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Paul Bryce interviewed by Jim Norgaard, Smokejumpers Oral History Project. 7/20/84. OH# 133-12.

JN  I guess, Paul the first question I wanted to ask you was what were you doing prior to smokejumping?

PB  Well I was going to school, the forestry school at Penn State. In my freshman year they always fixed everybody up with jobs in the forest, if they wanted them. Each university got parceled out so many allocations and it turned out that Penn State would up with Region Six. So that anybody that wanted to signed up for a trail crew job, lookout job or something. My name got drawn for Cave Junction, Oregon, to work at the ranger district there. So I sent in the application for the trail crew or something like that and I got a letter back from Cliff Marshall, the smokejumper foreman. They were short of people that year, in fact grievously short, they only had about six people.

JN  What year was this?

PB  1951. They only had about six people show up. So he sent me the forms and the application, of course I had minimal fire experience, I think I had about two fires in Pennsylvania and that was about it. But... so I sent him back the forms and he wrote me another letter saying that I didn't have sufficient experience so on and so forth. So I didn't pay it any mind. In the meantime I had wrecked a motorcycle and was recovering from that and oh, about two weeks after that I guess, I got another letter from Cliff saying that my application had been accepted. OK, fine, great wrote him a letter saying yeah I'd show up. At the end of the school year then I just jumped on a bus and came on out to Cave Junction.

JN  Did you have any ideas of what you were in for?

PB  No, but it didn't make any difference.

JN  It was a job in forestry.

PB  Sure. It wasn't so much in forestry, I wanted to get out here any way and see the country.

JN  What were your first impressions when you got out here and saw the outfit? What did you think of it?

PB  Oh I really think that the place is so much different today than it was that you really have to go back and think, well hell, all Cave Junction had at that time was a new loft building, the mess hall was in a tent, the latrine and the shower facilities was in a tent. There was one little eight room barracks in which they crammed twenty some people into. Four men to a room, rooms were a third of the size of this.

JN  That would be about six by eight.
PB  I couldn't estimate. There was just enough room for two
double bunks stacked on top each other and four wall lockers,
standard type, standard type wall lockers. And the field was
unpaved at that time, it was just a gravel field.

JN  Landing field?

PB  Landing field was unpaved. And they had a... all they had was
a concrete hard stand where they fueled the airplane and that
was about it. And a wind sock, they did have a wind sock.

JN  What's a wind sign?

PB  Wind sock.

JN  Oh, OK, tell which way the wind is going.

PB  Right, that was the sum total of the facility at the time.
Of course the training facility with the towers and the rope
swings and the calisthenics and the obstacle course.

JN  How long had they been using that base?

PB  Well they opened it on a temporary basis in 1943, and I
think it went full time in 1947 or '48. They housed and trained
people down at the Ranger station in Cave Junction in the early
years and then finally built the facility at the airport. It was
about five miles from the town of Cave Junction, where the field
was itself, out by O'Brien. Over the years, of course, it grew,
we constantly built and improved the place. It was all done with
hand Gobi labor. It was called the Gobi, in fact Danny On named
it. He was a rare flower there, Danny portentously announced at
dinner one time that it was found only two places in the world,
the airstrip there and the Gobi desert. So after that, the base,
to the the guys that worked there was always known as the Gobi,
[laughs].

JN  Danny jumped there, then too.

PB  Oh yeah, he jumped sometime in '40 then came back there in
'52, that's when I jumped with him. I think he was there in '52
up through '56, I am not sure, the Forest Service would have his
records. In the interim I started going to school in Montana.
After the summer of '52, Danny and I jumped. He was getting his
master's then so I signed up here. Then went into the service and
screwed around and eventually graduated here in '58.

JN  What were the people like, that you worked with, at first?

PB  They were all first class people. Each one was a total
individual... a minimum of regimentation or anything, since it
was a volunteer outfit, the discipline was a lot tighter than if
someone had been screaming like a First Sergeant. In either
case, you're free to leave when ever you want to. Extremely
competent people, Cliff Marshall was the foreman, Ford
Lindberger, who subsequently had the Alaska outfit, was Senior Squad leader. And Rod Newton was squad leader there for many years. In 1956 Jimmy Allen, no, he took over in '54 or in '55.

JN And you jumped til what year?

PB I went '51 and '52, and then '56 and then Redding in '57. Then started at Redding, quit and went back to Cave Junction in '58. So I think I covered basically '51 to '58 timespan.

JN What was that first jump season like, your training?

PB Oh, it was good. They had the average, at least at Cave Junction, if you got two or three jumps a year, that was good. In my first season I got five jumps and that was really a busy season. Of course we had several ground fires, too. So we made a lot of money, got to see a lot of country and a lot of fires, everybody came away happy. It was a drought year, we went a hundred and ten days without rain, or something like that, lots of lightning. For that base, it was a banner year. '52 was a rainy year and still we all wound up with six or seven fire jumps that year too.

JN Did smoke jumping surprise you with the expectations they had? Was it what you thought it was?

PB No, it was a free way to see the country. We went into most places nobody would ever get in their lifetime. Mainly because they are not worth going to [laughs]. It was a lot of fun, a lot of hard work. The pack outs were a bitch. The standard load weighed nearly ninety seven pounds. When you carry that through the good old Oregon brush for five, six, ten hours at a time, you know you have done a days work.

JN What about training at Newman's camp, what was that like?

PB It was just standard training. You did your morning run, your calisthenics, went through the obstacle course, and this that and the other thing. Then two hours on the shock tower and so much practicing let down, and this that and the other thing. And when they have a break or something you go pick Gobi rocks or something, fill in the time. It took them along time to train us because there were so many of us. They trained twenty-two or twenty-four men that year. It was well into July before we finally started our practice jumps. We went straight through our practice jumps and then I think about two days later, we had our first fire. Which was great, because you went from your second practice jump, which was to pull up, land in the tree, make a let down type jump. Within a couple of days, bang, you're out on the real thing in a fire. It continues like that through the summer. So we kept busy, there weren't any real long lags between fires. Which was fine by us, because then we didn't have to go through all the training bullshit, two miles every morning and so on and so forth. They would slack off on that if people were actually out on fires.
JN  What's this two miles every morning that you would have to do, jog?

PB  It's running, yeah. We'd make the morning run out through the tuley weeds, go cross country, up and down roads, whatever, calisthenics. Always did it right after breakfast, that'll help toughen you up in other ways, too.

JN  And the shock tower, what kind of tower did they have there?

PB  The one in '51 was a plain old wooden scaffold, looked like an oil derrick or a gallows.

JN  Did anybody compare it to a gallows?

PB  That's what it looked like because where the rope ran up and over, there was a beam that looked exactly like a gallows, it had an angle and a support brace underneath it. And of course a net, a net at the bottom of it. In those days we used the old three point jockey box harness. I don't know if you've ever seen one or not.

JN  No, I haven't

PB  It was a WW II type quick release harness. It had a safety clip on it pull that out, rotate a button on the top, hit it and the thing fell apart. Which make it easy to make a let down, rather than doing all sorts of chin ups and everything else to get out of the previous Dow harness.

JN  Is this your practice equipment or your actual jumping equipment?

PB  The harness was the actual jumping equipment. Everybody had their own set of gear, whatever size to use. They had small outfits for the small men and so on and so forth. And the harness had to be adjusted to your height. Actually you'd tighten the thing up to where you couldn't stand up straight, you were always hunched over. Because when you got the opening shock and you were hanging it in, why then the risers were right there at shoulder level. The big trouble with that harness was that if you got out of position, if you went out of the door out of position, that jockey box, which sat here, would come up and rap you in the breastbone.

JN  It's supposed to sit right at your chest?

PB  Supposed to sit in your belly button, but when the opening shock came it wound up here, at your sternum. Which is why they had such rigorous training, because you could actually sustain a... we had one guy split his sternum and he was out of it for the whole season. They impressed you at all times, to have good position going out the door or you were going to pay for it. And by God you did. You went out sloppy, why that thing rapped the living hell out of you.
JN You had a static line at that time didn't you?

PB Yeah, you had a static line all the time. The only free falls that were made were the first ones made over the Okanogan, back in '39, something like that. Then they decided that was too risky, so they went to... we've always used static lines. It was funny, that old hemp rope that we had eventually had all the spring taken out of it, and when you rattle, rattle, bang, hit the bottom of it, you stopped dead, 'chomp' like that. So everybody complained it was too stiff. So Liber ran out and he went over and he got great big coil springs and he rigged this thing up to... the thing, and the rope went up over that, and after that everybody said,"God, that's a real improvement." Well, one of the guys was an engineer and he went to analyze that coil spring and there was no give to that spring anyway, but everybody thought there was, [laughs].

JN This was on the tower?

PB Yeah, on the tower.

JN OK, just a psychological thing. Did that tower feel like an actual jump after you jumped or was that different?

PB No, there was no slipstream or wind. The opening shock on the tower were generally never as severe as the airplane, with a few minor occasions, when you had a bad accident or something like that. I think we would spend, I remember we'd spend at least an hour sometimes more each day in training, fully suited up. You'd climb up to the top of this tower and they'd hook you up and bang down, then get in line and go up there and do it again. It was good training, it was the best training device they had. They went to other things later on but none were as good as the old shock tower.

JN Is there anything in the training you thought wasn't that good?

PB No, it was all good, everything they taught us was useful, designed to a specific end. Some you didn't like.

JN Like, for instance?

PB Well, nobody much liked climbing. It was a royal pain in the ass. But in Cave Junction you're looking at hundred and fifty foot Doug Firs down there, or the redwoods, they'd send us down to the redwoods and they'd take a hundred and ten foot let down rope and replace it with a two hundred and twenty and there were no happy smiling faces then, [laughs].

JN So you actually did jump into the redwoods, then?

PB Not into the redwoods, nobody in their right mind would do that. But it was along just in case there was a wind shift and you got unlucky and did wind up in the redwood, you didn't have
to tie your shoe laces together to get down. We absolutely
avoided tall timber like that, every time we could. Once in a
while it was unavoidable. You had these small brush patches you'd
try to get into, if you didn't you could conceivably wind up in a
big old fir. But we were trained for it. Missoula guys, they
hated it up, all they had were these little pecker poles. They
never liked Cave Junction at all. But at the Gobi anyway they
insisted that we be totally competent with hooks and spurs and
everything else. You had to go back up and get the chute out,
there was no leaving it. What you went in with you came out with.
The battery pack, the flashlight batteries, the C Rations and
that was it. Everything else came out, even that crummy little
burlap parachute they used to drop cargo to the fire fighters.
They were very cost conscious in those days. I learned very early
on that Marshall was a cheap mother, a penny pincher.

JN  Did you feel a slightage on any of the equipment then?

PB  No. We mostly made our own. Missoula developed the patterns
for the canvas suit and the pads and everything. They used old
Red Grange type football helmets, you know those little leather
ones with the cross on top. The face strainer in front and the
chutes were all, there were a few new ones, but mostly they were
war surplus. In fact back then they still had the old white
chutes, the old Navy chutes, very few of the red and white candy
striped you see now. Later on, by the mid and late fifties, the
Forest Service got more money so they got rid of all the old
chutes and wound up turning the other ones just into cargo
chutes. Hell, a lot of those early chutes, hell, they were made
in 19... some of them were silk, made in '41, '42, '43. After
the training was over, they'd split the crew up and some of them
would work project jobs and so many of the guys would be loft
coolies. They'd train so many men as irregulars. You get to
repair chutes and repair lines and pack chutes and all the other
loft work that had to be done.

JN  Would you stick to those positions or would you switch off
between them?

PB  Once you got your riggers license and were a loft coolie you
were pretty well dedicated as a loft coolie and that was it. If
you got pissed off you could switch with somebody else and go out
and keep Gobi watch if you wanted.

JN  What was the preferred thing? What did people want to do as
far as project work?

PB  Oh, just about anything. One year we dug a well, everybody
hated that, great big caisson. Basically located on glacial till
consisting of this endless series of these big buckskin boulders
called Gobi rocks, all inter locked together. You'd no sooner
dig one out then you'd find three more you'd have to dig out to
get that one out. So sinking that caisson took about ninety days
in the summer. To get down thirty feet.
JN  What was the well for, the base?

PB  Yeah, the well was for the base, everything, the only thing that came in the base was outside power and an old hand cranked telephone line in those days. We had a radio, we did have a radio that was linked to the Forest Service, and we would chatter back and forth to headquarters in the daytime. Other than that it was all very basic.

JN  What about life at the base, what was that like to you?

PB  Oh it was great when the weekends came. We had a whole series of good hot warm summers down there. There was a creek, irrigation ditch ran right through the middle of the complex. The creek that fed it was about a mile away, and there was a swimming hole there. So when you weren't on stand-by in the weekend, you could go off and go swimming, Saturday or Sunday afternoon. The town of Cave Junction was very small, I think one movie and that was it, and they eventually got a drive in. But, oh we'd go into Grant's Pass or something like that, rubberneck around.

JN  What do you mean by rubberneck?

PB  Oh, chase women mostly, if we weren't sloshing down beer in a bar. Of course most of us were under age, very young crew that year.

JN  How old was under age?

PB  Well, drinking age was twenty one and we were all eighteen, nineteen, twenty, very few of us over twenty-one. Some of the guys, some of the WW II veterans were. Oh, we'd run up to the Oregon Caves monument and go girling up there, they had a stamp and College females, spent the summer up there. But they were highly restricted and chaperoned. Pretty hard to work any problems to any great extent. They weren't allowed off the base, or off their property at all, had to be in bed by eleven o'clock or something unfortunately, university dorms. Both those early years were busy years, we were out on a lot of fires, mostly over weekends, didn't have too much time to screw around.

JN  After those two years you had less fires?

PB  No, I went into the service for three years and came back in '56. They had expanded the crew by six or seven people by then and had built a bunch of buildings. We had a new mess hall, a new barracks, which was rather plush by our standards. So you got your choice of living in the old grungy barracks or the new one. And they paved the runway which was a big improvement. And they had more money to spend, so they had more airplanes. By that time, we started out with Noorduyn-Norseman and... the first two years, I think I jumped out of Norseman, Trimotor Ford, an old Fokker and a Fairchild on standby. I went out of the Fairchild once.
JN What was that plane like?

PB Oh, it looked like the Spirit of St. Louis. Big high winged monoplane, big single rotary engine on it, sat up forward with a little narrow window, about this wide, very narrow, it was about this wide, elbow to elbow. So when they'd load us in, the pilot had to get in first, then they had to throw the firepacks in, the cargo, and then the jumpers went in backwards. Because you couldn't turn around inside the damned thing, so they had you facing the tail. then the spotter climbed up over everybody else, sat on top of the fire packs and we took off.

JN What was the door like that you jumped out of?

PB It was little, a little round, oval door, about this big, you'd have to step on the outside.

JN About what diameter?

PB Oh, I don't know, call it two and a half feet, something like that. I don't know how high. But you had to get up on top of this thing and out onto the step. Very restricting movement. But it was like going out of a balloon. The damned thing had a stall speed of about forty miles an hour or so. When you went out of it, it was like stepping out of an elevator.

JN And you only jumped out of that once?

PB Yeah, just once. It was a contract ship, it was only there for standby. They had fire busts both '51 and '52, why they brought the Missoula crew down. So they'd bring a Doug down and when they did, they'd fly them down in the old Doug, a DC-3 and we'd get to jump out of that. They'd mix the crews together and when you had everybody scattered on fire, the first eight men that came back, it didn't matter where they came from, they went out in the next one. Mad scramble for a period of about a week or a period of something like that. People were coming in from everywhere, going out on fire.

JN Is there any competition with the Missoula base at all?

PB No, there were four totally different bases, and they all had... different terrain they operated in, they all had a different attitude.

JN How were their attitudes different?

PB That was more geared to the size of the base, and who was running it. There was no animosity or anything like that. Missoula guys had their way of doing things and we had our ways of doing things. Because of the Mann Gulch Fire the Missoula men were permitted to turn down a jump if they didn't want to jump. At Cave Junction, if you turned down a jump, that's fine, but when you got off the airplane you went on down the road. There was none of this flying all the way out there and saying hey I'm
not going. Once you went out you went. There wasn't any turning around and coming back. Mainly because we were scrambling to get used anyway. At that time all the local forests were reluctant to use smokejumpers because they were afraid somebody was going to get hurt. Which is totally ridiculous, because for five years I jumped for two or three years we won the safety award for the forests for no lost time accidents. Even headquarters couldn't do that, there was always some clerk running a calendar on his finger or something causing a lost time accident. We did all that and never had a day or an hour off.

JN What were the backgrounds of the other crew members?

PB Oh just about anything you want to come up with. They were mostly college kids, the majority of them were college kids. Not necessarily in forestry, they came from all back grounds. We had doctors, lawyers, dentists, you name it, every conceivable education field. About fifteen percent of the guys, it was a job, a summer job and they did it. Most of them had started college and then decided that it wasn't the thing to do. And in those days there were only two permanent jobs on the base anyway. The foreman and the senior squad leader were the only two people kept around. They even laid off the pilots at the end of the summer. In those years nobody considered making it a career because you'd have to wait fifty years until somebody would die before slot would open up. The attitude was that it was a hell of a lot of fun. I don't know a single guy who didn't really enjoy it. We didn't necessarily like the hard work involved but nobody does that.

JN What was the funnest aspect about it?

PB Oh, just everything was funny. We all had a great sense of humor I guess in those days. If somebody got into a bad situation it was even funnier. They would get razed to death. Falling out of trees, getting bucked off horses, damn near having a tree almost drop on you, if you had an incident it was bound to be exaggerated. They were all good people. Like I say we had our own reunion down here in '78. My contemporaries, the guys that I jumped with. Course they're all middle aged now, we'll grab a beer sit down on the lawn and resume the conversation we carried on twenty five years previously. It was that simple. These people never change, they never will. They were good people.

JN Do you keep in touch with many of those guys?

PB Most of them, yeah. We exchange Christmas cards or telephone calls periodically, to find out who's doing what. They all went off to their various fields, some of them were permanent military, some of them went to aerospace. The professional people are doctors, lawyers, professional people.

JN Must have made for some pretty interesting conversations having all those different backgrounds.
Oh yeah, well hell there were... some of the engineers built most of the Gobi there. Of course they had previous backgrounds, their father was a carpenter or something like that. They always managed to pack together the necessary skills to throw up something. Of course when you fly over the Gobi in the air you can tell it was built by amateurs. There are no two buildings which are square plumb with each other. Looks okay from the ground, but when you see it from the air, it's kind of a scrambling mess.

You said you jumped at another base?

I jumped at Redding in '57, they got authorization for that base, in late '56. So what they did was split the Cave Junction crew in half, of the old people, with veteran hands returning and everything. They were given an option, if you want to go here or if you want to go there. They sorted the thing out so half the experienced people went down to Redding and half stayed at Cave Junction. We trained the whole crew for Redding that year. All the new people, for both Cave Junction and Redding we trained them up at the Gobi. When the training was over, after we got them all trained, then that crew went down to Redding permanently and stayed there. Fred Barnowski was the foreman, Ron Luther was the squad leader. Jimmy Allen stayed at the Gobi, so did Rod Newton, Jack Carter.

How did you like Redding as compared to the Gobi?

Well it was different. Of course we jumped that country anyway out of Cave Junction. But once they put Redding in, we got to go a little further south into the California forests, into the Plumas and the Toiyabe and places like that. Before that Region Five had split the cost of the Gobi, Cave Junction. Then they managed to get full funding for their own base so they set it up. We were first year there they stuck us in a warehouse in town, right down in the town of Redding, eight miles away. So all we had was a loft tower and that was about it. So we lived in town and jumped in trucks and went out to work the day at the airport. Subsequent years, they built a full facility at Redding, so they had barracks and everything else.

Jumping for that period of years you must have seen some changes in how the operation went and the equipment and things like that.

No, not really, it's all basics. You take a guy that was trained in the forties or fifties, take him out there and take ten minutes, assuming he is in good condition, take about ten minutes to show him the minor difference in the equipment. The basic function always remains the same. There are improvements. They have better harnesses, better gear, parachutes are basically the same through the years, lighter material is all. Other than that it's the same old job. From day one, the minute you get out of the equipment, you're just another ground pounder, earth grubber, put the damn fire out. You go in easy and come out
hard. When the fire's out you can saddle up all that crap and load it down the road.

JN Was that the worst aspect of the job for you, packing out?

PB Yeah, nobody liked pack outs. In later years it got, with improvements in helicopters and everything why it got kind of cushy. The next to last fire jump I had was over in the Laverott country by Mount Shasta.

JN When was that?

PB That was '58. They dropped us within fifty feet of the fire. They dropped us thirty or forty gallons of water in five gallon cans, normally we get a five gallon can, all kinds of water. Of course you need it there because there is no water at all. But we kind of just picked our noses and spent the afternoon leisurely getting the thing lined, and knocking down the snag and getting the thing put out, plenty of fooling around. We had the whole evenings to ourselves, just laying around drinking coffee and stuffing rations down our throat. Got up bright and early the next morning, the thing was cold and out. Helicopter came in, landed fifty feet away, we threw everything in the helicopter, jumped in and went back to Redding.

JN That became a little easier toward the end, just the pick up. You didn't have to pack out as far.

PB Well, they used helicopters a lot more, plus the growth of Forest Service roads was phenomenal. There were places in the early fifties where hell, you had ten, fifteen, eighteen miles to get out. But by the late fifties or early sixties, hell there was a road within four miles of everywhere. It's not a function of distance, it's a function of time. Here in Montana, everything is wide open, you can go anywhere you want to. Down there it's buck brush, salow, you name it.

JN So the actual walking is much harder?

PB Yeah, it is more like a jungle in some places, especially when you get over to the coast. I had a Missoula guy I hauled out of Lobster Creek in '56 I guess. We had four miles to go and it took us sixteen hours. We didn't stop, we'd take a ten minute break every... hour or something like that. But a quarter of a mile an hour... was all you could do. Fighting brush and pull it aside, crawl under it.

JN What was the roughest fire you were on?

PB I can't really think of one. Everybody else had rough fires, I don't think I ever had a rough one, as I recall. It is all relative anyway. '51 was the year of the famous Pony Peak Fire. They jumped I don't know how many people in on that thing. One guy went in on it three times. He went in on the original crew, he went in on a relief, and went in on a final wrap out. Wasn't
much of a summer for him. He didn't get to see anything but the Gobi and Pony Peak. We never had anything... dangerous fire or things like that. Most people had enough common sense, especially when you have any experience, stayed the hell out of the places where you were going to get in trouble. The brush down there could go pretty fast, if it got really going. Flash through like the Los Angeles fires, claimed lived down there. Sometimes you'd be in the wrong place at the wrong time, and it would be too late.

JN Did news of the Mann Gulch fire affect you at all, the way you jumped or anything?

PB No, we knew about it, and that was all. It was... as far as we were concerned it was just one of those things that happen. I don't know whether it was Bob Sallee or Dick Joy, one of the guys I knew here was at Mann Gulch and he got away, he got up over a ridge. It was more of a Missoula experience and was ignored at other places.

JN So it wasn't controversial to you?

PB No, that happened in what, '48? '49 somewhere in there. I only started two years later. It wasn't up to me to judge what went on. I think Wag Dodge got a bum rap out of it, he was a pretty nice guy. It wasn't his fault, again I wasn't there, it's wasn't my input. We never had anything even close to that, at both the Gobi and at Redding. In those years we had a perfect safety record. We never had anybody get killed, very norm fire. Missoula, McCall people I think, killed in a plane crash. I think they smashed a... I think Stope took a Trimotor into Moose Creek or something, and landed long, wiped themselves out, I don't know the details. We had a personal sense of immortality anyway. It probably goes quite along way to reinforce the actual performance. If you're convinced nothing is going to happen to you, it generally never does.

JN Where did that come from?

PB I don't know, training attitude. I don't have the faintest idea where it came from.

JN Did that ever wear out, in your later years of jumping?

PB No, we had... people used to kid around about having jump dreams or something like that. Chute doesn't open up or some kind of anxiety like that. I never had one. I don't know of very many guys that did.

JN What about on the planes? Do very many people get sick? I've heard some reports of airsickness.

PB Yeah, every once in a while somebody got sick. That was more amusing than anything else, of course, if they they had a big strainer in front that kept the big chunks in. And you had this
horse fellow that went around you, this monk's cowl up at the top that made sure that everything that didn't stay inside the mask went down inside, [laughs]. When a guy got out on the ground he lived with the air of his waste. Of course the spotter once in a while would get sprayed when the doors open, the wind would whip it around inside. But I only recall about two or three guys getting sick. Most of the time it was because they were so damned hung over and bashed up, come rolling back in at dawn to find out they were ready to go out on a fire.

There was only one guy, he was universally admired. He went through a whole year and about half way through his second he walked in, told the foreman, 'I don't think I could do it' and quit. And he was universally admired because that took an awful lot of guts. Especially after he had the training and experience and the mark of respect. For all concerned, he admitted that he couldn't hack it anymore, and somebody else would be put in jeopardy sometime. I think that was a good gesture. Nobody... It wasn't a universal love scene. There was guys you liked and guys you weren't familiar with. One or two out of the thirty you actually didn't like. But it never occurred to me. I had a friend, we were pouring down a few drinks sometimes. There were guys, when you really think about it, he says, there isn't a guy there you wouldn't trust with your life when you went out on a fire with him, because it was only you and him. Things went wrong, it was up to him, something the matter with you it was up to him to work the problem out. So it was kind of a mutual respect all the way around. You may not like the guy, but you knew damned well he'd back you up. And they very seldom did, almost never, put to the test.

JN When you were out fighting a fire in the woods, after the day of fighting the fire, what would you do? Would you be too tuckered out, would you go to bed, or would you stay up?

PB You mean when you got back in?

JN No, actually when you're out, when you weren't fighting fire what would you do?

PB Sleep, sleep or eat, screw off, anything, do anything. Once you got it knocked down, why then it is just a simple manner of, when you get it lined and it's under control and everything else, well then you just begin the mop-up. The ground pounders are going to come in a relieve you. You just make sure everything was neat and tidy, turn-key operation, all you had to do was finish up the minor mop up, that was it. Then you would get your release and split. If you were going, going to get no relief, you were going to stay there, generally you worked your butt off trying to get the thing totally put out. Mainly because you wanted to get back and get out on another fire.

END OF SIDE A

SIDE B
PB That was a real incentive. The pay wasn't all that great in any of the years that I jumped. But if you managed to get enough overtime, you managed to come out financially fairly well. Better than friends who worked construction or anything like that. You made a lot less dollars per hour, but we got a hell of a lot more overtime. Minimal living, my God what did we pay in the old days, I guess we paid in those days five bucks a month for a room, twenty-five cents for breakfast, fifty cents for lunch, and seventy-five for dinner. You couldn't eat, even in those days, you couldn't eat that cheap. They fed extremely well, it was the best part.

JN I'll just ask you what type of food you ate.

PB Well, breakfast you got anything you wanted. They had eggs, fruit, bacon, oatmeal. They had just about anything you need for breakfast. Cooks were good, they were competent, in fact there late in '56 and on, you got Eddie Mean and Erma down there, they were just fantastic, good cooks. Lunch would be chicken fried steak or something like that. Dinner would be a pull up steak, potatoes, vegetables, dessert, the whole bit, and coffee, milk. They always had kool-aid in the morning and afternoon, doughnuts and everything.

I could always eat as much as I wanted and never really worry about it. Some of the guys had weight problems. They'd get cut off the jump list if they went over two hundred pounds. So when they started getting a bit porky in the summertime, they'd have to go stand on the scale and if they were over the two hundred pound limit, they were relegated to the loft coolie, [laughs]. Til those five pounds came off they didn't go on fire. So that was their incentive. Base food was great, I wish I could eat like that again, the good old days. Out on fire, in the early years it was those lousy C-rations. I puked more of those things out on the trails than I ever held down. Those things were worthless.

JN What was in them?

PB Garbage and glutamate. They were designed for guys sitting in the foxhole, just to keep them alive. You can't do hard manual labor on the slop that is in C-rations.

Jn Like what?

PB You'd have to eat one to find out what they're like. These were old, I mean hell, we'd open a box up and here'd be a pack of Lucky Strikes with the green logo on it, Lucky Green has gone to war, that would be 1942. This was 1951, 1952, something like that. Toe jam cookies, garbage. Jimmy Allen worked that problem in '56, he went out a set up the company store at the Gobi. He went out and stocked, he had a little warehouse, and he stocked the thing up with small cans, bitty cans, of every conceivable type of small can food you could imagine. They had sardines, all the fruit, all the vegetables, anything you wanted. Because
people would constantly bitch about C-rations, they hated the C-rations.

Very seldom did you get hot meal drop out on the fire unless it was right on the Siskiyou there. If it was on the Siskiyou you could have a hot meal drop. If you were anywhere else, forget about it. So every guy had a great big menu list, with your name on it, and you went down, and you checked off fifteen pounds worth of whatever you wanted to eat. That was your standard two day ration, fifteen pounds for two days. Whatever you wanted to eat that was fine, but from that point on there was no bitching, griping, or complaining about the food. You took what you wanted, what you were supposed to work on, and if you didn't turn in a full performance on it, it wasn't the food's fault. I remember, hell, I used to load that thing up mainly with mushroom soup and strawberries, can of strawberries, a basic meat dish or something like that.

JN It was much better after you got to pick your own?

PB Oh yeah, when you got to pick your own and it was always on file, and there was a custodian of the company store. So if you were out on a fire and needed resupplied, your menu was catered up right there, through it on the airplane and went out. So you got it with a tag with your name on it, that was yours. Of course, a lot of time there was more food than you could ever eat. So in the process a lot of it just got left there on the fire line. We'd always bag it up and put a big red streamer on it, and leave it there, you know, in case somebody gets lost or some hunter wanders by. There's food, stuck right out in the middle of the Klamath Forest or someplace like that. Nobody packed it out, except a couple of married guys who were feeding families. So they'd gather what was left and throw twenty-four pounds on their god-damned pack [laughs] and bring it out. Convinced me that I'd never get married, unfortunately I did.

JN What do you think of the new let-burn policy?

PB That's probably rational, probably eminently rational. We did such a good job, we have all this fuel build up for forty years. And, if it ever does really burn it's going to totally burn, embarrassing. It is... if you've ever been in a totally burned area where there is nothing left, just ashes and charcoal, it's kind of impressive. Of course when you look at Mt. St. Helens and the amazing comeback that that's made in just a short span of time since it blew up. Scientists are learning more and more as they go along. What was law yesterday is false again today and almost truth tomorrow, usually. But there is, it's hard to tell, the land's been misused anyway. I remember back in Arizona, looking at a 1883 photograph and going back and taking the same picture myself. One of them's herd cattle, cowboys, and everything and the grass is belly high on the cattle. My picture is is pure desert, bare desert. Once it gets ruined it stays ruined.

JN A lot of forestry majors that were jumpers?
PB Not very many, not as many, I don't know what the percentage is, you'd have to check the U. Pick a forestry school hear and divide the number of students by the number of jumpers, you come up with a percentage. That's probably valid for the whole system. Wouldn't know. Far more forestry students were turned out than possibly every Forest Service job anyways. I work at Boeing, and there's two or three of them with forestry degrees, one of them jumped here.

JN Some of the people I've talked to before have talked about an environmentalism, a grass roots type feeling, a conservation feeling that jumpers had. Did you run into that?

PB We weren't that sophisticated. That's something for the modern generation. To us that was a job, the more fires we had, the happier we were. The more fires, the more overtime. The more overtime, the more partying when we got back to school, [laughs]. Nobody had any sentimental attachments, if anything it was pride in your performance. You went out on a fire by God you put it out. You were judged on the basis of that, not for doing great things for Smokey Bear. Smokey Bear can go screw himself as far as we were concerned. Very irreverent attitude.

JN Towards the Forest Service?

PB Oh yeah. The Forest Service outside of the smokejumpers was something else again.

JN What were those attitudes, what did you think of the outfit?

PB They were basic, always been basically elitist to begin with. They are filled with a wide spectrum of people they had much higher training standard. The Forest Service is a government bureaucracy, everybody hates a government bureaucracy. We always did. They had a sign one time on the bulletin board at the Gob "Smokejumpers are not, quote, not employees, end quote." We'd have run-ins with the permanent people, twits on fires, something like that. Thought you were in the Army or something like that. Jerk us around, we were all under strict discipline to keep your mouth shut, do not, under any circumstances, argue, fight with piss and moan with anybody outside your own organization. Internal, fine, but outside, no way.

We had all kinds of amusing instances. In 1952 we didn't get paid for six weeks, and we all showed up. Of course you show up in June you are all flat ass broke to begin with. You got just barely enough to buy a new set of jump gloves and that's about it. You don't drink beer for three weeks until the government check comes in. Because you have to work two weeks and then it takes another week before you get your first pay check in. So we all started off the summer, that was my second year, so I made my two practice jumps in a day or two and bang, I was ready to go out on fire. They started training the new man and the checks didn't show up when they were due. So everybody thought, OK, well, there's a screw up someplace, because they came out of the San Francisco office. So the next pay period
roles around and no paycheck. Couple guys they have car payments coming due, married guys, and we'd complained to the foreman, Cliff Marshall. And Cliff had complained to the headquarters, hey, where's our money? Some of us had gone out on fires, we'd go out on fire absolutely destitute, not a penny in our pocket. Have to come back through town, can't even feed ourselves. We were supposedly on per diem, we hadn't seen any of the per diem either. That showed up on the paycheck. So we'd have to starve until we got back to the Gobi.

So one of the guys, Rod Newton, was a lawyer, he had just finished law school. They got together and drafted up a letter to send to Senator Morris in Oregon. Very respectful letter detailing the circumstances, we had been employed this long, we were to have been paid on these dates. We have not seen anything, we have gone through the chain of command you know through higher headquarters and nothing has happened, and we would appreciate your assistance in this matter. And everybody signed it. So sent the letter off. Marshall didn't know about it.

JN Marshall was your...?

PB Foreman, yeah. He probably saw his career go right down the tube, at least in his mind's eye. Because bright and early one morning there were three Smokey Bear in their uniform with the funny little forester hats show up. And it turns out its a guy out of Washington, the head of Region Six, and the Regional Paymaster. Idiots, instead of going right to the headquarters at Grants Pass and finding the root cause there, they had determined there was a bunch of rebel malcontents, and they were going to get in there and settle this rebellion really quickly. So they hauled us all in, one by one, interviews into... this dinky little office, and interviewed every guy whose name was on the letter. Went down through a whole list of standard questions and this that and the other thing. And it became obvious that everybody had a case. There were three of us who had been out on a fire our names weren't on the letter. So they called me in and said do you agree with, we see your name is not on this letter, apparently you don't agree with these. Like hell I don't agree with them. I was out on a fire, if you give me the god-damned thing, I'll sign it right now. No, no! Don't do that.

The last guy in there was Jimmy Dollard, big gangly Okie. And they got all done with him, and one guy asked the question 'what do you think ought be done to rectify the situation' and the guy said 'well,you ought to take the goddamned paymaster and hang him by the balls.' He said, 'I am the paymaster.' [laughs]. So poor Cliff, I guess he was just sweating bullets the whole time. They wrapped everything up and march over to the Headquarters. Well they get into headquarters and they find there's a GS-2 clerk who had gone around the bend, they guy is insane. He hated smokejumpers because we were GS-5's and we got all this overtime, all this per diem and everything else. So he was trashing our pay records, [laughs], submitting phoney vouchers down there. And of course the San Francisco office, they don't know what the hell is going on. They're paying hundreds and thousands of people every day.
So by God, next thing we know, here's everything, bang, due on demand, right today. And not another word said, and they disappeared, and from that day until as long as I can remember talking to other guys, that nobody else in the entire Forest Service got paid, the Cave Junction people did, they got paid on the day it was supposed to be there. Good old Senator Morris, he sent us another letter and asked us if the situation had been rectified. So we all grabbed it up very much, very formal thank you sir, we appreciate your assistance, the situation has been rectified, we'll never gripe again. And he picked up thirty votes right there, (snaps his fingers). We had a million laughs over that.

JN  How would you describe the ideal smokejumper?

PB  There weren't any ideals. I never saw such a diverse group of people in my life. There was about, like I said, almost every type of education conceivable. There were of course physical restraints proscribed by the training rules and everything else. They came in all sizes and shapes. Various intelligence, most of them above average intelligence, in fact some of the smartest ones were the ones who never set foot inside a university. They are all good people.

JN  Did you work with any Mormons or religious?

PB  Oh the Mormons were some of the most dedicated workers they had. They were straight with us and honest. If we got sent out on wood detail or something like that, hell, we would just turn on the chain saw and sleep for an hour or something like that. They'd sit there and cut wood all day long. Every other major religion, we had several Mormons throughout the years, and of course the CO's were gone by then. Some of them of course became a permanent part of various bases. But there was never anything made of that, so what? Korean War was on at the time anyway, nobody worried about things like that. You were either going to jump in the summertime and go to school in the winter or you were going to be drafted, one or the other. Military service was accepted. I look back on it now and wonder what the hell gave those bastards the right to obligate me for eight years. But it was different, different attitudes, different everything I guess.

JN  In general, just the social attitude of people at that time you think it was different? Like a man your age, how you felt about your country and service?

PB  Oh, I don't know, people change with age. I could never say I was patriotic or dedicated or anything else like that. I was out to cram as much as I could into what I was doing at the time, the hell with the extremists. Without any moral premises of the world, I was out to do everything I could lay my hands on that I thought was fun. What wasn't, I wasn't worried about.

JN  Smokejumping was fun?
PB Oh yeah, well you know, some guys became jump bums and spent years long after you're normally expected to finally hang it up and go out in the hard cruel world, you know, and make an honest living. Like I said there were very few permanent positions open. You came up, generally you jumped two three, four years, something like that. Got out of college or did whatever you wanted to, then marched off and did other things. So no one ever considered making it a permanent career. They would have liked to if they had permanent smokejumpers. The crews from the early fifties would all still be working. They would have retired from it.

JN Is it something that you'd recommend to a young man today?

PB Oh sure, I got daughters, so it's kind of academic. But most of the people that had sons, I can't make a generalization like that. I do know that all the pilot's kids for some reason became smokejumpers, I don't know why that was. Pilots insisted that their sons be smokejumpers whether they wanted to or not. I guess that created some hard feelings.

JN Between families, them and their sons?

PB I imagine, between the son and the father. One guy who was here, he was a dutiful son, he put two years in because his dad told him to and I'm sure he didn't like it.

JN Why do you think that they wanted their sons?

PB I don't know. We generally got... pilots were... separate but equal. At least in our eyes anyway. They were all damned good, we did not have any bad pilots that I ever recall. I take it, one of them but it eventually caught up with him. Like Eddie Shultz, one of the best pilots in the world. Red Miler, Red Turner, go through a lot of them. They were good people, too.

JN They had your respect pretty much?

PB Oh yeah, we could get out, anything went wrong with the thing, we're more at home outside then we are in. Poor damned pilot that was going to get it in the neck.

JN They didn't wear chutes or anything?

PB Oh yeah, they wore chutes, they didn't have any protective gear or anything. Plus the fact they'd be the last guy out of the airplane. He would have to hold it straight and level everyone else went. So they're out of there, getting clear, would constantly be minimal or zip. They were all good. Any carter runs at a hundred feet over whatever tree top level, you're not going to find many people who can do that consistently, month in and month out, all summer long.
JN You mentioned that you had some daughters. There are women smokejumpers now, some. What do you think about that? Would that be something you'd like to see your daughters do?

PB Makes no mind to me at all, I don't see any, if they can hack it. I don't think don't think many of them would really like a good long six mile session in the Gobi brush. I'm sure they could probably do it, but I don't think they'd like it. I don't know what the size of the women is that are doing it. But I was of minimum weight, in fact I was of minimum weight by virtue of gobbling down four pounds of bananas when I took my physical. I was the smallest one they could have and I knew what it took out of me on pack outs. On a fire, that's one thing, pack outs, that's something else again. You kept up, never got any sympathy. Long shanked bastard up and leading the parade, then you'd just step and a half pace to keep up with him. No lolly gagging, no dragging behind.

JN Is it something you'd want to do again, if you got in shape?

PB If I got in shape, sure I'd do it tomorrow. You don't forget. I can remember how miserable some of the work was. But there was a lot of compensations for doing the job.

JN Speaking of the compensations, just look back at it now, what did you get out of it, mainly, the most important things to you, having been a jumper.

PB Oh, well the whole thing. There was nothing really outstanding about what we did. Just getting to work an interesting job with good people. Very few people in the world get to do that, as later experience in life generally shows. Top flight people to work with, a lot of amusing situations. You got to travel widely, in the boondocks.

JN Is there a place memorable to you, that you travelled and you really enjoyed?

PB We used to call them fish fries, I had two of them. A fish fry was literally that. The first year I was there a new guy, four other guys went in, fact they were jumping a fire and when we got down there and it was a bunch of fishermen, they were frying fish. So all they had to do was tell the guys to build his fire in a legal place and then packed up the gear and came out. Thereafter every cushy fire was named a fish fry. Maximum scenic surroundings and minimum work and no pack out preferably. I had one with Newton in '52, we jumped the High Basin in the Klamath and that was a picnic for two days. There was a bunch of people running cattle up there they came over and ooo'd and aaa'd. Then packed our gear up to the helicopter point for us on their horses and served coffee and doughnuts while we scrambled around this fire. We got back and told the tale, and both of us never should have.

The other one, no I'm sorry, that was '51 that I did that. In '52 it was the trip I look with Danny On, Orv Luper, and what
was the other guy's name... OK, Luper, Cook, and On, there were four of us, went down to Mendicino. We came forty miles on horseback, right out through the heart of the old Yollabollie Wilderness area. We got to stop and fish caught about eighty or ninety fish, swam up and down the river. Traveled through the entire wilderness area in a two day trip. You'd pay a thousand bucks for a show like that today, we got it for free.

JN  You got paid for it.

PB  We got paid for it [laughs] we even got overtime on it. The packer came down, we crossed one of the fords and he said OK, why don't you guys go swimming for an hour or two? I'll take the stock up on the other side, there's a meadow up there where we're going to camp. So we had, all four of us snuck .22 pistols along. The Forest Service frowned on it, it wasn't legal. We were out swimming and diving off this great big rock into a pool of water that you could see thirty feet deep. You could see trout all over the place.

Then he spots this water snake. So he runs over and buckles on his gun belt and hauls out his .22 and Cook and I did the same thing, loaded up and come charging over there and we're headed at, with .22 pistols this water snake. And we look up and the trail came around this rock and we happened to look up there and here's a bunch of tourists. Ladies and everything else, pack train, [laughs] and everything else. Looking down and wondering what these idiots are doing. I think they were headed for our campground. [laughs] But they took one look at this, and the trail forked and went off some where else, and they took the right hand fork and disappeared. [laughs] We're standing around with pistols in our hands, stark naked watching them go by.

JN  What was Danny On like on the personal level?

PB  He was the finest man of the three I've known in this world. I was shocked when I heard of his demise. We had written him when we had our seventh reunion, and I don't know why he didn't show, we had kind of looked forward to having him around. The guy was just... he just did everything to excellence. Soldier, scholar, artist, you name it, he did it extremely well. [Silence] Great guy. Great gentleman. He was into everything, everything, photography you name it. When we jumped in'52, I had one fire with him when was it? Oh, OK, I've got another entry here. That is where we both did a freefall show, a freefall in March of '53 at the Missoula airport. On busted my ass and they charged out, it was my first freefall. He had borrowed an outfit for me because he jumped regularly.

JN  Freefall?

PB  Yeah, freefall, five bucks apiece or something, total cost, five or seven dollars. It was windy, really windy. We only had one reserve between us. So I went up and it was my first freefall, so I went out to the airport and come in and why I
picked up a gust of wind on the landing. Bad oscillation. Danny, I came down, as if I had broke my back, I just lay there groaning. And On comes running over, stands there and points, Ha, Ha, Ha, Bryce you busted your ass. I'm in agony, [laughs], so he unclips the reserve, goes back up to six thousand feet and comes down for about a five thousand foot freefall and everything else. Cracks the chute, comes in and did the same goddamned thing [laughs]. I'm there limping sideways, I could just barely move. And friends are holding me over, and I said, "Ha, ha, ha, Danny On you busted your ass." Never know about him. Like I say that picture has been very valuable to me I want that back. I'm sure it's in these archives someplace. Of course he had many famous pictures.

JN But that's a photo he took of you?

PB I don't know what that fire was. I can't key it because it's so blurred. But he gave it to me two years after the event, '52. He was living there up there around Daly, he had a room over there and I was staying at the Phi Sig fraternity house. So we saw a lot of each other. He was a gun nut, I was a gun nut so we talked with various famous gunsmiths around town. Yeah, he was a remarkable man, fantastic war record. He had a shoulder disability, got hit in the shoulder, never apparently slowed him down. But I hear through the grapevine, when he fell in that snow hole... tried to use that arm to dig it out and couldn't do it. So you just scratch your head, for all the things that guy did in his life time, he winds up like that.

JN So working with a fine group of people is a big part of it?

PB Oh yeah, yeah. Danny, Jimmy Allen is another one, Rod Newton, Cliff Marshall, all first class people. I respect and admire them as much today as I did then. A lot of personal, we became good personal friends that's lasted the years to date. We may not see each other five or six years at a clip. But if you are in the neighborhood, why you always drop by.

JN Well, if you don't have anything else to add.

PB Ready for a cigarette.

JN Thanks for the time.

PB Sure.

END OF THE INTERVIEW