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DH Bert, I'd like to start the interview by asking you, when did you start jumping?

BC Oh, in 1946 and I jumped 1947 and 1948.

DH Where were you based at?

BC At Nine Mile camp out of Missoula.

DH Had you had any kind of previous Forest Service experience before you became a smokejumper?

BC No, I hadn't.

DH Had you seen or had any kind of contact with smokejumpers before?

BC No, I hadn't.

DH Had you been in an airplane before you...?

BC No, I had not, [laughs].

DH What made you decide to try smokejumping?

BC Oh, sort of adventurous, possibly overcoming an inferiority complex.

DH How well do you remember your first training jump?

BC Don't remember that at all.

DH How about your first fire jump?

BC And I don't remember this either. I remember my second training jump because I had a chute malfunction.

DH Can you tell me about that?

BC And the... what caused the chute malfunction was the person behind me hadn't been paying attention to the training and instead of pulling out three feet of static line for me to hook up, he pulled it all out. So when I went out the door, the static line went underneath my arm, nearly tearing my arm off and I did get free of the airplane, no chute. So I reached for the emergency but at that time I saw the hoyt underneath my arm which was the apex of the other chute. So instead of pulling the emergency, I dropped it. But when I pulled my arm up my other chute went down and wrapped around me, too. Which even covered the emergency. About then the static lines were wrapped around my legs, I unwrapped the static lines from both legs, got a hold of
a big piece of silk and threw it out and it fired right now, sounded like a gun going off.

DH  How did you feel when you got down to the ground after that?

BC  I felt disappointed in the rigger. I didn't realize I had a static line under my arm and the first thing I did was look at the person, the rigger that had packed the chute and I was going to look him up and I was mad. And the person's name was Oswald, but before I got in contact with him, the plane landed and the spotter explained that the static line had gone under my arm.

DH  How did you know who packs the chutes?

BC  They had a card in each chute with the man's name that had packed the chute.

DH  So, how many years did you jump?

BC  Just the three years.

DH  Had you been in the service?

BC  Yes, I'd been in the Marine Corps from 1942 to 1945.

DH  Were a good majority of the guys that were smokejumping in 1946 returning veterans?

BC  Yes, I would venture to say 90 per cent, age range was probably 22 to 26 and then there were a few people that hadn't been in the service that were 18 years old.

DH  Were you aware of the fact that the conscientious objectors were smokejumping during the war?

BC  Yes, I'd heard that later.

DH  How did you feel about that?

BC  I thought great for them, If they had conviction enough to miss the war and take on a job of a smokejumping that's fine.

DH  How many different bases did you jump from?

BC  Only Missoula.

DH  Didn't travel to McCall or anywhere else?

BC  No, I didn't.

DH  Do you have any idea how many jumps you made in your career?

BC  That was... only twenty-one with the smokejumpers and I made two free falls in Alaska.
DH  What were you doing in Alaska?

BC  Oh, I moved up there in 1949 and I still live there.

DH  What did your family think when you told them you were going to become a smokejumper?

BC  I didn't tell my family. My mother, I considered her quite a worry-wort. So I just told her I was going to work for the Forest Service. But on my second year I was one of four selected to jump at the Montana State Fair. Which was in Great Falls and I came out in the newspaper so at that time, my family found out that I was smokejumping.

DH  How about your friends, what did they say when you told them you were going to be jumping out of a perfectly good plane into a fire?

BC  Oh, I had some time from when I got out of college, before the training started so I went to a friend's ranch and I worked there for about three weeks and he said, "You're gonna get killed." But I survived and he got killed in an auto accident that July 4th.

DH  Were mistakes during training sessions pretty common?

BC  No, very good training, excellent training. I had considerable training in the Marine Corps. But I have to consider the smokejumper training even better and more thorough.

DH  Did you ever get injured while you were smokejumping?

BC  I had a slight injury on the neck.

DH  How would you rate the safety record of the smokejumpers while you were there?

BC  Very good.

DH  Does that come as any surprise to you that they were so well-trained in safety?

BC  I don't know. I wasn't familiar with jumping at all at that time. But I respected the people that headed up the project and the instructors, I think they did a wonderful job.

DH  What kind of planes were you flying then?

BC  The Ford Trimotor and the Travelaire and the second and third year the DC-3.

DH  How many guys would be in that Ford Trimotor when you were going out to a fire?
BC  In the Ford, it was eight smokejumpers and the Travelaire, it was three, probably twenty-two in the DC-3.

DH  Is there, did you prefer to jump out of any plane at any particular time?

BC  I liked the Travelaire because it was very, very slow and it didn't strain my neck and also very fond of the Ford. That only injury I had was out of a DC-3 and it was going too fast for me and I snapped my neck back and apparently crushed the disc.

DH  How did you feel about having to do project work?

BC  I enjoyed working in the woods.

DH  What kind of projects did you work on?

BC  Going out to Bob Marshall Wilderness Area and clearing trail. Very much enjoyed this because we were right in the heart of the fishing area and enjoyable work. Also, I remember on my last year in 1948, I was digging a ditch and I, after two or three days that got a little boring and I asked the man along side of me, there must be an easier way to make a living than this. And he said, "Yes, and I've got it", and what he had was the system to beat the horse racing in California. It was a slow season so we left in mid-August of 1948 and headed to make our fortune in Del Mar, California, betting on the system, betting on the horse races.

DH  Did it work?

BC  It was very, very accurate and after about six weeks we were just about even. I also remember we couldn't beat the 13% that the state of California and the track profit takes.

DH  Was there any kind of project work that you really didn't like to do?

BC  No, I can't think of any.

DH  How many guys trained with you when you first went through training?

BC  At that time I think they hired a considerable amount. It was probably the first training class after the war and I think they hired a 150 with the intention of having about a 120 at the end of the training session.

DH  And how many guys made it through to the end of the training session?

BC  The ratio of 120 out of 150.

DH  With all these returning veterans in World War II, did you seem to, there has been an awful lot of talk about post-war
let down and attitude was that I've done my job, the government owes me a living. Did you see any of that in the smokejumper organization?

BC Oh, I certainly didn't. I didn't see any veterans of that era that expected much of the government either.

DH Is there any one fire that sticks out in your mind as being the most memorable fire you jumped on?

BC It would be a fire when an injury took place and the injury was, happened to Carrol Reick. He had a very bad broken back and we had to pack him out roughly thirty miles. It took all night and half the next day. So that made quite an impression on me.

DH Where was this at?

BC I don't recall, except that it was in Montana, north of here, probably Flathead country.

DH Can you remember the largest fire that you fought?

BC Yes, it would have been Cash Creek fire where they had to send in six smokejumpers. But the fire got away from them... and it ended up sending in seventy-eight smokejumpers and walking in a thousand, it was a man-made fire incidentally.

DH What's the first thing that you do when you hit the ground, if you're on the ground?

BC I look for the other people that jumped with me to assist them if they need any assistance or make sure they weren't injured.

DH Was there any kind of sequence of events that you were assigned to follow, or was it common sense?

BC Once we left the airplane and we had, they gave us a map of our way back to civilization, then we were mostly on our own, on the two-man fires.

DH Did you ever have any long pack outs?

BC Yeah, probably thirty miles being the longest.

DH Did you ever have any that were really easy?

BC Easy fires or easy walk outs?

DH Easy walk outs.

BC Yeah, there were some very short ones where a forest trail was available and didn't have to pack much gear out. Maybe a two hour hike out.
DH How about easy fires?

BC The easiest fire was one that Earl Cooley spotted me on and it was putting up a tremendous amount of smoke. He says I don't think two men can handle this so we'll send the plane back in two or three days to take a look at it. But when we got down there we found out it was a wet log completely surrounded by water with some willows above. That was putting up all the smoke so we didn't unpack our pulaski or shovels just used the canteen cup and put the smoke out.

DH What kind of equipment would you carry with you to fight a fire?

BC I always carried a .45 pistol. Well, uh, I didn't use that to fight fire, though. A pulaski and a shovel and if you ran into big trees they'd drop you a cross-cut saw.

DH Why a .45 pistol?

BC Well, I just liked packing a weapon.

DH Did you ever have any time when you thought you needed it?

BC I sometimes used it for food, I would shoot a grouse and I had a bear confrontation which I was very glad to have it on me. But I didn't have to use it.

DH What kind of food do they give you for going out and fighting fires?

BC It was pretty much the food of our choice. They took a consensus of suggestions and it would be a chocolate bar and melba toast. Some type of canned meat and a pound of canned butter, which came in handy if I decided to picnic and shoot some grouse or catch some trout, I could fry 'em up in this butter.

DH How high would the plane be in the air when you guys would make your exit from the plane?

BC At that time it would be 1500 feet above ground level.

DH And how long would it take you to reach the ground?

BC I wouldn't know, but I would guess three or four minutes.

DH Would you say that fighting fires is a physically demanding job?

BC It certainly is on a big crew fire and sometimes on a two-man fire. It is very physically demanding.

DH Did you have to do a lot of physical training when you went through your training?
BC Yes, we did, as much as you could cram in in an eight hours a day. Most of us played volleyball after and always had hikes and a little running and obstacle course.

DH Would you say that injuries were more common from actual jump itself or from fighting fires?

BC In my experience it's been the actual jump itself and most of that caused by wind or dead snags where the chute collapsed and the person went the rest of the way without benefit of the parachute.

DH What about injuries from fighting fire?

BC I didn't see any in my experience. But I've heard of some where a tree fell on someone.

DH Have you ever been in an airplane where the plane developed mechanical difficulties?

BC Yes, I was on a plane when they lost a magneto in one of the Ford engines, but it wasn't any big problem.

DH What's the magneto? Do you know?

BC Well, the magneto is what activates the spark plugs to keep the engine running. But when you lose the magneto it runs real rough, you don't get much power out of that engine.

DH How many, were there, the people that were in the administration of the smokejumping when you started out, were they veterans, had they stayed here during the war?

BC The first year they were people that were here during the war. By the second year, some were training that had one year's experience.

DH Is that pretty common for guys to move up the ranks in the organization?

BC Yes, for people that wish to stay a few years.

DH How do you feel about people who are taking smokejumping, making it a career, instead of using it for a summer job like college students did in the '60's?

BC Yeah, I think that's fine when they're that devoted to the work. The longer they stay the more benefits they can be for the Forest Service and especially for the training programs.

DH You don't feel that stagnates the organization?

BC Oh not at all, the more experience, the better.

DH How did you feel when you heard about the Mann Gulch fire?
DH Did you know the guys that were involved in that?

BC Ah, yes.

DH What exactly did the Board of Investigation decide after it was all over?

BC I was in Alaska at that time so I was only familiar with what I read in the Life Magazine and some hearsay.

DH Did it ever occur to you while you were fighting a fire that it could blow up on you like that?

BC I knew it was possible, but I didn't worry about it.

DH Are tree landings pretty common?

BC Yes.

DH What did you do if you got stuck in a tree?

BC Well, I'd just use a letdown procedure and rapel from your chute hanging on the tree.

DH Would you leave your chute in the tree?

BC Yeah.

DH How did you get it down?

BC And then you'd climb up the tree and bring the chute down. You always returned your chute to the Forest Service.

DH What kind of chutes were you using?

BC I'm not very familiar with chutes, but these were Army surplus, perhaps they were called T-2's. But they were round 28 white chutes.

DH What were they made of?

BC I suppose they were nylon.

DH Did you ever make any runs that it was too bumpy to jump or too turbulent, too windy?

BC I made many where I got very air sick which made me very glad to get out of that airplane. But I've never actually seen a jump refused in my experience.

DH Do you feel that you made jumps back in the 40's that they may not make now because of weather conditions?
BC Yeah, this jump where Carrol Reick was injured. The wind was much, much too high. But it was not the spotter's fault. There were six people there and all six definitely wanted to go. They hadn't been on a fire for sometime, it was probably a Friday, thinking of overtime. But mostly just to get out, so the six aboard prevailed on the spotter to jump on that fire.

DH How would the spotter let you know when it was your turn to jump?

BC Oh, he'd slap you on the back, we had prearranged stick anyway. We had three people lined up in the Ford Trimotor and the first man he would slap on the back and the other two would follow as shortly as possible.

DH What's a stick?

BC A stick would be a group of men... which in the Travelaire would probably would be three and the Ford Trimotor was three men on a stick, and a DC-3 was five men on a stick. Probably the reason to keep only five men at a time was so that they would stay in a group and assist each other and not get too far from the fire.

DH What would the spotter be doing while he's making, while he's trying to find this place for you to land. Does he sit up front, does he sit back with you, what does he do?

BC Oh, he's, he was right at the door and he'd be estimating wind and dropping drift chutes and looking for a place to land. Really looking at the country before he gave you the word to jump.

DH Did you feel that while you were jumping that there were some spotters that were just inherently better than others or were they all pretty much the same?

BC I had confidence in all of them, although I realized that some of them might have a tendency to be careless. I recall one spotter, I wouldn't care to name him, who wanted to put me on a, it was on a very, very high mountain, a steep mountain in Idaho. And if he'd dropped me at the standard 1500 feet, I would have drifted all the way down to the bottom of that canyon, then had to walk back up. So he jumped me at a very low altitude, I would estimate 400 to 450 feet for the purpose of me sticking to the top of the ridge. This is the first time I carried a camera. I checked my chute, it was open, and I reached for my camera and I hit a tree at the same time. There would not have been time for the emergency chute.

DH Did you carry a camera with you pretty frequently?

BC No, that was the only time I ever did.

DH How about other guys?
BC I think a lot of other guys carried a camera.

DH Was there any other kind of things that the guys took along with them that...?

BC Everything, I was just talking to a fellow this morning in this reunion that pointed out that we were on a two-man fire and both of us had to have firearms. Which was against Forest Service rules and there weren't very many people that carried them. But he had a .38 and I had a .45 revolver.

DH Did you ever get into trouble for that?

BC No, I didn't and I usually wore it openly... along with my four cans of beer. I always carried four cans of beer in the leg pack which, if you put in a cold stream, very nice after a hot fire.

DH Did you ever know of any smokejumpers to carry a good luck piece?

BC No, I didn't.

DH How well did you know the pilots that were flying the planes?

BC I never got acquainted with most of the pilots, but I noticed that most of the smokejumpers did. They probably became more acquainted after they were based right in Missoula, but I was at Nine Mile. I came, the only one I really became well acquainted with was Bob Johnson and I had a lot of respect for him.

DH Did you ever have fellows from other bases come into Missoula to jump?

BC Yeah, when I started the program in 1946, everyone trained here at Missoula.

DH And then go to the other bases and jump?

BC Uh huh.

DH Was there kind of a rivalry between guys from different bases?

BC Never did notice this, it all seemed to be just one unit, smokejumpers.

DH How would you describe the feeling among the smokejumpers themselves?

BC Ah, very close attachments, comradery.
DH Do you agree with the statement that smokejumpers work hard and play hard?

BC Very true.

DH Do you feel that playing too hard might have interfered with their ability to do their work the next day?

BC No, they were young, very healthy men, it was fast recovery.

DH If you weren't out doing project work or out fighting fires, what would you do with yourself?

BC It got a little boring then. But we always had a job to do, either in camp or we'd just be sawing wood for exercise. Our eight hours was always occupied.

DH What about after your eight hours?

BC We used to play some volleyball, got a little bit of exercise.

DH Were you living on the base?

BC Yeah, we were living there right on the Nine Mile base. The only time I recall being unoccupied is when we went to the Hale Airport in Missoula. When we were on standby, we would just be waiting in the barracks there waiting for the siren to blow and that was a little monotonous.

DH What would you do after the fire season was over?

BC I was attending college in Bozeman, Montana, at the time.

DH What were you getting a degree in?

BC Electrical engineering.

DH How did you feel when you learned that smokejumpers had decided to let women into the organization?

BC Don't approve of it and a short time ago and I stopped into the loft in Fairbanks and talked to two or three smokejumpers and they really don't approve of it. They said that Fairbanks is the last hold-out. I don't believe in suppressing women, but now they're talking about modifications and different equipment to adapt to women's needs... I believe a crew would be more efficient without the women.

DH How do you see the future of the smokejumper organization? Will there always be smokejumpers?

BC Yeah, I would have expected to be replaced with helicopter, but hearing this speech last night from the Chief of Forestry, he anticipates smokejumpers into the year 2000.
DH Don't think that as the size of wilderness areas decrease that the demand for smokejumpers will become less and less?
BC Oh, there's so many wilderness areas set aside, particularly in Alaska, that there will always be wilderness.

DH Do you feel that your years as a smokejumper affected you in later life?
BC It probably gave me more confidence and I was really glad that I participated there.

DH This is kind of off the beaten track, did you, when you were going through training, did you see any guys that froze at the door?
BC Yes, but this particular person kept on going... it would be... I made several jumps with him and there'd always be lots of perspiration and sometimes he'd get over eager and take a run at the door, on a DC-3. But I recall once he ended up just sitting on the door, didn't quite make it out. But he finally tumbled out of there, but he continued jumping.

DH Do you feel that there is a certain type of personality or an attitude that it takes to be a smokejumper?
BC Very possible. And most of the parties seem to be young, have a love of life and there were the adventurous type that would go out and probably try anything once.

DH Is this the kind of a job that you would recommend to a young person nowadays?
BC Yes, I think it would be very good training, discipline, and the helpful work.

DH Did you ever notice any kind of difference in attitude or ideology between the smokejumpers and the administration?
BC No, I can't say that I did.

DH Well, I think I've gone through my list of questions that I've asked. Is there anything that you feel that I've missed or something that you wanted to add?
BC No, in fact, I think we pretty well covered my story.

DH Okay, thank you very much.

END OF INTERVIEW

SIDE A

001 Introduction, jumped in 1946 - '48
010 Attracted to jumping for the adventure
015 Second jump his chute malfunctioned
040 Marine corp in WWII
047 Heard later about the CO's smoke jumping, no hard feelings
056 21 jumps in 3 years
061 Didn't tell mother about jumping, found out when he jumped at the Montana State Fair at Great Falls
085 Talks about the planes that they flew in
099 Talks about project work, enjoyed it
116 From 150 trainees the first year about 120 survived
126 Didn't see any vets with attitude problems
139 Largest fire was the Cash Creek fire, six jumpers went in but the fire got away, used 80 jumpers and 1,000 men
148 Describes events after landing
160 Carried a .45 pistol with him on jumps
188 Describes the jump
197 Physical training
205 More injuries from the actual jumping
212 Only mechanical problem with a plane was when a magneto went out
238 Talks about the Mann Gulch fire, in Alaska when it broke
252 Talks about tree landings
Feels that they made jumps that wouldn't be made today

Describes the sticks, groups of men who jumped at the same time

Confidence in the spotters

Always carried 4 cans of beer and the .45 pistol

In 1946 everyone came to Missoula to train

Fast recovery of the guys meant that the night before didn't affect the performance on the fire the next day

Student at Montana State during the off season

Doesn't approve of women jumpers, Fairbanks is the last hold out for men jumpers

Future of jumping looks good, thought that helicopter would be the end of jumping

Saw one guy freeze in the door, guy kept on jumping

Talks about how jumping affected life later on

End of the interview