So it crawled down into some logs and stuff. He'd used to kind of bank up the dirt to keep his bed from rolling down. So anyway, I finally got the shovel and cut the snake's head off. So then we ate, sat down and started eating lunch and just a little bit, well, here come, here come a little bear walking around the hill. He walked, oh, he must've got about 10 feet of me and he just walkin' along, he never knew we were there. He never seen us. I hollered at him, boy, he went a tearin' out of there and then we ate our lunch and started back down our fire line. Herb was all spooky then. We just got down there a little ways, there was a little bluff there was a grouse flew out of there and I think Herb jumped about 10 feet. We went on down the trail a little bit further and bzzzzzzz, right there in the trail here was a rattlesnake and then he really took off. [laughs].

FC  Any other stories about Herb?

AC  [Laughs] Oh, I can remember when him, that was back in '46, when him and I was planting some of these stubs that... Remember the old telephone poles? They used to, when they draw it off, they'd put various stubs along side and run bolts through and use the same pole again. Well, some of 'em were pretty heavy and we used to have a creosote plant there at Nine Mile and creosote. Herb and I was, we just piled 'em up and they were heavy. They were oh, they were mostly, probably weighed 100 pounds or better and I was carryin' 'em up and droppin' on the top of the pile. And I dropped this one on there, my foot was down underneath there about two layers down and I dropped it on there and it whammed me on the foot, see. And I was hoppin' around there a little bit and stinging and Herb was laughing at me. So pretty soon I took my shoe off and that, I got hit right there on the next toe from the big one and I took my sock off. Well here, it
just flipped my toenail right off from the back and it was just hangin' by a little skin in front. Oh Herb says, "Gee, I guess you had somethin' to dance about." [Laughs]

FC  How about some other characters that you've known over the years that might be interesting to talk about?

AC  Well, I don't know. Hal Samsel, he could tell you a lot of stories pretty fast. You'll probably interview him.

FC  You have any stories on Hal?

AC  Not really too many. Let's see, the first time, the first fire jump Hal Samsel ever made, he jumped with me. He was on my crew, we jumped over Myrtle Creek out of, across there from Bonners Ferry. We had a pretty good size fire there and anyway, it, the air was pretty rough. We jumped way up on top, had an earthquake and anyway, Sam got sick. He made it to the ground and I told him, well, he was in pretty bad shape, so I left, and told him whenever you get to feeling' good come on over to the fire. So that was the first time I really remembered 'ol Sam and that was his first fire jump. That was, that happened, maybe that was '45.

FC  Any other characters?

AC  [Laughs]

FC  Nick names?

AC  Oh, I could tell one on ol' "Paper Legs Pete". [laughs] That's kind of a beer drinkin' story.

FC  Well, that's a good one. He was mostly down in McCall, did he... ?

AC  Yeah, he was and he, you know, that was in '60 when I, I had quite a time trying to convince 'em that I had to go back down to Silver [City] for one year. And they finally said I could. I was a foreman here and they didn't really want me to go. But they finally said I could, so "Paper Legs Pete", he used to go down there every year practically, out of McCall. But he heard, he was a good beer drinker and he heard I could drink a little beer. So when I got ready to go well, they took and drove his car, about four of 'em drove, took out of here, left the afternoon before. Then we got in the airplane the next morning and flew down and we got there in about two hours. Well, here they pulled in. I didn't know Pete really very well, yet, but first thing he does is come over to me and says, "Come on Al, let's go have a few beers." So we went out to, I think it was Casa Loma and we started on pitchers of beer. Well it wasn't, before we got through, I had to drive his car back to the barracks and I had to carry him in the barracks. So he found out I could keep up with him. So we were real good buddies after that. But everytime he got a few too many beers, he'd always give me the keys, "See I
get home." But he could drink a lot of beer, we'd tell the kids, course we was both older, you know, we'd tell 'em, "Oh, we're just going out to have a few beers." Well, it was pitchers of beer, it wasn't bottles. [laughs] So, he was a good beer drinker.

FC Did that affect the jumping the next day?

AC No, no. We never did go out very often, too much. Actually, it never did.

FC I see you brought an old photo album along. Maybe you might want to look at some of these pictures and discuss some of the items in there.

AC Well, they're kind of mixed up. Some of these years, some of these aren't even jump pictures. Got it off?

FC You got a couple photo albums?

AC Yeah, a bunch of these are just pictures of that Washington, D.C. thing. There's one of those big black convertibles. Oh, that gal there in Washington D.C., that colored girl that I was talkin' about who run the elevator. That was the question she asked now, I mean, she says, "Where were you boys goin' in that big, black cadillac?" [laughs] See, there's two of the guys there in one of 'em. Just like they do with the President or somethin', I guess. They put 'em in the back of one of those convertibles.

FC V.I.P.'s

AC Yeah.

FC What about some other pictures?

AC Most of those are on that trip in Washington, D.C. There's the president of Bristol-Meyers, I guess that Bill Dratz had given him something, says on the back of it, I think. There's a [inaudible]... there's a picture of the Washington Monument in the background.

FC Most of these are of the Washington jump then?

AC Yeah, them are. These used to all be in here in order and everything, but people got to lookin' and they've just taken it all apart. I think that other one ... called Timber Pilots?

FC I read that, yeah.

AC That's, they sold her there. Larry [inaudible]. There's ol' Al Cramer, 1943.

FC Haven't changed much, have you?
AC [Laughs] I guess not. There's ol' Frank Derry. He trained about, I don't know, 10 or 12 doctors, Army doctors, in '43 that fall. You see there was snow on the ground when we were jumping at the end of the season.

FC For rescue missions?

AC Yeah, so they could jump and rescue. Dr. Little, I don't know if you ever heard of him, over in Helena.

FC He was our personal physician in Helena when I was stationed there.

AC Well, he was one of 'em we trained and he used to, when he first come back out of the Army, he would come over here if we needed him. And he did a couple of times and then finally we got helicopters and stuff and there was no use.

FC We used him when Dale Spodeen broke his back.

AC Yeah, well, see I was on the airplane when Dale Spodeen got hurt. I was check spottin' I think when Spodeen got hurt.

FC You were with Dutton, you say?

AC I was in the airplane, I was check spottin', he was doing the spottin' and I was trainin' him, he was doing the, yeah.

FC What do you remember about that injury?

AC Well, I was really a little surprised. It was, conditions were marginal, you know. But he hit into one of the better lookin' places. But I guess he hit a rock just right in the back of his neck or head or somethin' that paralyzed him.

FC I understand it was about the size of your fist.

AC Well, I don't think it was a big one and he hit into the area that we was tryin' to get him into. It was somethin' that maybe was just, well, see there was... probably we didn't have the protection right where that hit him. And it wasn't too long after that that I made a suggestion that, I got paid a little on that, we had the boards in our backpack trays were made out of plywood and so I made the suggestion that we make them out of fiberglass which is a lot stronger. See, because we had jumpers that run into trees backwards and stuff and maybe knock a big hole in that, you know, and it could've injured their backs. So after we put that plywood in it takes an awful wham to, you know, do anything with that plywood board. So that was one of the safety deals and I think that probably come right after he got hurt. Which probably would've made him, might have even protected his, but it might have been too, that it hit him right between where that board would be and his helmet or somethin', too. Was it in his lower back or upper? It was his upper?
FC  No, it was right, one of the vertebrae close to his neck that, cuz he couldn't feel a sharp instrument on his arms or his legs when he was at the hospital.

AC  Well, that's what I thought and it was probably might have been the rock hit right between his board and his helmet, see, which would take a small rock, really, to do much damage there, you'd think. You haven't got that on, tell you why you just...

FC  Honor award, Albert Cramer, awarded this certificate of honor for superior service, signed by Director of the Bureau of Land Management, Berkland, what was his first name?

AC  Uh, I don't know. Kurt, or is it Kurt? I don't know.

FC  27th day of May, 1974. What was this for?

AC  This was when I retired and for my service. No, they got a little write up there, too. Oh, I went out there to train, or give the riggers there exams. I was a rigger examiner up there, too, cuz, for the...

FC  Fort Wainwright?

AC  Yeah.

FC  Where's that?

AC  That's the fort right just out of Fairbanks, there. It's the Army fort, it used to be Ladd years ago when they had the war going on and then they made the new air base out at Eielson which is about 22 miles out and they changed that. Changed the name to Wainwright, from Ladd to Wainwright and made it an Army Base.

FC  Were you ever involved with the assisting and training of those personnel?

AC  Yeah. Well, because I was, see I was one of 'em up there qualified to give rigger exams so I went out and did those, those guys...

FC  What other incidents might you recall that really stick out with your memory as far as excitement or lots of fun?

AC  Oh, I can [laughs]. I can tell you about another fire down on the loft that was called the ash pile fire.

FC  What year?

AC  That was a hot one, I'm not sure what year that was either, probably, might have been early 60's in there. But it was one of those that started down along the highway there, up at the highway. So it had to be in the 60's probably. But I was, Hugh Fowler was spotting, he had the old C-46 and boy that fire was
hot. He could feel the heat up in the air in the door of the airplane and so we flew around that several times trying to decide. Delos Dutton was going to jump it and Hugh Fowler was spottin' and I was just checkin'. My responsibility, what we did when you're a check spotter or you know, you have to get somebody out. Anyway, we decided if we were going to do any good we'd have to jump on this ridge up there and they'd have to try to stop it there. So we talked it all over and we dropped 'em. They did lose a parachute or two, but at least they got down, they did stop the fire there, but...

FC  How do you mean lose a parachute?

AC  Well, where they landed and before they got the fire stopped, it burn up. Burn up the chute before, you know. We knew we had to be, but they did have a good way to escape. We was always careful that way. I know when we got in, well, one pilot kind of ridiculed us for jumping there. They thought we'd lose the guys and everything else. But they stopped the fire for 'em and there wasn't that much danger. We talked it all over and anytime we had anything like that, you know, we made our own decisions.

FC  What was the reason it was so touchy?

AC  Because that fire was really burnin' hot and comin' up out of there and the only place you was gonna stop it was up at this ridge, you see.

FC  You were thinking about jumping above it?

AC  Well, we had to if we were going to do any good, see, to stop in on that ridge. But by jumping 'em right there on that ridge, if it overran 'em, they'd have the other way to go down, see. They could have got out of there. But, of course, they were pourin' retardant on it, too. But they stopped it, it was one of them hot ones. I tell about a little trip way back in the Hell's Canyon, that was early in the spring. We had, matter of fact, I think it was the 8th of May, just before we started training. We had a fire in the Seven Dells and there was, I think there was eight of us jumped in there about 200 acres, been burnin' around there for awhile and snow wasn't too far above us. Anyway, the first night we were there, it snowed six inches on us, and so the next morning we just went around, rolled up snowballs and put on the logs.

We put the fire out the next day, a couple hundred acres. Then the only way out of there, we had to go down to the Snake River. There was, oh five or six miles down to this Wilson Camp and then another mile or two down to the Snake River right down there by little Hell's Canyon. We was supposed to catch the boat that come up from Lewiston and ride out to Lewiston. But anyway, when we got down there the ol' Snake River was high and full of driftwood. So we walked 25 miles down to a place just below Johnson Bar. On the Oregon side was a dude place, they boated us across and we stayed there at this dude place and waited for the
boat. While we was there, well, that guy treated us real well. He had no dudes there so we played his slot machines and drank some of his booze. I remember we'd run out of nickels, he'd open a slot machine and start all over again. We just... kind of waitin' for that boat to show up. Well, I asked him one day, "How do you catch those sturgeon?"

END OF THE INTERVIEW