The following transcript is a scan of the original and has not been edited. For additional assistance, please contact Archives and Special Collections.
This is an interview with Jim Deeds on July 30, 1984, the interviewer is Renee Gouaux. OH# 133-25. Smokejumpers Oral History Project.

RG I'm going to start by asking Jim what attracted him to smokejumping.

JD Well more than anything else, it was certainly the adventure and the, and the money, more than anything else. Plus the fact that I was going to college, it was a good summer time job.

RG How old were you when you started smoke jumping?

JD Let's see, when I first started jumping it was, let's see that would be '64, I was twenty years old.

RG OK, what years did you jump?

JD Summer of '64 through the summer of '68.

RG OK, so for five seasons?

JD Five summers.

RG Did your parents have any reaction to your decision about smokejumping?

JD Well, not really. Both my, I have a twin brother that jumps too and he jumps to this day but my parents never really had any problems with it. I think they always felt that us kids were pretty much, quite athletic, quite adventurous and it never really bothered them too much.

RG Did you grow up in Missoula?

JD No, my father is retired Air Force and we've been all over the United States. My dad finally settled and retired here in Missoula in 1959 and so I attended high school and pretty much the rest of my time was spent in Missoula.

RG Were you exposed to smokejumping from living in Missoula?

JD Well, not really, I, I guess you could say to an extent. When I was swimming, I was swimming varsity for high school and also for college and Larry Nelson who is a foreman at the jumper base, at that particular time was jumping and he was also a coach for swimmers and I guess maybe he, in a way, kind of got me started in it. I served two years previous to that time on fire suppression crews, one out of Grangeville, Idaho which is the old Adams' Camp and then I also served on the Nine Mile Hot Shot crew before I jumped. So I had been exposed to fire fighting beforehand and then I just decided to with, you know I talked to Larry and then I just decided to apply for the the jumpers.
RG I see. What kind of training did the smokejumper organization give you before you made your first jump?

JD In 1964, it was, it was a two week, pretty intensive training. It took in everything to, from physical fitness, the obstacle course, we went to the uh, jump tower, we had let down training. Pretty much everything I think it is today.

RG All that training was in Missoula, is that correct?

JD Right.

RG OK, do you remember what your first jump was like?

JD Yeah, we jumped up on what was called Sherman Meadows and I kind of liked it in a way. I didn't know what to expect. I kind of got to be one of the first ones out of the door, they were jumping two at a time, I got to be the first one in the door so I got to stand in the door and look at it, think about it before I went. I wasn't really scared, I was, let's say, quite apprehensive as to what was going to happen. I guess you could say, not actually really butterflies but... at the same time, that awareness was there. I don't know how you explain it but I guess in a way I was a little bit scared but probably more apprehensive as to what was going to happen than anything else like that. And as soon as the spotter tapped me on the leg, it was just automatic and that was due to the training, it just, as soon as he tapped me on the leg, I can remember, I just didn't hesitate, I just went out.

RG So, did you feel pretty well prepared to make your first jump?

JD I felt quite prepared, yeah. I thought they did a good job training, as far as the training was concerned.

RG Can you describe what the atmosphere in the plane was like before this jump?

JD The first jump, well there was a lot, it was quiet, let's put it that way.

RG OK.

JD And I think everybody was thinking about it. But it was definitely quiet and I think everybody was thinking about the first jump and what was going to happen. I don't really think there was too many people that were really scared as far as being scared of going out of the airplane as much as they were just... I think they were all in the same boat that I was. We were just apprehensive as far as what the jump was going to be like.

RG Did you ever you have to use your reserve chute?
JD  I never, I never did, I never did. I don't ever recall even having any problems whatsoever in any of the jumps as far as chute malfunctions or anything else like that. And I can't remember to this day, just exactly how many jumps I have. I know I have a 50 jump pin so I made 50. But I don't, I never did use any reserve or have any malfunctions.

RG  Were you ever injured during the course of making the jump?

JD  No, the only time that I think probably... about the only time I ever came close to an injury was when I got... was jumping on what was called the Bear Fire up in the Moose Creek and I, I got hung up in the side of a tree and I didn't hang up well and I was up quite high and it just came all the way out. I just never got hung up well and it just came all the way out. That just really knocked the wind out of me. I remember laying on the ground for quite a period of time but I never, you know, I never did get any broken bones or anything like that.

RG  What kind of parachute did you use?

JD  Well back, '64 it was all the, the FS-10's. It was the old 32 foot parabolics with the Derry slots.

RG  So you did use the 32 foot parachute?

JD  Yeah I recall they were 30 or 32 feet at that time.

RG  What kind of planes do you remember jumping out of?

JD  Well I jumped out of a Trimotor, the Doug.

RG  That's a Douglas?

JD  The DC.

RG  DC.

JD  The DC-2's and 3's.

RG  OK.

JD  And the... oh I can't remember, Twin Beeches, I jumped out of a Travelaire and I jumped out of a Twin Otter at... let's see where did they have one, oh they had a Twin Otter out of Silver City one time. I jumped out of a Twin Otter and I don't know, I can't, I think that's about the extent of it.

RG  OK, what plane did you most often jump out of?

JD  The two or the three, most of the time, it was always the 2 or the 3.

RG  Was it a problem having to adjust to jumping out of different types of planes?
No, not really. I guess the one that I guess I liked the best was the old Ford Trimotor or the Travelaire. They could slow them down pretty good and I always thought that I kind of liked the Travelaire because they had a little bar above it and you could just kind of reach out you know, just grab a hold of the bar and pick up your feet and swing out. The rest of them were all, like if you jumped out of the Beech you got the, most of the time, if you were the first man, you were in the door and you had your foot out of the door and on the step and that was an easy exit. The second man out usually was a pretty tight hole so that was, that was kind of a tough one to jump out of. But the other ones were all, you know, they're all, I never really had too much trouble adjusting to any of them.

Were you ever stationed at another base?

Well I've been to, I was stationed in Grangeville in '66 and stationed at Silver City in '67. I'd also jumped out of Winthrop, Washington, as a back up crew. I went to Winthrop, Washington, I went to Redmond, Oregon, Redding, California and I've been to McCall, Idaho. I never did get one of the trips up to Alaska, which is one I really wanted to get.

Uh huh.

And I jumped out of West Yellowstone, that's about the extent of it.

Did you notice any different procedures at any of these bases, than the one in Missoula?

Ahh...

Or did it make you feel any differently about being based in Missoula?

No, Missoula I think was always the biggest base and always had the most jumpers and always had probably the, you know, the most people around and stuff like that. But I think pretty much all, at that particular time, all of the jumping procedures and stuff like that were pretty much set, you know, through out all of the bases. I don't think there was anything different as far as the techniques in jumping and stuff like that is concerned or really too much in how they packed their fire gear and stuff like that. The only thing I do remember is that, that when you went to Redding, California or Redmond, Oregon, they always gave you a second let down rope because the trees were taller, [laughs].

Huh, interesting. What kind of on base activities were you involved with here in Missoula when you weren't jumping?

Well that was something that I guess I always had a problem with. If you weren't jumping they always had, they always found something for you to do. I used to pack chutes and so you know, if there wasn't a fire call and you were still on job duty,
they'd always give us a chance to pack chutes and stuff like that. So I went through the rigger training and... but the thing I guess that bothers me the most is if you didn't have anything to do, they always made you paint the curbs, [laughs], and those poor curbs got painted I think, five, six times a year, in one summer.

RG  Huh, uh huh.

JD  But we played volley ball, we had a, we had during lunch hour or just right after lunch hour, we had a, we considered it kind of a physical training time. We played volley ball, we played a lot of volley ball. But outside of that, no, you always had, they always had something for you to do. There was a lot of fire packs to be packed up and stuff like that. I think you have a little bit more of a tendency to be a little bit lax and not have so much work for you after 5:00 but during, you know, regular eight to five routine was, they always tried to find something for you to do.

RG  Did you live out at the aerial fire depot during the fire season?

JD  No, my parents lived in town and, and I had an apartment so I pretty much lived in town, just ran back and forth. I either, I went to the university out here and so I had an apartment and I pretty much stayed in the apartment or if I gave up my apartment, you know, in the meantime I'd stay a little bit with my folks or something like that. There was a lot of people from out of town, they didn't have a lot of room. You can only put about, about 60, 80 jumpers at that particular time so, it was just probably a much, easier for me to stay at home and find, give somebody room.

RG  During the course of being a smokejumper, were you able to meet a lot of the jumpers who were from other regions of the country?

JD  Yeah, I got a chance to meet a few, simply because the fact that I spent, you know, was a back up crew here and there and of course, in a way I was sort of, I felt myself kind of an outgoing person. I always went around and introduced myself to some of the other guys and I just figured, if you were going to be there and your going to be on their home turf, you might just as well get to know them. Made things a lot easier, they could always tell you where the best places to go were, [laughs].

RG  Right, right. Did you enjoy that aspect of the smokejumper organization?

JD  I did. I really, I like to travel anyhow and any, I think any time you could get out of reach and, I would always jump at the opportunity.

RG  Mmm mmm.
JD I thought it was really great to get to see a little bit more of the country than to just have to jump for Region One.

RG Would you consider most of the smokejumpers, who jumped out of Missoula to be pretty good workers?

JD Oh yeah, I think, there was, you know, I think there was that certain comradery that you have with... a group like that. It becomes a real fraternity, you know. The guys who are in there for the adventure and the... it's hard work and the only, I don't care where you went, you always had two or three of them that just wouldn't do their part and stuff like that. I think you find that anywhere. The majority of them, yeah, the majority of them were really good workers and I couldn't even remember who did or didn't any more. That was too damn long ago.

RG Right.

JD But, yeah, you, I think anywhere you go, you always have those two or three that just don't do their part. But the majority definitely were damn good workers and, and most of them were really good people to know and be with.

RG Were you ever involved with any project work out in one of the districts?

JD Yeah, I spent the whole summer of 1965 in the... Bob Marshall Wilderness Area. I only got my two refresher jumps and then it was such a bad season I ended up in... the Bob Marshall Wilderness Area on a trail crew and I ended up being up there all year. In fact, I think I made more money that year being up there because we worked six days a week, ten hours a day. And we built a new trail over Hon Creek uh, new trail over Hon Creek. So I think I probably fared better than most of them money wise.

RG You spent the whole summer building this trail?

JD Yeah, trail maintenance and building brand new trail over Hon Creek.

RG Mmm mmm, how many people were on that project?

JD I think at that time, I think there was eight of us on that particular crew and I was the only smokejumper.

RG Uh huh.

JD I recall I was the only smokejumper that was up there on that. In fact it worked out so well I, I came back out of the Bob Marshall after they closed the fire season. They flew me out and I had made arrangements to stay in longer so I came out and went to the University and made arrangements with the University to start classes late and I worked clear up until the middle of October.
RG  Wow, did you enjoy that?

JD  Yeah, it wasn't, you know, it was, I looked at it again as the aspect of terms of money, money to go to school on. So I think when you look at in terms of life and what your goals are set for for the winter and everything else, why it didn't bother me to go in and do the hard work. I didn't mind it at all and I got a little bit of hunting done and things like that while I was there because the hunting season started in September. So it worked out for me. I had no problems with it whatsoever.

RG  Did you, have you acquired many skills from project work and from your on base activities and also from just fighting fires that you've used the rest of your life or since then I should say?

JD  Well, I, I got pretty proficient with a chain saw. In fact because of my proficiency with a chain saw, I got to jump on a few rescue jumps and cutting helispots. But yeah, I think the use of the chain saw taught me quite a bit. In fact after I got out I even did some gypo logging, sawing here and there to make money and stuff like that to go to school on at that particular time. So yeah, but as far as, most of it was really, nothing I guess you could take any where other than in terms of fire fighting. Of course after I got out, I wanted to stay away from as many fires as I could, I wanted my summers to myself, [laughs].

So that was one of the good things about getting out when I did, was because of the fact that I did have my summers to myself to do other things. I would like to say that it got me in such good physical condition and stuff like that that I, I used to, even when I got out I did an awful lot of hiking and back packing and I enjoyed the outdoors. I always have enjoyed the outdoors and to this day yet I still do an awful lot of back packing. So if nothing else than I've got out of, more than anything else I've got a real love for the outdoors and an appreciation for the outdoors and so I think that's one of the biggest benefits that I ever got out of smokejumping. Just the fact that being in the outdoors, seeing so much country and loving it and developing a real appreciation for the outdoors.

RG  Would you use chain saws to cut down trees on most fires?

JD  Yeah, it would depend upon the situation, you know. You always have, a lot of time you got a lightning strike and stuff like that, would hit, would hit a tree and that's where your fire would start from and it wouldn't necessarily, you know, consume the whole tree or anything else like that. It would just start in the top of the tree and then the lightning would run down the tree and start a fire on the ground. But you always had that little bit of fire in the tree and in order for that fire to be completely out, you had to knock that tree down.

Which brings to mind a time when me twin brother and I dropped off on a two manner and we, we fought quite a bit on that fire. I was the oldest jumper, I started in '64 and he started in 1965 and this particular incident where we were both jumping out
of Grangeville, Idaho in '66 we jumped on what we called, was called the Cave Creek Fire. And we jumped from a Ford Trimotor and we argued about who was going to be the fire boss, [laughs]. And so I told him, I says, well you realize that the procedure has always been that the older jumper is the fire boss and the new jumper is just the helper. So we argued about it, finally I told him, I says, well you go ahead and be the fire boss, it sure isn't worth arguing about. So it was quite a hilarious incident because after it was all over we ended up having a reburn and that's a no-no in the Forest Service. But he wanted to be the fire boss and he got to be the fire boss. But he wouldn't climb the trees and all the equipment got hung up in a couple of tall white pines.

RG Can you tell me exactly what the fire boss does that say the other smokejumper wouldn't do?

JD Pretty much the fire boss makes the decision on what's going to happen. Like for instance, if a tree has, has been hit by lightning and the fire bosses kind of make the decisions as to whether the tree comes down or whether it stays, or you can of look at it and keep a good eye on it and you have a good idea or you're pretty much positive the fire is out of the tree, you might decide to leave it. I always felt that the safest thing to do was to drop it come hell or high water because you know, it's, there's possibility something's there that. But he makes those decisions, he decides when the fire, consider the fire completely out and it's time to leave. You control the fire, keep the fire under control by putting your line around it, once your line is around it and you feel you've got a good stable line, then you can consider the fire under control.

Then comes the mop up stage. That's when you have to put out all the small, little hot spots and stuff like that. You have make sure the fire is completely out cold, then you can leave. And usually when a fire is out they required you at that time to stay over the next burning period. Which was probably from oh, 8:00 in the morning until 4:00 in the afternoon. So if you got the fire out at say 9:00 at night, that night, you'll still stay on it to make sure it's dead out through the next burning period. And well see, it's the fire boss', to decided whether, what he considers it out or anything else like that and it's time to leave.

But anyway we argued about that for awhile, he didn't really want to climb the tree for the gear so I ended up climbing the tree for the gear. When I got down, found out that our cross-cut saw was broken so we couldn't bring that big white pine down. So he wanted to call back to Grangeville and have the plane bring out a chain saw and I wasn't for it. I figured there was a way we could get that down one way or another cause of the cost of putting a plane in the air just to bring a chain saw out. Well they ended up, we ended up leaving it and that was his decision to leave it. And it ended up, was a two manner, it ended up, they jumped 31 men on it next time, so it was a tremendous cost to the Forest Service because of our mistake. I will have to admit he was really good, he went to the regional office there and or to
the forest office and explained to them that it was his fault, was his decision to leave it. But it was kind of hilarious. After that, they never jumped brothers together on a fire, [laughs].

RG  Huh.

JD  So that was 1966.

RG  Well what other ways would have you taken that tree down?

JD  Well, even if I had to take and whittle the handle for a cross-cut saw, I would have done it. There was a way, you know, we could have used that cross-cut saw. It might have been a jury-rig type thing but you know, the way I looked at it, even if we'd have stayed over another whole day or something like that, it would have cost them a lot less than bringing that, another plane load and thirty some men out there. So there was, we could have figured out some way of getting the tree down with that cross-cut, that wasn't a problem to me. It was just the fact that you know I, I kind of had the feeling at that particular time, Jack was kind of new and stuff like that and he wasn't really gung-ho for the work. But we argued about that and he's come a long ways and stuff like that since then. But that was a bad one, that was the only time we ever had trouble together and after that we never jumped together on a fire unless it was a project fire in which we jumped, you know, eight or ten guys and then we'd have a foreman on it anyhow. So they never jumped us, after that, on a two man fire together.

RG  Did you know of any other brothers who were jumping at the same time?

JD  Not at the same time Jack and I were jumping. I understand a little bit later there was a couple of brothers came in and jumped together. I never did get to meet them until one night we were sitting in the Silver Dollar and one of them was really upset with me, oh you are one of the Deeds brothers that kept brothers from jumping together. He was that drunk, you can't believe the amount of trouble I got that night. So I said, the only thing I could say was I'm sorry you know. It isn't worth fighting over and anything else like that so let's just drop it and it was probably, believe it or not, it was probably a good thing that they come out with particular ruling however.

RG  Why do you feel it isn't such a good idea for brothers to jump together?

JD  Well, not that everybody's the same as my twin brother and I are or anything else like that, but I don't know. I think, in a way, one way or another, brothers are competing against themselves all the time and that competition come in several different forms, you know. Maybe one wants to be the boss, the other one doesn't want him to be, you know, and that's where arguments come in and stuff like that. I think it's probably in
the long run, it was just better to not have brothers to jump, particularly in our case. I wished I had said something about it before the two of us had made the jump because I knew for a fact that my twin brother and I had argued all of our lives. And we get along real well right now. But you know, we still have our times when we argue and stuff like that. Don't get me wrong I think he's, I love my brother and everything else like that but, well, brothers will be brothers. I guess that's the way you put it, [laughs].

RG Right. You mentioned having made several rescue jumps and using chain saws during them. Can you tell me some more about them?

JD Well I remember two of them, you know, in particular. One of them was the, was the time that... Dave, I think it was Dave Evenson that got, had jumped on a fire in Clearwater and I can't remember just the extent of his injuries. But he got injured on that and I think he, he got some low back injuries and maybe a broken collar bone. I don't remember just exactly the extent of his injuries. But I got the opportunity to jump on that one and cut a helispot. And then I also jumped on one, that was probably, I jumped on one on the south side of the Salmon River. I don't remember the year or the date but I do remember it was a helicopter crash in which the helicopter pilot was bringing in a geological survey crew to survey down there. I don't remember what caused the accident or anything else like that but I remember the helicopter crashed and the pilot was in pretty bad shape. They jumped us that evening and the winds were really bad and that was, probably one, probably was the jump that I got the scaredest on if anything. Because the winds were pretty bad and a lot of us got blown all over the country and there was some damn big rocks. And I remember just barely coming down between a couple of pretty good sized boulders and I was figuring I was going to get hurt.

But anyway that's probably the worst jump that I, that I can recall having because of the winds. The winds blew us, oh, I'd say probably a good mile away from the damn jump spot and stuff like that and we were scattered out pretty heavy and there was, I don't remember just exactly how many was jumping, whether it was 16 or how many but it was quite a bunch of us jump and we were scattered out pretty bad. It ended up the helicopter pilot died. But we cut a helispot and I got to saw on that one, cut a helispot to get those people out.

RG Was your only responsibility on those rescue jumps to cut a helispot or were you also expected to help with some emergency treatment?

JD Well, we got to help, you know, we were expected to help with... those that were pretty good at first aid, helped the with first aid and stuff like that. But it, particularly, a lot of the cases you know, they had guys that were a lot better with the first aid and stuff like that than I was and most of those guys did the work. But they always had other guys come along to help
haul the individuals because a lot of times, maybe it was two miles, three miles to the nearest place to cut a decent helispot. And then we had to carry the individual to that particular spot. So then that's when they needed most of the guys to help spell off you know, carrying the individual any distance, particularly uphill and stuff like that. You don't climb a lot of that Salmon River country without getting awful tired, just without carrying somebody, without having to carry somebody. So that was a lot of the, a lot of it was to, to work on the individual, to, and there was always jobs for everybody. All the equipment had to be retrieved and everything else like that and bundled up, sacked up, ready to take out so there was plenty of work for everybody. Usually what they did, most of the times I got to do a lot of the sawing.

RG How far away was the most distant fire you remember jumping?
JD In terms of having to walk?
RG Uh, in terms of...
JD The farthest from Missoula?
RG The farthest from Missoula.

JD Without going out of reaching, I would say I jumped on one in... clear out of what was called... Sabe Creek. It was clear down on Mcgruder district.
RG And that is?
JD Back in the Bitterroot Wilderness Area.
RG All right.

JD As far as in terms of walking, I would say it would be that Bear Creek fire in which we had to, we probably hiked 15 miles just to Moose Creek and then from then on it was, and all Moose Creek is is a ranger district back in the wilderness. It has an airstrip in there. But as far as the longest walk, I would say probably the Bear Creek fire.

RG So your spotter, so you jumped...

JD Well I wouldn't have to say, from Missoula, I'd have to say no. I'd have to say probably would be the ones down on the Salmon River, that would be the furthest from Missoula.

RG When you had to hike all those miles, into the fire, was that because there was no place for you to jump close to the fire?
JD No, that's hiking out.
RG Oh, hiking out.
JD When you come out of a fire.

RG Right, OK.

JD No, I think the largest distance that I had to hike to a fire was probably four miles simply because it was so, you know the terrain was such that you couldn't get close to the fire and when we did jump on that one, that was, I jumped a two-manner with Gary Anderson down in, that was that Sabe Creek fire, was down there near Sabe Creek someplace. And it ended up, we ended up jumping quite a ways from the fire and then in reproduction. And what we mean by reproduction is just new trees that are grown up. They're fairly short that you can jump into them and they're usually very thick so that you can always generally get hung up in them without any trouble. But not a big let down.

And we jumped on that one and we never did find the fire because it rained as we jumped and then it rained that night and it rained pretty hard and it was just a small fire. And so we had to walk the trail down into the draw and then we just couldn't find the fire. So we ended up staying out there two and a half days in the rain just [laughs], looking for the damn thing. But we never did find it and we ended up, we ended up going back and sacking up our gear and just walking out and leaving it and it never ever came up again. So evidently the rain had put it out probably the first night and we just never could find it. We climbed trees and everything else like that looking for smell of smoke and everything else like that and we never could find anything so we ended up sitting in the rain.

RG Wow, What do you think is the biggest fire you ever...?

JD Sundance, I was over, I was a sector boss on the Sundance fire over in Idaho.

RG And exactly where in Idaho was that and what year was it?

JD Well it got started at Priest Lake and went almost to Bonner's Ferry. It was between that, it was, it was, I believe it was 128,000 acres but I don't remember just exactly. These are the pictures of it right here, I think I remember taking these as I was in the helicopter going up and looking over my section. Yeah there it is right there. [looking at photograph album]

RG Right, what exactly was your duty on this fire?

JD Well I was just given a crew and I was... they broke your fire line up into different sections and they put a sector boss in charge of each section of that particular fire line. And so I was sector boss of a certain section of fire line with so many crew to, so many people to just make line and to bring it under control. They pretty much had it fairly well under control, it just had a few hot spots and stuff like that were going up. I recall hot, I had one hot spot on my section where, where there was a bunch of... where they had put the fire line and everything else like that. It wasn't a good, substantial fire line and it
all of sudden started... and there was some, still some green, good trees and a good bunch of trees inside and it started picking up again. So I was a little worried about that so I remember calling for a retardant drop, cause then it picked up pretty bad and I was just afraid the line wasn't real substantial at that particular section. So I, I wanted to make sure it got knocked down before I got a chance to improve that line, give me a chance to improve the line.

RG Were there quite a few fire fighters and smokejumpers who worked on this fire?

JD Well, at that, the fire originally started with two jumpers jumping on it and they got it under control and what my understanding was that the Idaho Protective Association came in, which was the state crew. Started on state land I guess, came in and their policy was that at 5:00 their work day was done, they left the fire. Well it ended up blowing up again and they jumped a bunch more jumpers on it and the same thing happened and then it ended up jumping in, becoming 128 acre fire. And then some of the smokejumpers went in as the sector bosses and in charge of air operations and stuff like that, you know. A lot of the jumpers that had had quite a bit of experience and stuff like that were called in to, to be sector bosses and in charge of air operations and different other operations.

RG As a Forest Service employee, are you or were you able to jump on any fire on any land or exactly how was that put under control?

JD Well, a lot of times what happened, most of the time we just jumped on Forest Service land. I think most of the, the state land was accessible in the fact that they could get crews in easier by truck or something like that. The whole purpose of smokejumping was, was the initial attack. They tried to get in while they were small and keep them small. Occasionally you got a fire that was getting heavily out of control or something like that on state land or a lot of times you jumped on... you jumped on BLM land you'd jump on state land you'd jump on... Park Service land, a few jumps in Glacier Park... a few in Yellowstone Park. You got to jump on Indian land, reservation. You jumped, you know, the reservations, anybody could call for jumpers if they needed them. Of course they'd be footing the bill but, you know, it wasn't just the fact that we were restricted to federal land or anything else like that.

RG Right, OK. What do you remember as being the toughest fire you ever fought?

JD Well it was one I was trucked to I think out of Cody, Wyoming. I don't recall just the exact acreage when we got on it but it must have been about 20, 40, 50 acres, something like that. And there was predicted extreme high winds for the area and stuff like that. So we built some really big 50 foot fire line and we built some really wide fire lines and of course the winds
picked up it didn't hold it. That wide line didn't hold it and I recall... a bunch of us or it got away from us and we ended up on a damn ledge and I remember the slurry planes coming in and dropping retardant on us instead of the fire. And I can't even remember the year or anything else like that. I've been looking around for the pictures because I remember taking my camera, [laughs], and I was supposed to be having my head down with the slurry planes coming in, trying to get some pictures and it was, there was a good 100, 150 foot wall of flame behind us. The planes were coming in and dropping us and dropping it on the edge of the fire there. But we just took the chain saws, everything and just started dropping it into the fire and then we, as soon as it started getting close then we just moved back out to the, to the ledge. I can't remember who all was on that one either.

RG  What kind of a ledge was it? You weren't being like pushed off a precipice?

JD  No, no. It's just the fact that it was a big rock ledge and it was, it dropped down but it was the only place that there was no, actually no fuel.

RG  Right.

JD  Where the fuel was so sparse and we figured it was the only place we could go so we just took our chain saws and we got out to the ledge there and we started knocking everything back towards the fire and trying to give us as much room as we possibly could out there for us. And... and then we just kind of hunkered down on the rocks and stuff like that. Which is the safest place to go is any natural break and stuff like that. We figured it was the safest place, there's too much timber to go anywhere else really.

RG  Were you, did you have very much fear of being surrounded by fire or of the fire itself when you were fighting it?

JD  Well, now I never, never really thought of it that way because we always took pretty good precautions. We always had, it was, any kind of a big project fire or a pretty good size fire, we jumped 30 guys or something like that on it, we always had one guy that was a lookout. His job was to go around, look and see what the fire was doing and if it looked like it was getting out control or trying to swing around us or if a spot fire had started below us or something like that, that was his job to make sure that nobody got caught in the situation. So I never really worried too much about it.

RG  Did you ever work as a spotter or a pilot?

JD  No, I kicked some cargo but I never really did any spotting. That was mostly for the guys that were, were squad leaders and foremen did most of the spotting. I kicked cargo but that's about all and, and packed chutes.
RG Did you have a lot of confidence in your spotters?

JD Oh yeah, I never any problems with any of them. In fact I, when the guys through that spotter training and stuff like that, I think they do thorough job. I think the whole organization has always done a thorough job. There again with my ability to you know, just on my first jump to go up there, I felt that I had enough good training that it didn't really bother me. And they told me what to look out for and everything else like that and so I just never really had any fear. No problems with any of the spotters. I don't ever recall any spotter putting me in a bad situation.

RG Of the equipment that you would use and have dropped to you, while fighting a fire, how much of that was disposable and were you able to leave behind at the time?

JD When I first started... there was a lot of gear left behind. There was a lot of gear left behind. We never left any chutes or anything else like that, those were always brought out, always retrieved or brought out. We always brought out most of the shovels and stuff like that. But you know, the containers from food things and stuff like that, you know, we dug a hole and buried it and stuff like that. But, and we'd even leave out water containers and stuff like that that were empty and stuff like that. But as it got toward the ends of the years I was jumping then it pretty much got to be pack in and pack out and I can remember packing in some, packing out chain saws that were pretty heavy and stuff like that. And I mean it got to the point where we was stomping everything. I think Lady Bird Johnson was the one that started all that. But it ended up being that... towards the end, the last couple years yeah, we packed out most everything.

RG I understand that at some point, the Forest Service was using disposable or burnable sleeping bags. Did you ever use those?

JD Yeah, paper sleeping bags, yeah, we just either buried them or burned them.

RG And you said that...

JD They had... there was a lot of, you know, actually had quite a few disposable things. All your food containers and stuff like that we never brought back. Just dug a hole and buried it and stuff like that. And actually when I first got started, probably about the most of the things we brought back out were pulaski and shovel, cross-cut saws, tools, tools and flash lights and stuff like that. We brought most of that stuff back, sleeping bags, eating utensils and stuff like that you just buried.

RG Would you use a chain saw on most of the fires that you fought or would you use cross-cut saws more?

JD Well, most of the fires that I jumped on were, I jumped on a lot of two-manners.
RG You mentioned at the beginning of the interview that you were a student while you were smokejumping. Were most of the other people who were jumping at that time also students?

JD Yeah, I think they were. They were either students or teachers or people that had jobs that during the winter, full time jobs during the winter and that had a particular job that didn't have summer employment and so they jumped in the summer time. There was a lot of kids that, when I was going to school were jumping that had the same idea that I did. Which was money to put them through college. In fact there wasn't, you couldn't find a better job to go to college and make money in the summer time.

RG Right.

JD The amount of hours that you got, you put in an awful lot of hours in the summer and you made some real good money. I can recall a lot of times putting $8700 away in the bank for school and Lord knows how much I spent in the bars.

RG That's great. How much money did you make? Were you paid by the hour, do you remember how you were paid?

JD We were paid by the hour then. I can't recall just exactly how much it was. I think if person was to work on a, boy I just don't recall, but I think if a person was to work for just a regular 40 hour work week he wouldn't make much more and probably wouldn't bring home much more than 100 dollars a week you know. Which wasn't big money at that time but the thing of it was you got a lot of hours. That was the thing and a lot of people thought that maybe a person got paid time and a half but no you didn't, you got paid straight time. But where you made your money was until the fire was controlled, you worked 24 hours at the fire. And of course you got to sneak in a little bit of sleep time here and there and everything else like that. But principally you got paid for 24 hours until the fire was under control and then for the next day or two you got maybe 16 hours a day so it was good money.

RG Mmm mmm.

JD A lot of hours and good money.

RG How many hours were you allowed to work continuously without a break?

JD Well, I think they, I don't recall but I think they let you go about 32 or 48 hours. I think, you know, that continuous and then they required a break. The think of it was you know, a lot of times you, you'd... you wouldn't have the fire under control,
you'd work awful damn hard for maybe the first 20 hours or
something like that. Then you'd finally reach a spot where the
fire wasn't really too bad in that particular area so you took
the opportunity to take a little bit of time off and sit and
stuff like that. So I don't there was anybody that ever worked,
you know, if you want to call it continuous, 24 hours a day. I
don't think there was anybody that ever did that. There was
always a break in there someplace where maybe a few of us would
work and a few of them would sleep and switch off and stuff like
that.

RG    Do have any feeling about the change in the composition of
people who are smokejumpers today? From being students to... a
lot of smokejumpers being sort of career jumpers?

JD    No, I think everybody picks his own way. I have no
objections, I have no problems with somebody becoming a career
jumper. I could take my brother for instance, he started jumping
the year after I did and he jumps right up to this day. I have
a little bit of problems with his attitude. I have a little bit of
problems with some of them's attitude. Some of them think that
it's, you know, you're really a macho individual of you're a
smokejumper. Well, I guess maybe that's their thing. My idea of
it was was a good summer time job. It was a job that had to be
done, sure there was a lot of adventure in it but it... my life
did not revolve around smokejumping... like I think some of the
people do, like my brother right now. I think by brother to this
day, his life revolves around smokejumping and there's where I
think the macho comes into it. I think some of the younger kids
today are into it for the money and not for the work. So I think
that's probably about the extent of it you know. I think as far
as career people, there's some damn good people out there that
make a career. Larry Eisenman, he is in charge of the project now
is a damn good smokejumper, damn good foreman, damn good at his
job. He knows it, knows it well they couldn't have picked
probably a better person to put into it. And some of the others
guys... I think they're into it just for the macho that goes with
it.

RG    Do you think the level of expertise is increased by having
people come back year after year like they are now or do you
think that that is really a very significant thing?

JD    Well, I don't think... yeah, I think the level of expertise
is always better when you bring a person that knows the ropes and
things like that. I think you would never get the level of
quality of work if you had to train new smokejumpers every year.
I think that as far as jumping is concerned, I think it's, it's
like anything. If the attitude of the individual, I'm sure there
are still guys coming back here year after year that probably are
no better than they were when they first started. But I think
that's the same with any organization. I think once you train an
individual, an individual gets a handle on what he's doing and he
develops any kind of pride in it, and I think the majority of the
people that after, particularly after going to this reunion and
seeing some of them. It's a tremendous fraternity, it really is, it's you know.

It's a unique organization, it's a unique bunch of guys and the majority of them are hard workers. They know their job, they know it well and so yeah, I think that coming back year after year is a benefit to the organization because the cost of training. Because you're getting an individual that's got experience, he knows the job and so I think yeah, I think the fact that it's a benefit to them, the guys just come back year after year. I think there's some guys there that just... I don't know if they're trying to think that it could be a full time job or not. I know that a lot of the smokejumpers that when they're, when they get done, go to elsewhere on the forest, you know. They can go to a forest as a fire control officer or they do something like that, which is a benefit to the forest because they do have that experience in fire fighting.

RG Were many of the people that were students when you smokejumped, were they forestry students?

JD I was. Yeah, I think there was a few of them around that were forestry students.

RG Do you think that smokejumping helped to further your career in, as a forestry major and other people's?

JD To an extent, yes. Largely, no. Because really if a person is in timber management or range management or wood utilization or you know, what have you, you don't get much benefit out of smokejumping cause you're mainly in fire control, that's it. You just don't get an opportunity unless you maybe by chance get on some particular project in a district where you can use your skill or something like that. But outside of that, no, I don't think smokejumping really helps your forestry at all. In fact I would say that probably very little.

RG Have there been any changes that you know of in regard to fire management that the smokejumper organization has adopted since you were jumping, or during the time?

JD Well I haven't, I haven't... gone out on really that extremely close to the project since I quit. I've devoted, I've gone on and devoted my time to I think... been good or more important to me than to pay attention to what's going on out there. But I'm certainly, there has been some really good changes. I remember the first year that I jumped they used bentonite and stuff like that as their fire retardant. Which now they've gone to Phoscheck and some of those, stuff like that which not only is it as, is it a good... retardant but it's also a fertilizer and stuff like that. Where, if I remember right I think bentonite actually sterilized the soil.

Now they've come to some things now where they've got everything computerized, you know they can, I think new technology and stuff like that has evolved in this and everything like that just as much as it is in any other big business. They,
I'm sure that they have tremendously upgraded their organization as far as, well there's, they brought in some new chutes, experimental chutes and the chutes are even better than they were in those days. They brought in the inversion net which eliminates a lot of malfunctions. In fact I think now with the inversion nets or line overs and stuff like that are, are virtually eliminated. And so sure, no doubt about it. I don't know very many of them, I never really spent a lot of time out there.

RG Did a let burn policy ever exist when you were a smokejumper?

JD I don't recall that it did. I don't recall of there being any fires that they actually just let go out of control like they do now in the wilderness areas. I know there's some of the wilderness areas where you can get some pretty good-sized burns simply because of the fact that they're just going to let them go.

RG As a former smokejumper, how do you feel about that?

JD Well, I think, I really honestly believe that in some areas I think it's good. I think it's really good. I think that we get to the point where, you know, as soon as your mature trees come in and take over, by then you've lost a lot of your vegetation for your animals and stuff like that. And a burn does nothing better but to bring a lot of good wildlife vegetation and stuff like that. It's like any other ecosystem, as it progresses and stuff like that, you're, as you get into the top part of ecosystem and stuff like that you eliminate your lower and... as you get a big mature canopy and stuff like that, you get the undergrowth for your elk and deer and stuff like that to feed on. So I believe it's good. It depends on what they want to do. There's a lot of good merchable timber that goes by the wayside too. So it's 6 of one half a dozen of the other, I haven't thought about forestry for quite a few years, [laughs]. Since I've been in the environmental chemistry end of it I haven't really done a lot of thinking about it. Your, it's a basic trade off, there again it's a trade off. But then here again you get back in your wilderness areas. How much of that merchantable timber is going to be sold, how many, you know, there's not going to be any forest, logging in there anyhow so.

RG Were there any women smokejumpers when you were smokejumping?

JD None... none. I don't think the first, the first woman jumper came in I think along in 1981. In fact at the reunion I think we gave the first jumper, woman jumper, a plaque recognizing the fact that now women jumpers are in. Your next question is going to be how do I feel about it. [laughter] I have absolutely no qualms whatsoever about women being in smokejumping. I have no problems with women being any job that a man has as long as she can handle it and she can admit it if she can't. I have seen jobs where women have been in jobs where they
just can't handle and they just refuse to admit it. Then what ends up happening is somebody else ends up carrying them and when somebody else carries them, then there's hard feelings that come along. And there are women, don't get me wrong, that can handle most any job a man can handle and I recognize that and more power to them you know. They can have, if a woman can take over my job and she's got capable and she's smarter than I am, then fine, she deserves it. I feel a person's got to move on. You either fight to hold your job or you, you lose it you know and I don't have any problems with giving it up to anybody, male, female, whatever.

RG Are there any other transitions in the smokejumper organization that you'd like to comment on or that you've noticed or are aware of?

JD Oh, I have a little bit of a problem with the... the union out there. I don't know whether the fact that the union is good or bad for, for the smokejumper program.

RG How long has a union existed for smokejumpers?

JD I don't know. I just heard about it and just really never, really got with anybody and talked with them about it or anything else like that. But it's like any other union, I have problems with unions. I think unions are good if unions don't out step their bounds. As far as the smokejumper program is concerned I don't know how strong it is, I don't know how strong it is. I don't know how it's run. I don't know what affect it has on the individuals out there. But usually unions have a tendency to fight for the dead heads and causes a weak organization. And so that's the reason I have a problem with unions. But there again, I don't know to what extent that union is or anything else like that. But if it's like a lot of the other unions that I've seen and stuff like that I think it's a disadvantage.

RG Do you feel when you were a smokejumper, that you had a fair amount of freedom on the job to use your own judgement without having to necessarily go by say, a contract guideline that was laid out for you? Do you feel like that made some of that freedom and... of judgement is going to be reduced by something like that?

JD Yeah, to absolutely honest with you, when I was on a two man fire or something like that, I handled it the best way I thought would handle it. I didn't care about guidelines or anything else like that. I felt that I was out there to do a job and I felt that by gosh if they put me on a fire, that they had enough confidence in me to take care of it my way you know. And so I just took care of it the best way I knew how and I never had any problems with it. I, I think really the way the program was structured at the time I was there, it was fairly well structured. The, starting from the beginning, they gave you a really good training. I think the training was, was really great and that built that confidence in you into being able to jump.
And the same way with your fire training, they taught you every technique that they had in fighting fires and I thought that was good. So, so I felt that, you know, that every individual that came through the door out there and became a smokejumper, I think the majority of those people that were, have been the higher echelon, had all the faith in the world in those people and they felt that their training was good enough that if you went out and you did the job. I don't think that there was really anything really strong about structured lines. I think when you got out you had a job to do, they didn't care how you did it. They just wanted the job done. And so I never felt that I was really pressured to a job any particular way or anything else like that. When you got on a job with a foreman or something like that yeah, they generally made the decisions and stuff like that as to where the line would go and stuff like that. But you know, everybody still knew how to dig a line and stuff like that, wasn't really anything to it.

RG  OK, has your smokejumping experience had a significant impact on your life?

JD  Oh yeah. You know, here again, I guess the fact that I was out smokejumping and the fact that I was out fighting fires, had the opportunity to see Montana and well, in fact to see most of the damn... the wilderness in from, you know, everything Montana, west of the coast and stuff like that, having jumped in many different places, I just had a tremendous love for the outdoors and to this day I still spend as much time as I possibly can in the outdoors. There's nothing I'd rather do than just put a back pack on and go back packing, you know. And I, it really has, you know, I appreciate what we've got here now. More than anything else, I think it's the appreciation for what we have. If I see somebody... just recall, I remember stopping at a, at a road construction and this guy in front of me just hauled out and threw a piece of paper out of his car window and I walked over and got that piece of paper and threw it back in his window. I love Montana and I love the outdoors. I don't want anybody else to mess it up for me. I have a real appreciation for it and I think that smokejumping and having the opportunity to see a lot of this country has had a tremendous effect on me in that respect.

RG  Are there any other experiences or stories that you'd, that you have from your time as a smokejumper that you'd like to talk about?

JD  Well, there isn't really too many. I guess I, you know, a lot of the times I got small fires. The only really big fire that I got was the one in Cody, Wyoming and we got kind of trapped out there on that ledge a little bit. The Sundance fire, I don't think I was a jumper then, I remember when I was working on one of the hot shot crews. One of the most hilarious things I ever seen in my life was when the jumpers were dropping cargo. They were dropping these five gallon water cans and... three of the five gallon water cans broke away from one of the chutes and
landed right next to the mules. The mules were right by, next to the cook tent, that was on the Alder Ridge fire and boy I tell you, talk about a rodeo.

RG I bet.

JD When those water cans broke and sprayed water all over those mules, those mules went wild and went right through the damn cook tent. But I wasn't jumping then, I think that was the year just before I started jumping. But, and I was on one fire that was pretty hairy one time and they over in Helena. They were jumping on a fire over in Helena and they had the old C-47. And I think a lot of us, when we jumped out of that damn airplane, we couldn't decide whether we wanted to jump over the tail or under the tail. The tail stood right about even with the bottom of the door and so when you looked out, you looked out over the top of the tip. And they were dropping cargo and cargo sliced right through the tail and they had to end up flying all the way to, back to Helena with that cargo slice through, hanging in the tail.

Most of my jumping experiences were, were quite mild. I've been getting a lot of the stories like a lot of the guys got. Although my jumping experience was a tremendous experience. I enjoyed every minute of it. I had uh, it was good hard physical work which I think, you know, really never hurts anybody. I guess in a way it did give me an attitude towards my work too. I still, to this day, I think I work hard. It was a great organization to be in, some good individuals to work with. It was, it was, I still think back about the years that I jumped and the adventure that I had jumping out of airplanes and some of the fires that I've been on. I just didn't get too many of the good fires you hear everybody talking about. Which is no problem, but it was quite an experience the day that I jumped with my twin brother you know, that in a way was [laughs]...

RG Absolutely, absolutely.

JD So everybody has their own little thing, I guess, that they experienced and... it was, I guess that was enough for an experience. The one over in Cody, Wyoming, I guess that was, I wish I could remember some of the guys that were on that fire because I remember we didn't jump on it. We ended up, not that I recall anymore, we didn't jump on it, we got, we ended up getting trucked to it and, but it ended up blowing on us. That's about as close I guess as I ever came to a hairy fire as anything. I do recall the first fire jump that I got up at Parsnip Mountain, up on the Kootenai National Forest, up by Libby. In which I think, a load, a Doug load of 16 of us jumped on the upper edge of the fire and before it was all over, nobody got hurt or anything else like that, those that jumped up on top, before we got over, the fire got into our chutes and burned up our, a bunch of our jump gear. And some of them jumped at the bottom into the fire and that was the ones that got hurt. A few of those guys got hurt because they jumped into what looked to be reproduction and it was a lot taller than it was and it had covered up a whole bunch of downfall. And some guys got broken arms and legs and one or
two of them I think got some back injuries and stuff like that. But no, I was really, I guess I was quite, one of the mild smokejumpers.

RG OK, well I'd like to thank Jim Deeds for sharing his experiences with me today, this is the end of this tape.

END OF THE INTERVIEW