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William D. Dratz interviewed by Jim Norgaard, 6/28/84.
Smokejumpers Oral History Project. OH# 133-30.

JN  This is an Oral History with Bill Dratz and we are doing it at his home in Polson, [MT], and it's June 28th today. So you were saying you didn't really begin at the very beginning of smokejumping, you began in '42?

WD  '46, actually, right after the war is when I started jumping. I was involved with, indirectly, with the jumpers in the early forties when they were up Nine Mile. I was in a fire fighting crew they called the Flying Squadron at that time. These were young fellows, first year of college or last year in high school that were just hired to fight fires. We were based at the same base that the jumpers were. The old original jumpers Earl Cooley and Fred Brauer and some of those fellows that were really in in the start. [They] were jumping then, we were acquainted with them all but then of course the war came along in '42 and, in '41 actually. In '42 I went into the service and I was gone until '46 and then we went back in and went into the jumpers and stayed with them then until '49.

JN  So, were you on an inter regional fire fighting crew?

WD  This was an inter regional fire fighting crew before the war. They called it the Flying Squadron, in fact we spent that summer of, gosh what year was that... '41 I think, over in Washington on a big fire by Skykomish. This was kind of a hot shot crew that traveled around and we fought fires all over the region. In fact several regions, it was an inter regional crew and I think it went on several years after that. Of course I was gone and wasn't in it but the jumpers were training in the same place at that time, up at Nine Mile... the old CCC camp up there, and that's where we trained after the war too, is up there. It was a real nice little camp. It was an old CCC camp but we had all the equipment up there that they have in Missoula really, rigging and places for let down and we had the towers to practice, you know, the jumping to get the shock of the chute and that sort of thing and the position on the airplane and mock ups of the various planes we jumped out of. We had a strip up there and the Trimotor would land there and we did our jumping right there. It was a pretty nice place to be. And of course then in the summer when the actual fire season started then we jumped out of Hale field which is the site of the high school in Missoula there now. In fact that was the airport then, of course they moved out to where the airport is now, out west of Missoula.

JN  Back tracking back a little bit, before you even got involved in fire fighting, what were you doing?

WD  Well, I'd just gotten out of high school of course, and I started college. In fact I wasn't even taking forestry, I was majoring in mathematics at that time. I didn't even decide to go into forestry until I went in to the war and decided that this was what I wanted to do and came back and then enrolled in the
Forestry School and that's when I did my jumping. When I was finishing up, I finished up college in 1950 in Missoula with a degree in Forestry and I jumped during the years that I was in school. It was a good job to have, at least I could pick up enough money to maintain myself during the year. We had a pretty good size crew in those days. Gosh, I think they used to train over a hundred at Nine Mile in those days.

JN That large a smokejumping crew?

WD Yes, and of course then they would send crews to McCall and various places from there. But the main base of training at that time was right, was at Missoula and up at Nine Mile.

JN When you were with the Flying Squadron, could you describe what that was? Was that a jumping outfit or....

WD No! No it was just a well trained fire fighting crew. I don't even remember how many people were involved. Probably fifty young men. The reason they called it this is because we were equipped to travel and they'd fly us. They flew us to Washington to fight the fire at Skykomish. But we were available to hit fires anywhere and they'd come and get us in the middle of the night and take us wherever we had to go. But, I call them the Flying Squadron I guess because they were a special crew of fire fighters to go anyplace.

JN Was that unusual to have a crew that was transported by air at that time?

WD Oh, I think so. It was the first experiment with this I'm sure. They stayed with this several years and I'm sure that a lot of people that were involved with that program went into the jumpers. But the war kind of interrupted all this. This was in forty, forty-one and this was when the jumpers were starting and then of course, this whole thing was interrupted during the war and... of course the jumpers stayed in existence during the war. They had a bunch of conscientious objectors jumping. Several friends of mine were involved with the jumpers during that time. Bill Wood was one, he's still a real good friend. He's retired from the Forest Service now and he had to train these conscientious objectors and they did the jumping during the war. A good share of them were, that was the only place you could get the crew. Everyone else was gone to war.

JN Did he find them to be good jumpers?

WD You bet! He always had a lot of good things to say about them. He said they were hard workers and he always had good things to say about them. You bet.

JN Well with that original Flying Squadron, you got involved in that mainly for an income when you were going to school?
Oh, it was a summer job, you bet. I'd worked... trying to think what year that was, gosh... I went to work up at Troy Ranger Station after that, or before that, I don't remember which now. What year came before what. But I think that was just prior to the war, if I remember right, that Flying Squadron bit and... The jumpers were stationed at the same place. This is the reason I knew a number of the people that were there like Earl Cooley and Fred Brauer. I can't think of some of the other names but they were the original jumpers. Fred still lives in Missoula, Fred Brauer, Fred is retired. Earl Cooley was head of the project for quite a long time and off and on two different times. He was one of the, I think he was the first one to make a jump. He and Frank Derry. Back in the original times, I wasn't with them then although I knew them. I got into it right after the war and of course, this is when it really started amounting to something at that time.

What was that original outfit like? You knew some of the jumpers when you were in the Flying Squadron, what was that original outfit like?

Oh, they were a bunch of real dedicated people and they jumped the old Eagle chutes and they did a lot of the experimentation and a lot of the things that finally came along later. Like Frank Derry developed the slots in the back of the chutes, the original chutes that they used to jump without slots. They had very little control over where they were going to go and when Frank Derry developed the slots in the back of these chutes he gave us a forward speed and a way to steer the chutes.

Did they have a lot of problems with accidents before they developed those slots?

I don't think so, I think the only thing was that the old Eagle took a real tough man to take the opening shock and there wasn't very much maneuverability. In other words, they couldn't land just where they wanted. Pretty hard to control and those slots really gave us some latitude. We could find a spot to, well, say a hundred feet across in a little meadow or something, without any wind you could pretty well put yourself in there. You had about five miles or seven miles forward speed. This really helped. Then I guess they are into a different type of chute now. I don't even know what they are using. They're using different shapes, and they've got ears and everything on them and I guess they've got more forward speed. A lot of things that we didn't have then. But we did a pretty good job. We didn't have any accidents, damn few.

What type of fellow would get involved with jumping back then?

Well, first place you had to be a fire fighter. You had to have some fire fighting experience at that time to even get on. It was hard to... I suppose it's a lot harder now. There's probably a long waiting list to get into it now. I assume there
is. At that time you had to have at least one year of fire fighting experience to get into it and that didn't guarantee the, the first thing you had to be is a fire fighter. You had to know how to fight fire. Because it didn't make a damn whether you had the guts to jump out of an airplane, that had nothing to do with it, really. Because if you couldn't do the job after you got there, so what. So you had to be a fire fighter.

JN So you couldn't just be a daredevil then?

WD That's right and of course right after the war we got a lot of fellows that were in the Air Force or in the paratroopers, or whatever. I wasn't, I was in the Engineers, but a lot of them came in after the war were paratroopers. But they only picked the ones that had experience at Forest Service or fire fighting experience because this is what you trained to do and if you jumped on a fire and couldn't do anything about the fire, what good is it. That was the first thing you had to do, was be trained in fire fighting. So they were kind of exclusive in that end of it but...oh, I made a lot of good friends in that, gosh, over the years. Still a lot of them I still know real well, well like Bill Wood. Course, I knew Bill Wood prior to... I went to high school and grade school with him. He was just here a few weeks ago, went fishing together over at Portland. He originally lived in Missoula and we went to school together and he was jumping during the war. He spent considerably more time than I did with it, course he stayed with the Forest Service and finally retired from the Forest Service just a few years ago.

JN So you were pretty close as crew members then?

WD Oh yeah, a lot of good friends, you bet! Well, during those '46, '47, '48, '49, years we had pretty much the same crew every year. Some of us were promoted up to squad leaders and foreman, this, that and the other. Some weren't but most of them that I was acquainted with over those period of years were part of the overhead. We... a foreman or squad leader was also a spotter. He'd take crews out and actually find the fire and find a jumping spot and jump the crew and then come back. Then you'd be in charge of crew fires. Anything over eight people, why, you'd have to go and be the crew leader or the foreman or the squad leader or whatever you want to call it. A little more money involved in it. We jumped mainly from the, with the Ford Trimotor and the Travelaire in those days. The Travelaire would only carry four jumpers. And the Ford would carry eight to ten jumpers and of course, we got into the G-47 or the DC-3 and we could carry twenty, twenty-five jumpers in that.

JN When you had that Travelaire and also later the Ford Trimotor...?

WD Well the Ford Trimotor and the Travelaire were at the same time.
At the same time. Did they end up sending out a lot of planes on a fire, like if it was a big fire?

Well, in those days, if I recall, they had two Trimotors. Johnson's had two Trimotors and one Travelaire. Of course they had the DC-3 which was used for the bigger crew fires, but most of your fires were two and four and six man fires. They weren't... they were just lightning strikes and the idea was that you could get a two man crew there immediately. They'd report the fire in and within an hour or two there would be a couple of men on the fire. A lot of them were just two man fires.

What was it like to work on a small fire like that?

Well, first you'd find the smoke and then you'd find a place to jump and usually all those little fires was a snag hit by lightning and maybe an area the size of this room. Maybe thirty by forty feet would be burning in the duff and you'd just trench it and put the damn thing out. And then pack your gear out to the end of the nearest trail. They'd give you a little cut of a map and this is where you are and this is how you get out when you get done. You had to pack your chute out and all your gear to a trailhead somewhere so they could pick it up with a mule or whatever way they want to do it.

And then how would you get out?

Walk.

In later days they'd come and pick you up with a helicopter wouldn't they?

Well, yeah, sometimes. But the choppers in those days wouldn't handle... we tried to get, on one fire I remember up over in the Lochsa, up near Big Sand Lake, we had a crew of eighteen or something, in fact I was in charge of the crew and they dropped the whole camp in there to us. Bedrolls and tents and the whole thing. This was impossible for us to pack this material, all this stuff out. There wasn't even a trail up there, it was twelve miles down to the trailhead. So we tried to clear an area for the chopper to come in but in those days choppers were real limited in the high elevation and they just couldn't... I mean as far as I know, that, those bedrolls and that camp is still there.

Really!

Oh yeah, I don't think they ever got it out of there. Because we packed our chutes out and the fire packs and the chutes. That's what we were required to get out to the trailhead and that's what we did. Had to pack them ten or twelve miles. And we flew out of I think Shear, [Shear Guard Ranger Station], we flew back from there. Shear itself is twenty miles from the nearest road and we walked twelve miles down to there so we were back in the country all right.
JN Sounds like it was a decent sized fire with that many people on it.

WD Oh yeah, we had a good size fire. It was probably sixty acres, fifty, sixty acres. As I look back on it, a lot of those high country fires way up in the goat rock, the Forest Service would have been wise to just let 'em burn. They weren't going to burn anything anyway. Really up in the high country the fire's going to burn up and as long as they're not getting into any heavy timbered areas, really it's kind of foolish to do much about those high elevation fires. We did in those days. A smoke was a smoke brother and we put it out! Philosophies changed a lot in the last few years about this.

JN I was going to ask you what you thought about the new let burn policy.

WD I think it's fine in this high alpine areas. In real high class timber areas I think it's a mistake. I think we can't afford to burn up our resources. We know that a burned over area is a better game area, certainly we've got lots of these. Go back in the Lochsa and take a look. There's thousands and thousands of acres that's strictly brush. It's a hell of a game country, but I think in limited areas it's fine, let 'em burn but let's be careful we don't burn up the whole Bob or something, which can happen!

JN So have you been back to the Lochsa then, since that fire?

WD Oh yeah, I've been working in the timber business ever since then, after I got through school and I've been back in that country, you bet! Back in to a lot of the areas, but of course a lot of those areas are, were wilderness areas and were wild or primitive areas and they're now wilderness areas. I expect they've changed a lot since we've been there. Most of our fires were back, you know, back in the really back country in those days although some of them were close. Gosh, I can remember jumping on a fire right above Plains. I still look up on the ridge and say, "Yeah, I jumped up there one time." We were looking right at the town of Plains. But it was still probably a four hour hike in there from the end of the road so we beat the crew in there by quite a ways. Had the fire under control by the time the ground crew got in there. This's primarily what we did in those days is go in and make the initial attack on the fire, get the line around it, get it controlled and within a day usually there'd be a ground crew in. Turn the fire over to them and leave. We'd make sometimes two or three jumps a week.

JN So you were like an advance...?

WD You bet! We were the initial, the people that hit it initially and... gosh, you get a lightning storm in sometimes in July and there'd be thirty, forty fires show up in a region and brother, the jumpers would be going all directions. In fact, we'd get back in and have a day's rest and go right out on
another one. A lot of times we did this.

JN Do you consider that the rougher job doing that and then
easier on the regional crew that came in?

WD Oh, I don't know. Fire fighting's dirty old work any way you
look at it. But initially if it's a small fire, it wasn't really
difficult to control after you get a line around it. If the fire
was really moving then of course, you can work your fanny off
getting it... just controlling it. Sometimes you didn't and
they'd have to send a great big crew in. We wound up on several
fires that got real big. We'd done some initial work and weren't
able to control some in some areas, not able to control the fire
and have a big crew in and take over. We jumped on a fire up in
the South Fork [the South Fork of the Flathead River], up at Kah
Mountain. I've been back in that country since then. I think we
jumped that one morning, I think we jumped sixty people on that
fire.

JN Could you maybe go into a little description of that fire
and how it started and what you did?

WD Well it was initially a lightning fire as I remember. It's up...
Kah Mountain is up near Spotted Bear, up in that area.
It's up on the west side of what is now the reservoir, this was
before the Hungry Horse Reservoir was there. I expect the fire
was probably twenty or thirty acres when we jumped. We jumped on
this ridge and it was I think sixty of us. Three plane loads, C-
47 plane loads went in there and dropped and we stayed on that
fire for three or four days and then it was a big crew. There
were several hundred people in there by the time we... then we
were relieved. The jumpers were always relieved first. We were
the initial crew in and we were the first crew released. And
they'd have to keep crew in, keep the line intact and mop up the
fire and this was time consuming and they always had a camp in
there and cooks. The whole thing and overhead to run it. We
were pretty well a self-contained outfit. Just an initial attack
deal and that was what it amounted to.

JN When you got a call on a fire, what would you do? What
would your actions be?

WD Well, first thing they'd do is, in the office, they'd
decide... you were on a roster and if you'd just come off a fire
you went down to the bottom again and of course the foreman and
the squad leaders would be interspersed through this. They'd
come on the loudspeaker, we were down there at the time, when we
jumped out of Hale Field, we were in a little loft, we called
down there where the old fair grounds, really, is what it was,
part of the fair ground. And we had a loft that was right out on
the airport. And they'd come on the loudspeaker and say, and
just call the names out. So-and-so, and so-and-so, got a fire
and report to this squad leader or this foreman and draw your
equipment and load the plane, you'd be gone within a half an
hour, normally.
You'd load aboard the, whatever plane you were going in, the Travelaire or the Ford or whatever, Trimotor, and they'd brief you on a map where this fire was. Course the spotter would be in charge of the airplane. Then you'd have the crew and whoever's in charge of the crew. And everybody knew who was in charge before he left. You'd all have a map of where the fire was, a little section of the map. And then of course, away you'd go. The spotter would find the fire, he and the pilot. He'd sit right up there with the pilot and they'd find the fire and find a jump area and drop the drift chutes and decide what you're going to do. And the spotter was the one who made the decision whether you jumped or you didn't or where you jumped.

JN The spotter have to be a good man or... ?

WD Oh yes, he was an experienced person, he was normally a squad leader. He was a second or third year man that had been through the thing. Because he's the man that had to make the decision. In fact, I brought people back lots of times when the wind was too high and the conditions were too tough and it was just too damn dangerous. You better off to bring them home.

JN So you were a spotter then?

WD Well, yeah, I was a squad leader and a spotter at the same time. We were one and the same, sometimes if you weren't due to jump you'd be a spotter. Go out and jump a crew and come back. And when it was your turn, then you were one of the jumpers and somebody else would be spotting you. If it was a crew fire then the squad leader had to... you had to have a squad leader for a fire over six people.

JN I see. So if you had smaller fires then you'd switch off being spotter, pretty much?

WD Sure, we did a lot of spotting. When we weren't spotting we'd be on a fire and we'd come back and we'd be spotting in the meantime till it was our turn to take over a crew fire again and then we would go with our crew again. The first year you were always the crew. The second year I got to be a squad leader, I think it was the second year. And then a foreman the third or fourth year, I don't remember anyway. But it... as you went along and got more experience you had more responsibility. Made it more interesting I thought.

JN I was going to ask you, what about if you were first year man, you couldn't very well be a spotter, could you?

WD No. No, you weren't... no, you weren't. You were a jumper then and if you came back the next year then of course, if you were considered by the rest of the people, in the overhead, to be qualified. Then you'd be made a... and you'd get a little raise, a raise in pay. The pay wasn't great in those days much. Mostly overtime where you made your money.
JN What kind of money would you make at that?

WD Oh gosh, whole summer I think I... the best summer I ever had I made about twelve hundred dollars. It was an awful lot of hours but twelve hundred dollars in those days was a lot of money, you know.

JN Did you have to pay anything for food out of that?

WD Oh, let me think. I don't think so, not when we were... at Nine Mile I think the food was furnished, as I recall. I don't remember now if was any deduction for it or not. But there wasn't any for quarters, I know that. It was an old CC Camp, [Civilian Conservation Corp]. Great food up there, gosh. We had cooks and some of the best food you ever ate in your life.

JN What kind of stuff would they serve you?

WD Oh man, lots of meat and potatoes and... really good food. We really had good food up there. On the fires, of course, this was a different story. We... first years right after the war we'd eat K-rations primarily. The old Army K-rations. The first time I saw those, I almost resigned right there because I'd just gotten back from the war and I'd been eating those.

JN Too close!

WD I thought this was a heck of thing to have to happen to a fellow. But they got better rations in. They developed new rations. As they were going along these things were developed and things got better I'm sure. Conditions got better and they got more experience with their fire packs and they knew what to take and what not to take. We just learned as we went.

JN What was in those original K-rations?

WD Well, those old K-rations were a little box that had a can of meat of some kind.

JN How big?

WD Oh, maybe eight inches long and four, three and a half or four inches wide and two inches thick. In waxed cardboard, kind of a waxed cardboard container that was waterproof. Pretty well waterproof and inside of that was a little can of either cheese or meat, a little... maybe, I suppose four ounces or something like that, a little can of meat or cheese or whatever. And some crackers and some coffee. Packets of instant coffee and sugar and a little chocolate bar. Probably... I suppose in calories, I suppose in each one of those was a breakfast and a lunch and a dinner.

JN Just from what you named? That covered, covered that all?
WD  It was three different rations and one was breakfast and one was lunch and one was dinner. And as I recall the breakfast one had corn pork in it and the dinner, the lunch one had cheese and the supper on had... oh, some kind of meat. Canned beef or canned meat of some kind. I don't remember exactly what they were. I just think about them now I get heartburn. But, and old hard crackers and... but the instant coffee and instant lemonade, you could make coffee and make lemonade. Get by all right on it, but sure wouldn't get fat on 'em, I'm sure of that. But they made better rations after that. They came out with a... well then they sent what they called C-rations which are a can of various things. Meat and beans, and stew and a lot of other things. It gave you a little more variety and fed 'em a lot better.

JN  And then after the C-rations, were you... ?

WD  Then they made up a ration of their own and towards the end after I got out of it they developed some pretty nice rations that they jumped with. They came right in your fire pack. After the men jumped then they'd come back on a cargo jump and they'd drop all your fire fighting stuff. Your fire packs and... the fire packs you know, had a pulaski shovel and inside of there was a mess kit and then all your rations and this, that, and the other. And they'd drop these after you dropped. They'd come in and come in low and kick this stuff out. This was a spotters' job too, was kicking cargo out.

JN  Did they ever screw up and lose cargo?

WD  Oh yes, sure. The chutes wouldn't open or something and they'd auger in the cargo or something. Cause you were only dropping at maybe fifty, seventy-five, one hundred feet off the ground. Just barely time enough to use the small chutes on them. And the chutes came in a little bag and you just kick the cargo out and the bag stayed in the plane and the cargo would just get out there open and be on the ground that quick. If you had a little malfunction in the chute, why the cargo would hit the ground pretty hard. But, boy those pilots really... some of those guys... well, like Bob Johnson himself and Pen Store and Swede Nelson, lot of those guys... could put that airplane right in there boy, and they'd signal you when to drop it. You'd be in the door with that cargo and tied in of course, so you couldn't go out the door with it. And he'd give you that signal when to kick it out and boy you'd kick it out and he'd put that stuff in an area one hundred foot around. Just package after package and drop 'er right in there. They were really good at it.

JN  They were good at it, huh?

WD  You bet.

JN  What would happen when you would lose your cargo?

WD  Well, you might lose one bundle. You just kick out an extra, whatever, if you had an extra. But you didn't lose much.
JN You never went hungry or you never went through the trees?

WD Once in a while you couldn't get in close enough and your cargo would land too far away and it was a lot of work for the crew to get it all gathered up. But these things happened and of course this even happened dropping jumpers. You'd kick 'em out over a ridge and then the wind would change and geez, they drift down and land a mile. This was kind of embarrassing when this would occur because your crew is scattered and... anyway it was a... every fire was different, everything was different. We learned as we went and we didn't hurt very many people. Gosh, it was kind of amazing, once in a while somebody'd get hurt a little bit but... some of the names I have trouble remembering. A fellow from down at Darby got hurt. He fell out of a tree, actually he landed in the tree and the chute slipped and fell, and he fell and broke his back. Don Durland, Durland I think was his name. But he came out of that. He was one of the most serious injuries that occurred while I was there. Except for, of course, the Mann Gulch Fire happened, that was in '49 I'm sure, wasn't it?

JN Which fire was this then?

WD The Mann Gulch Fire. That's where the eight jumpers were killed.

JN Were you on that?

WD No, I wasn't but the crew that was on it were all good friends of mine.

JN What happened there, at that fire?

WD Well, it was over by Helena. It was primarily a forest fire and grass fire combined. Really, the fire was out of control when they dropped the jumpers, I really felt... and I have all these years that they should have brought the crew home and not jumped them, but that's beside the point. They jumped a crew of, I don't remember, it was eight or nine. Wag Dodge was in charge of the crew. He was the foreman and there were only three survived. The rest were burned up in the fire. The fire came up around behind them and got 'em trapped and Wag Dodge tried to get 'em... tried to keep 'em from panicking. Wag since has died himself. Tried to get 'em to keep from panicking, in fact he even built a fire in the grass and laid down in the burned area and the fire went around him.

And another real good friend of mine was killed on the fire. Bill Hellman. Bill Hellman, in fact, that same year we went back and jumped in Washington D.C. Bill was one of the ones that jumped with us back there, which four of us went back. It was one of those tragic things. They had an inquiry on it and the only thing I could ever get out of it was the fact that probably the crew shouldn't have ever been dropped originally. The mistakes were made after that and there's not a hell they can do about it. That was the last year I jumped, not because of that
but because I got through school and got a better job is what it amounted to. I didn't go direct to the Forest Service either, by the way.

JN How would you have changed the outfit if you could change it now? Is there anything that you...

WD Well I don't even know what, how they do it now. I'm sure that it's like any girl. It's gettin' bigger, and bigger, and bigger and they keep a lot of people on year round. I have no idea what they do all winter, but that's not my business I guess. They have a big set up down there now. Smokejumpers Center and everything's really ideal and... I kind of liked it the way it used to be when we trained up at Nine Mile and the old CC Camp. Things were kind of low key and hard work and... but this is like everything else. It's hard to sit down and criticize something you don't really know how they do it now, really. I've visited there a couple of times.

JN So when you worked it was more of an action work oriented thing year round?

WD Oh, we worked on projects too. When you weren't... you weren't just sittin' around waitin' for a fire. You were out working somewhere on some kind of a project work.

JN What kind of projects would you have?

WD Oh gosh, we worked at the engineering shops, worked on road projects, we built an airstrip up at Nine Mile, for instance, worked on that. Oh, lots of things we did, lots of kinds of works we did, work we did, and especially, you get into a rainy area, a rainy time during, say in July, and there wasn't any fires, well, they just put us out in various areas, worked for various ranger districts doing all kinds of work.

JN You say you built an airstrip, that's one of the things?

WD Sure, yeah we worked on this, there's an old airstrip up there. It's still there, I guess, up on the old Remount area. I don't think it's usable anymore. Of course we had another strip there at Six Mile where most of the training jumps were made. That's a housing project now I guess, in that area. I drove up there not long ago looking at some timber and telling this guy I was with, I said, "Well gee, we used to land the old Trimotor here and jump up on this ridge." And of course, it's all houses in there now. It's hard to recognize it the way it was. And the old CC Camp is gone now. The Remount Station is now the Nine Mile Ranger Station. And all those old pastures, and that's where we did our training, and really, I thought it was a real nice area. It was a good area to train. You had all the crew right there. They slept there, they ate there, they trained there and made their practice jumps. Everything was done out of there.
JN  How'd you do your practice jumps back then?

WD  Oh, just, we had to make, as I recall, seven jumps to qualify and they just take you out in the old Trimotor and... we jumped up in that Six Mile area. We'd jump in that big meadow. The first few jumps were out in the meadow and after you got that one then you had several timber jumps to make. The easiest landing, of course, is in short timber. Timber that will hold your chute and pull your feet off the ground. That's like landing in a feather bed, you know. As long as you got all the gear, that's... the suit you know, pretty substantial. Strapped through your crotch and heavy mesh over your face and a football helmet and all this stuff was built, you know, in those days they'd take football helmets and then build these mesh screens that would tie down over your face to keep limbs and things from coming in. And padding, padding on the hips and on the knees and elbows and... quite a padded suit. A big pocket on the leg for your let down rope. Carried a hundred foot of rope with you. Several times I had to use that rope too. I had a hundred and ten feet of rope on one tree I landed in and I was a hundred and twenty feet off the ground. But it stretched a little and I didn't have to fall too far when I got to the end of it.

JN  What were you hanging from?

WD  A great big ponderosa pine tree. Right in the top of it. I was heading for a little clearing and a little gust of wind caught me at the last minute and slapped me right in the top of that tree.

JN  Nothing you could do about it?

WD  Not there. But this happened.

JN  So, you had a football helmet, it was a...?

WD  A football helmet with a mesh screen over it. I think they've got something similar to that today. I haven't been down there lately, but it was quite a, quite a suit. It was designed to, so you could crash right through a tree without getting hurt is what it amounted to.

JN  And it worked?

WD  Heavy mesh deal through here so that if you came down spraddle legged, a branch couldn't catch you in the crotch. It would hit that heavy strap and break.

JN  So there was a, actually a wire mesh going up your thighs?

WD  No, no, it wasn't wire, it was just a big heavy strap.

JN  Canvas?

WD  Canvas strap, yeah.
JN Were they custom built or something?

WD Oh yeah, they had them built. I'm sure they were, yeah they were all the same. Each jumper had his sack. Had his jump suit in there and the whole thing. Of course, you were issued the chutes. As you loaded aboard you'd be issued your reserve and your backpack and... but your own sack had your own jump suit in it and helmet and the whole works to take with you.

JN You didn't practice jump from a tower at all back in those days.

WD Oh, we do that, yeah, that was part of your training. Is just to learn how to jump and keep your body position right and get the feel of the chute hittin' you, grabbing you by the shoulders. That was primarily what that was for. Getting your position and learning how to... they had these towers built so that the door was shaped exactly like the doors on the airplanes you'd be jumping out of. They had one for the Trimotor and one for the Travelaire. So you know, gee the door on the Trimotor for instance, was small that you had to get down on your hands and knees to get out of it.

JN To actually crawl...

WD Well, not crawl. You'd get down on your hands and knees and then there was a step outside the airplane. You'd put your hands on the outside of the door then put your foot on the step and have your head and shoulders...

JN Crouched over...

WD Crouched over the... and then when the spotters said go, he slapped you on the shoulder and you just step up on that step and step out. As opposed to that, well of course the Travelaire was similar to this. The door was a little bigger, little bit different shape. But the C-47 or the DC-3, course it was a bit enough door that you could run out the door. Walk out the door. Which was convenient.

Of course we used static lines. We had a wire running down the, and you hooked your static line and of course, this is one the spotter's responsibilities, make sure every static line was hooked properly. And the static line wasn't running under the arm but running over so that it would be pullin' the, this happened a couple of times. A guy'd hook up his static line and the dang thing would be running under his arm and he'd jump out of the airplane and then that static line, of course, pulls the chute out of the backpack and it would try to pull it out from underneath the arm. You can imagine what would happen at that point. It would flip him over and you could have some trouble. So this is another thing the spotter checked. He checked each individual jumper to make sure that his, everything was hooked up, and the safety pins were in, and the single point release pin was in, the safety pin and the static line was hooked and locked. These were things, and we had, we had no accidents that I can
remember at all of, other than once in a while somebody'd get that dang thing under his arm. This usually would happen after the spotter had checked him.

JN And that'd flip him over in the air then?

WD Well sure, it would try to pull the chute up underneath his arm and of course, this would happen and then probably the static line would break loose from the apex of the chute and you might have a malfunction. But we didn't have any. Once in a while you'd have a little malfunction with the line over or something.

JN Did you ever...?

WD Very few times that you had to use the reserve chute.

JN I see. You always did have a reserve chute?

WD Oh yeah, you had one on the chest. It was manually operated. The one on your back was activated with the static line. Static line pulls the cover off the chute and pulls the apex of the chute clear out before it ever breaks loose. It's a series of break cord. The toughest cord being in the apex and when you're finally out and the chutes clear out, then it breaks loose and the spotter pulls the cover and the static line back in the airplane after he's jumped a string of jumpers.

JN First time you made your first real jump from a plane, what was that like?

WD I was scared to death. I don't think I ever got over being scared. I think anybody that says he wasn't scared is a liar or a damn fool, one or the other. Gotta be! Not to the point where I couldn't do it, but sure, you're scared. You're really keyed up and of course, I think you should be because you're thinking better when you're that way. You really do.

JN What would you tell yourself when you were stepping out?

WD What am I doin' here! [laughs]. There'd be a lot of better things I could be doin' than that. But I look back at it and I enjoyed it. I enjoyed the people I was with primarily and I've got friends yet that I knew there. That's been what, forty years ago? I guess it has. '46 and this is '84 so it's been almost forty years ago now.

JN And you've still got some friends that...?

WD Oh, you bet! You bet. Like this Bill Wood. He's been a friend for years. But, oh, there's a guy in Missoula. Forest Service retired, Skip Stratton. He and I, well, there's four of us went back and jumped on Washington D.C. that year. That was the last year he jumped. They, well what they did...

JN Tell me about that.
WD  Well they asked for the Smokey the Bear program. It's financed by industry, you know, by the big corporations, put the money into this and then it's administered by the Forest Service. Or it was at that time anyway. So the Forest Service decided they wanted to put on some kind of a show for the heads of the industry, to thank them for the money they put into this thing. So they dreamed up this deal back in Washington. Harry Truman was President then. Where they'd take four jumpers back there and we'd make a parachute jump on the Ellipse, right behind the White House, in front of the Washington Monument. And all these industry heads, head of General Motors, head of General Electric, head of Seagrams, I don't know what all. Anyway there was, the presidents of all these corporations were there.

JN  Was the U.S. President there too?

WD  Well, we didn't see Harry, I guess Harry was watchin'. We got a letter from him later, thanking us, but we didn't ever see him. But they picked four of us jumpers.

JN  How'd they pick you?

WD  I don't know. I happened to be one of them. Myself and Skip Stratton and Ed Eggan and Bill Hellman. Bill Hellman who was killed later that same summer on that Mann Gulch Fire.

JN  Mmmmm, that's right.

WD  Four of us went back and... with, oh gosh, Bob Johnson was the pilot and he had a mechanic with him. I can't think of who that was. We took a photographer with us. He was a local photographer from Missoula. Trying to think of who the other... anyway, we went back there and made this jump on the Ellipse. Then they drove us up Pennsylvania Avenue on the back of some convertables and we went to the Press Club and presented a plaque, each one of us to one of the presidents of these corporations as a thank you thing from the Forest Service. It was kind of interesting, it was fun. Windy that day and we probably shouldn't have jumped at all but we pert near had to. Everything was there, the Marine Band and everything was there and, you know... of course I had a malfunction. Could jumped... I was looking right at the top of the Washington Monument when I went the door and that's only eight hundred and some feet. And my chute inverted, turned inside out. It was backwards and the slots were in front instead of in back and I was going backwards into the forwards and... but I did land in the Ellipse, but I didn't hit the spot very close.

JN  What was your usual jumping height when your... ?

WD  Well, normally we didn't jump below twelve hundred feet. That was usually the minimum elevation. That... see it takes a hundred and fifty or feet or so for that main chute to open. And you fall that far and then it pops at about that elevation. And then you've got to have time enough to react and hit your reserve
and you're falling at ninety feet a second or whatever it is and
doesn't take very long, if you're only eight hundred and fifty
feet. Mine that day happened to turn inside out, it was
backwards, probably, I probably fell two hundred feet, but I had
plenty of room.

JN  Was it packed wrong or something?

WD  Well, what happened is, no doubt, is the apex prematurely
broke loose. Hadn't pulled completely out and then it broke
loose prematurely and it was a matter of... they used different
sizes of string. The cover of the chute was tied with a light
string. That's the first thing that broke and came off. And the
 apex was a heaver string. Well, what happened, that probably the
cover came off and the apex broke at the same time and the chute
was stilled balled up and some way it got... the apex got into
the lines and back around. It was a good thing it didn't
malfunction any more than it did. This was fairly common. I've
had this happen several times, have an invert, turn inside out.
Of course, then we always looked in... course in the backpack of
the chute there's a card and the guy that packed it puts his name
on it. I knew who packed it, I found out who packed it.

JN  Ah ha...

WD  But you can always give 'em hell, but I don't know what good
that does. As you're falling through the sky you're looking for
the, [laughs], that doesn't do you much good.

JN  Is that part of your project work? Pack chutes?

WD  Yes, a lot of the jumpers, in fact in the early days, all
the jumpers had to know how to pack a chute. And of course, it's
done on a long table.

JN  You don't have to do that now?

WD  I don't know how they do it now, whether they've got guys
that just do nothing but pack chutes. In the winter time that's
one of the projects they used to have. The short crew they had,
they'd go through all the chutes and lay them all out and, you
know, in those days we used silk chutes, some of them. And we
had old Army surplus chutes. In fact the one I jumped in
Washington D.C. was an old camouflage Army chute. Old nylon
chute.

END OF SIDE A

SIDE B

WD  ...and repack 'em. There's quite an art to doing this.
These lines have to be bundled just right and tied in just right
with rubber bands and it's got to be done right. No question of
that. We just had to depend on them being done right. We had...
well, I don't think I know of any deaths or injuries due to
malfunctions, complete malfunctions of the chute so we had it down pretty well on that line anyway. There wasn't much danger in that happening. It's the first thing you think about. What happens if it doesn't open.

JN  We were talking about packing the chutes before I flipped the tape over, I wanted to ask you what happened if you got static electricity in there, what would that do?

WD  Well this would tend to hold the chute together. It might not open it, it might be really delayed in opening. When they got away from the silk then, of course, this solved this, or the silk chutes were the worst. The old silk chutes, and then they got into the nylon and it wasn't too bad. There was always this chance of the static electricity holding the cloth together and it might be a little slow in poppin' open, or you might have a malfunction. But this wasn't a big problem.

JN  You don't recall a case where that actually happened to somebody?

WD  You'd have a lot of cases were the chute would malfunction. There'd be a line over the top of it, they call it Mae West. You would have two portions of the chute and one of the lines would be over the middle and of course the chute would be spinning, be falling faster than you should. Of course the procedure then was that we'd look up and all the lines would be loose except the one over the top and that's the one you'd, could a lot of times could just pull it loose. Just take a jerk on it and it'd pull off and you'd have a full chute again. If it didn't then the procedure was to hit your reserve chute.

JN  I see.

WD  And you'd have to come down with two then.

JN  Why'd they call it a Mae West?

WD  Well, you've seen pictures of Mae West. It looked like a brassiere coming down with a line over the center and two separate bulges. That's why we called it a Mae West, I guess.

JN  I'm really curious about that press conference at the Washington thing. Did they ask you a lot of questions there at that news conference?

WD  Well, they had a great big news conference in there. Had a dinner, it was at the National Press Club. We'd waited in the other room until they were ready for us. And then we came in and each one of us was given a plaque. I gave the plaque to the president of Seagram's. I don't know which one was that. This was in the days when this, Wilson, was the president of General Motors or General Electric. There was two Wilsons. There was one president of one company and one to the other. One was General Motors and one was General Electric, anyway. It was
quite an honor, I thought, at that time. They had real rudimentary television sets there that they watched our jump from the Press Club. They weren't actually there, they watched the jump from the Press Club.

JN  Oh, they weren't out on... really?

WD  Then they wheeled us down to the Press Club in these open convertables and then where they...

JN  Were there people lining the street?

WD  Oh, some. Yeah. There was quite a few. I don't know if everybody in Washington knew what was going on. It was like a lot of things in Washington, I think there's a lot of things that go on there all the time and the general public doesn't know what the... what's going on.

JN  Did you have to make any little speech or anything?

WD  Oh, a little bit. We just said, "In behalf of the Forest Service...", and this, that, and the other. I was interviewed on the radio back there. And after the jump that night, then they took us out to this... well, we were on national television, news, that night. I don't remember who the commentator was at that time. But we go to get on that after a short period of time. We flew clear back to Washington and back, you know, in the Travelaire. That was an experience in itself.

JN  Just how so?

WD  Well, it took three days to get there for one thing. That Trimotor only flies ninety miles an hour, you know. It takes quite a while. We flew to Rapid City I think the first day. The next day we flew to somewhere in Iowa. Then flew to Washington the next day. I'd never forget when we came into Washington with that Trimotor. Bob Johnson, of course, he preferred to land right on the first part of the runway. Anywhere he landed he was used to, usually... he was used to short runways, period. Like Spotted Bear, and Big Prairie and these places.

    He came in over that McCormick, over the national airport, the big national airport and he got on the radio. We had little earphones, we could hear what he was talking about, called up and he said, "This is Trimotor NC84," he said, "askin' for landing instructions." And it was complete silence for about ten seconds and the guy said, "What!?". You could just about see him lookin' out of the tower, you know, to see what that was. And he told him, "Come in runway so and so," and he came in over the Potomac and he landed, well he landed that Trimotor on the tip that sticks out past where the big planes taxi out to take off. We didn't even need a runway, really, for that little airplane. At that time we were landed in real... it landed slow and, I forget... When he pulled up there, all these big jet pilots and all these guys flyin' these big airplanes were all lookin' over
that old Trimotor. Because they thought, outside fulcrums and all the controls were wires on the outside and it's quite an airplane.

JN  It was quite dated by that time, huh?

WD  You bet it was dated! That's, that plane was built in the thirties, you know. To fly the Andes, that's what it was built for. This was in the late forties, you see. It was an antique then. Of course this was in the days when the jets were just starting, the big jets. A lot of the commercial airplanes were big prop airplanes. But that old Trimotor was quite an attraction when it was there in Washington.

JN  It was a good plane for jumping?

WD  Oh, you bet it was. The thing about it was, it was so, you could jump at fifty miles an hour. Great big thick wings and he'd always cut those engines, cut 'em way back, just before we jumped and we'd just mush along, about fifty miles an hour. And like I say, it was just like stepping off the back porch. As opposed to that, the DC-3 would slow down to about ninety or a hundred. And you, the minute you went out the door you could feel that wind grab you. And the Trimotor was easier to jump out of for that reason. Because you could step out and drop straight down, feet first and that was the easiest way to hit your chutes, if you're standin' straight up. That DC-3, sometimes you'd be over and you'd be almost standin' on your head and it'd grab you and straighten you up.

JN  So you had a lot less control with jumping out of a DC-3 then.

WD  I thought so, except you had more room to get out the door. You could run out that. You could jump a string of six or eight guys in one string. Get 'em all bunched together and the Trimotor, well, one guy would get out and the next guy would get down and he'd have to get organized and get out. You could usually only jump three at a time in a string out of the Trimotor.

JN  When you jumped out that door, what was the scariest part? Was it until the chute opened?

WD  Well, this was the period of time when you were, of course, you'd be aware of your body turning or... and of course, you knew after a while, you knew just about how long it was going to take for that chute to hit you and of course, this is what you're waitin' for. You welcome, even though it really pops you, it was a welcome feel, you know. And then the next thing you do is take a look up and see that the chute was OK. Then from then on it was just beautiful.

JN  Then it was enjoyable?
WD  You bet!

JN  You didn't have a lot of fears about where you were going to land?

WD  Well, of course this is always the, I think the biggest danger in jumping, smokejumping in particular, is landing. Is finding a good place to come down because it doesn't always look the same on the ground as it does from the air. You're up there twelve hundred feet and you see a meadow. Maybe you get down there two hundred feet from it and you find out it's got four foot of water in it. And this has happened. You know, grass stickin' up in the water and it looks good from the air but you know... course in a couple of other cases this bare ridge that looked like a grassy ridge was just moss on top of rock and you didn't want to land on that particularly. That's one reason I landed in that big tree that time. I saw it was rock and I headed for the timber and got slapped in against this big tree.

But snags were one of the biggest worries. Landing in the top of a snag... they'll break easily and of course if you land in the top of a snag and the snag broke, then you are in trouble. This is where most of the injuries occurred is when you landed in trees and then fell. Really, once in a while why you'd, sure, sprain ankles and this, that, and the other. I sprained an ankle. The only time I ever sprained an ankle, I jumped right on Hale Field one morning. We had a bunch of new jumpers and so we decided, it was the day of their first jump, and so some of the old timers, I was one of 'em, were going to go up and show 'em that it was nothin' to it. Went up and jumped and I landed a little wrong and sprained an ankle and I had an awful time keepin' from limping in front of those kids.

JN  [laughs] Showed 'em how to do it, huh?

WD  Showed 'em how to do it. I hadn't warmed up properly is what had happened. I wasn't loosened up, it was early in the morning. You ought to be in good shape though, we really got in good physical shape in those days.

JN  How would they get you in shape?

WD  Oh, we took calisthenics, and boy we took 'em and tough ones. We had what we called the rack, was two poles and we'd put our knees down, one of 'em was down here and one of 'em was back here behind your knees and we'd bend clear over back and touch our head on the ground behind us, back and forth. Keep doin' that.

JN  So one catches in your ankles, catches your feet?

WD  Front of your ankles and the other on the back of your knees.

JN  Back of your knees. And then you'd hang back?
WD You'd hang right back and touch your head to the ground back. That was what we called the rack.

JN And just hang there, or would you?

WD Well, you'd move back and forth.

JN Oh, I see, like a, almost like a sit up or something.

WD Except it was a backwards deal where you'd... and, oh we did a lot of... well every day we did calisthenics, a lot of calisthenics.

JN How many, how much time?

WD Well, I recall, we'd go out right before breakfast and do a bunch. Kind of like the Army in a way. Then you'd have your breakfast and then you'd come out and that training period, you got in shape, there's no question of that. You bet. You had to be. If you weren't in shape you'd get hurt. Like football or anything else. Weren't in shape you gonna get hurt.

JN In later years did you see any change going on in the training?

WD Oh, I don't know. Well, a lot of the old timers, I know they had to pass certain physical requirements to keep jumping. I remember a couple of guys that jumped quite late in life. That is, they jumped into their forties. And they had to pass some pretty strict... they had 'em run a mile in a certain length of time. Things like this, which should be really. The younger guys in their twenties, why there's no problem gettin' them in shape. But when you get into your thirties and forties then of course... some of the old guys, they kept jumpin' for quite a long time. Like old Earl Cooley. He jumped for years and he finally had to quit. Which is fine. He should have. You get to the point where you get a little brittle and you're not in shape. You're going to get hurt, which isn't what we want to do.

JN You mentioned over the phone that you'd jumped in the Black Hills?

WD Yeah, we made another demonstration jump. We were... it seemed like in those days, they were always called on, they'd call on the Forest Service. They were having a fifty year deal down there on the Black Hills. Have something to do with the Forest Service as I recall, and they were having a big celebration. So they asked us...

JN Do you recall what year that was?

WD Well, that had to be the year before the Mann Gulch fire. '47, probably '47 or '48. I can't remember which year it was. Anyway, we jumped out of Rapid City, in the Black Hills. They had a great big celebration there and they had bleachers built and
everything else. We made a jump, four of us went back there and jumped and in fact, two of 'em landed in the opening and they wanted one of us to land in the timber and I was one of those. And I landed in the timber and made my let down right in front of where everybody was. It worked out real well. This was right out of the... we stayed at the Rapid City Air Force Base as I recall, and it was a fifty year or a hundred year celebration of the Forest Service there, or the... I don't remember. It was part of the... it had to do with the Forest Service end of it.

JN Who was watching it?

WD Gosh, I don't remember now, it was a lot of people there.

JN Open to the public pretty much.

WD Oh yeah, they had quite a lot of people there and I don't remember what the name of the celebration was now. A fellow should have kept all these things, I guess, but it's easier to remember back and try to remember why didn't I keep this and why didn't I keep that, you don't do it. I do have that old Hungry Horse-News, where they reported that Mann Gulch Fire, and I got it here somewhere, and I should be able to pick it up. But I can't remember now what I did with it.

JN That's OK. I just wonder after you worked there about six years? Jumped about six years?

WD Four.

JN Four years. Did you see any changes from when you started out to when you finished and how it was run and type of people?

WD Well, this was during the transition, at the tail end we'd gotten' out of... they were just gettin' out of Nine Mile then and then soon after that they built this Jumper Center out at the airport, out at the present airport. They moved out of Hale Field, of course Hale Field is no longer even in existence. I lived in Missoula all during these years and could kind of see it going. Course then they got satellite programs in California and Alaska and McCall, Idaho, and other places. I guess these jumpers that are coming in are from all these places. Originally they were starting in Missoula and go... then they'd assign certain numbers of Jumpers from McCall, for instance. They'd go down there and spend the summer down there after they finished training. But then I guess they started training down in McCall and doing work. Then they had a unit in California and they had one that went to Alaska. But this was the... the Missoula base was the original base. This is where they originally started. Started up at the old Nine Mile base, or an old CC camp is what it was.

JN And you liked that location very much?
WD Oh, you bet! That's where I remember back, we were in... we'd come off a fire and go back to Nine Mile, you know. First thing we head for that mess hall. Boy, they had a big good meal for you and you get off a fire and come back and they would bring a steak for you, you know. Had great cooks and took a lot of pride in their work and... it was a nice place to live. We lived in barracks, they were regular CCC barracks but it was a nice green area right in the woods and it was a real, real pretty, real nice area.

JN Did you make the move to Missoula with them. Were you still on then?

WD No, I wasn't with them. We'd moved from Nine Mile then, of course, down at Hale Field during the fire season. This was just the training base. This was a... go up there in May and usually there, take about a month and get all the training out of the way. Then of course, after the first year, then you were involved in training the new guy.

JN You didn't work clear through the year though, did you?

WD On no, just the seasonal. From May till September?

JN What would you with the rest of your time then?

WD I was going to school.

JN Going to school.

WD In college.

JN What would, like, other people do?

WD Well, most of them were students, I think. As I recall, gosh, I don't remember. I don't think there was any of 'em that I really... were very well acquainted with that weren't, that weren't students. There's a certain number of 'em that were on full time year round. It was probably, in those days, maybe a dozen of 'em kept on the ground but the rest of 'em were all seasonal.

JN What would those year-round people be doing then?

WD Well, pack and repacking chutes and developing new rations and equipment, and this, that, and the other. They had a real lot of things they could do all winter. I assume they were working all winter, they were on the payroll. Anyway, they've got a certain number of people around, year round still. Probably a lot more than they, maybe a lot more than they need, I don't know. But that's, oh... Parkinsons law, you know. You gotta keep those things going. Anyway, it's different now, I'm sure quite a lot different than it was.

JN What do you think's most different about it now?
WD Well, I don't think fires have the priority they used to have. It seems like anymore, they're talking about letting 'em burn and not doing anything about it and I wonder then, what's the use of having this fancy thing that uh... they've got real good facilities and that big aerial fire depot and all that. If they're de-emphasizing the value of fighting fires, then, you wonder about the reality of all this now. I don't know. I'm not that close to it.

JN About putting all the money into it?

WD Yeah, that's what I'm talking about. Pretty hard to once you get something going in a government agency, to cut it back. As you know. There's only one place to go and that's forward otherwise that Parkinson's Law, you know. If it doesn't grow it dies. This is a fault of our system, which, the best system we've got, I guess. The best system anybody's got so, I can't criticize it too much.

JN Do you think that cutting back on the fire fighting, de-emphasizing cutting fires. Think that's a realistic thing to do.

WD No I don't, really. I really can't swallow this. I think in certain instances, well, take a look at Glacier Park, for instance. The way they let the fires go up there, it's really a shame I think. It's, I think they should have put some of those fires out instead of lettin' 'em burn, and they let 'em burn. Go up the Going To The Sun Highway and up, clear up in, that's all a burn up there now. Course eventually it'll green up again, just like anything else. Time will take care of it, but... I think in a lot of cases they should, they should be putting these fires out and protecting what they've got otherwise fire's an ugly thing. It really makes a... well, so's loggin' but neither one of 'em are permanent. They all come back. Come back green and looks pretty good in a few years. But of course, fire's a relayed wildlife manual. There's no question about it. Being a forester, well, I understand this but I don't agree with 'em that we should go in and let a fire burn up valuable timber land. I think this is a, this is a mistake. Somebody with a lot of judgement's gotta decide which one they gonna let burn and which one they aren't, I think. If it's in an area of low value and really a... sure, let it burn a while if you want to. Maybe it does make better browse and better a lot of things in the long run.

JN One of they're arguments is that, if you let a stand of timber get too old then the the fire you get there is more destructive.

WD Oh yeah, sure. We've got stands of lodgepoles, for instance, up in that Big Hole, up at Big Hole that the environmentalists, they know we can't cut this timber, it's a terrible thing to do and yet this timber is dying and falling down. It only lives for so many years, a hundred and twenty to thirty years. That's as long as nature intended it to go and the only ultimate end is either to harvest it or burn it and nature's going to take care
of the burning. One of these years we're gonna have a bad year and the whole damn country's gonna go up in smoke and then it is a... then maybe the emphasis will change again. We haven't had a bad fire since... quite a few years, really. Tend to get a little lax and worry about it. But I can think back on a number of real bad fire years when I got this feeling in the pit of my stomach the whole damn country was gonna go up in smoke. It'll get up that... we'll get more of 'em. We just haven't had any like that for twenty years.

JN Just haven't been that dry for...

WD No. We just haven't had the dry weather and the and the lightning storms. There's lightning storms can go through this country after it's been dry for three or four weeks and it can start a hundred fire. Overnight. And if you get the right conditions, brother, those fires, that's what happened to 1910. Hundreds fires started and of course, they didn't have the transportation or the roads, or anything then and all these fires fine and than that big front came in from the north, wind and some of that burned up more timber than you've ever harvested in ten days.

JN I'm a little surprised that most of the people you worked with were students too. Like, weren't there a lot of ex-military men workin' then?

WD Sure, most of 'em are guys about my age, in their early twenty's, that were gonna go back to school, get their lives back together. And, most of 'em in those days were students. I don't remember, I wouldn't have any idea of the numbers but I would bet that eighty percent of 'em were students.

JN Were a lot of them in forestry?

WD Oh, some of 'em were, some weren't. A lot of them were, yes. I was. But I know a number of 'em that weren't. Doing something else. But it was a good summer job for 'em. Good place for them to make a thousand dollars or so and carry them through the, get them through the year, you know. A lot of them were veterans then, right after the war, when I was in it. Lot of these fellows were just out of the... out of the war. And you ask why would you have, after goin' in, goin' through a war, want to go into this? I don't know. Just because, I guess it kinda took the edge off of my nerves a little bit and it really helped me, I think.

JN Sort of eased you back into...

WD Sure. Except the first time I got those K-rations I was ready to pack it in. Other than that, why... it was really a lot of fun.

JN Do you have any particular experience that you'd like to, you'd like us to know about, you know. Something that sticks out
in your memory real strong. Like a fire you fought?

WD Oh, gosh, there's a lot of them. But if I had to pick out one, I've talked about the interesting ones. Those demonstration things that was back to Washington, and the Black Hills and this, that, and the other. I know that first fire jump I landed in the top of a snag. That probably stands out in my mind more than anything else. I was up there in a, got it up Gold Creek, out of Placid Lake.

JN On you're first jump?

WD On my first fire jump.

JN How'd you get outta that snag?

WD Well, with good difficulty. I, in those days we could jump with any kind of boots. I had cork boots on. I used to wear cork boots, that's the one with the spikes in it, you know. The let down rope, part of your procedure is to run that rope down underneath through the arch of your boot and then it slides your, you hold it and it slides. Well, of course, those corks didn't slide too well on that rope. I was up there sixty feet off the ground, hanging in a snag that was wobbling and not very strong and I was tryin' to, I'd rigged my let down rope up, which I'd trained to do. I'd done it on a tower, never done it in a tree. I'd never done it in my cork boots either and, well, that was when they did away with cork boots, soon after that because we found it didn't work. I had an awful time letting down, in fact I got about halfway down and the snag broke off and started to fall. And I thought 'Oh, I've had 'er now'. Then the other corner of the chute hooked up in the top of a green tree and it stretched all out and I wound up about three feet off the ground, bouncing. And I let myself out of it and I was lucky, you know. But I found out one thing then, I couldn't jump in cork boots anymore. In fact they wouldn't let us in the airplane after a while because those corks would slide on the metal on the floor, you know. It, well, in those days, cork boots were the thing to wear, you know.

A young forester, young woodworkers all had to have a set of White cork boots, [Boots from White's Shoe Shop, Inc. Spokane, Wash.] But they finally did away with those and White in fact, made a boot which they called the Smokejumper boot. Which was a rubber soled boot that everybody went to. Gee, the White's in those days used to cost twenty-two or twenty-three dollars. Today, I priced a pair here not long ago, that are a hundred and seventy-five dollars a pair now. So, quite a difference there. There's quite a difference in everything. But... that was, probably stands out in my mind as anything else. And then we had to pack our equipment out of that fire and it rained. I never saw it rain so hard. It rained an inch and a half, two inches. The day after we, we'd finally got the fire under control and it started to rain. It just poured. This was towards the end of July, as I recall. It was middle of July, I don't know the day. We had to pack our chutes and our pack and our backpack, our fire
pack, down to the end of this trail and this oh, maybe two or three miles. But that stuff was soaking wet, and it was heavy.

JN   Everything?

WD   Oh, yeah. We packed 'er down there. Got 'er to the end of the trail and the packer was waiting for us and packed it in to, into Seeley Lake, as I recall. We weighed those packs. We were carrying a hundred and thirty pounds apiece.

JN   Wet.

WD   It was wet! That's the reason I weighed that. It was two chutes and, you know, the chutes were loose and they'd gotten wet and the fire packs. Everything was wet. We had an awful time getting moved down and we got them out of there. Course, that's when we were young and strong and didn't hurt me any, I guess.

JN   Were there any Indians jumping on the crew?

WD   I think there was. I can't remember their names. I used to work together with them crews occasionally. They, the Indian crews would come in to relieve us or something. If you were happened to be jumping on the reservation. We made several jumps on the reservation. They'd call on us. Tryin' to think. I don't remember any. There wasn't any reason why there weren't that many. I mean there wasn't any restrictions, you know. All you had to was be a fire fighter to apply. Black, white, red, or yellow, I don't think it made any difference.

JN   And now there's women jumping.

WD   I guess so. I don't know how they segregate them when they get on the fire. But that's, I guess, their business, if they don't try to. Things have changed, but that's all right. There actually is women smokejumpers? Are they actually...?

JN   Yeah.

WD   Well, whatever.

JN   Would you recommend that job for, like if, I don't know if you have any children now or anything?

WD   Oh yeah, had five sons. I've still got a sixteen year old son still in the nest. Sure. If they want to do it that'd be great. If it was like it was when I was there, it'd be a good way to make a little money and get in good shape and accomplish something. I'm sure that I'd recommend my kids doing it.

JN   Sounds like it was a little more than a job, too.

WD   Oh, it took a lot of pride in it. It was something I kinda enjoyed, kinda, you know, thought, 'well, I'm a jumper', you know. Sets you away, aside a little bit from the other cut of
people, I guess. I don't know. We thought it did.

JN Sounds like they made some real good friendships too.

WD You bet! Yeah, people that I still know and... you bet.

JN Well. Sure thank you for this interview.

WD Well, I don't know if I've told you anything. I just trying remember things that we did and... I sure had a lot of fun at it and I'm sure gonna enjoy meeting some of these... hope a lot of them show up down there.

JN I think they will.

WD I'm sure they will. I know of some that I know that are gonna be there. Old timers that... like, Bill Wood. I know he's gonna be there and old Fred Brauer, he'll be there. Fred's had some health problems, but he'd do it anyway. Course a lot of them, a lot of us are in our sixties now, you know, and, you know were jumping in the forties and we're not spring chickens anymore.

JN Do you by any chance know Gene Pitts?

WD Yeah. I know Gene. Good.

JN Was he in the career with you?

WD Well, Gene wasn't there then. The only reason I know Gene Pitts, they had a sawmill down at Ravalli years ago and I, after I went to work after I got out of school I got acquainted with Gene. But I don't know what, if Gene jumped. I do know Gene.

JN I believe it's '42 that you worked with, so like that was a little before your...

WD Well, then, if he did, I didn't know him. Gene has gotta be about my age, isn't he? Or maybe he's even younger than that. I don't know.

JN Yeah, I think he's about your age.

WD Gee, in '42 he'd be, he'd have been twenty years old. I know Gene but I don't, I don't remember, remember him as a jumper. He may have been twenty years, probably. I don't know.

JN Yeah. Just curious there. Well let me...

WD He lives in Dixon.

JN He lives in Dixon, right now and is the Postmaster there.
WD Oh, he gotta little ranch there. He used to have a sawmill down at Ravalli and I got acquainted with him then. He's a member of the tribe.

JN Let me see if there's anything else I wanted to ask you, ask you about, or, and you can think if there's anything you wanna add too. Let me see. How would you describe the best smokejumper? Like, what type of person would he be?

WD Oh, he'd be about... twenty-four or five years old and he'd be five foot ten, eight or ten, not any, not any taller than this. Strong.

JN How come not taller than that?

WD Well, we found the shorter guys were a little bit tougher. More compact. Of course, there's nothing wrong with a big guy, of course the big guy with same size chute as the little guy is gonna fall a little faster isn't he? That's, I guess maybe this is the reason that most the, most of the jumpers, it seemed like, were shorter, more compact like myself than the real tall lanky fellows. They're a little more, I don't know, all this kind of thing. I wouldn't consider that the type. The type is a shorter, more compact. Maybe a football player, maybe not. I don't know. They used to say the difference between a lawyer and a forester, the lawyer has a number forty hat and number two coat and the forester has a number two hat and a number forty coat. I don't think they're intellectuals, they're people that like the woods and like to, like to work and not afraid of work. That's probably what I would say is typical.

JN That's a good description.

WD Lot of guys say, "I'd never jump out of an airplane", which isn't that difficult. The point is you gotta decide at one or another the, you gotta go through your mind and say, "All right, this isn't near as dangerous as it looks." And it isn't. I'm sure some people, we had darn few people, darn few people that, trained people, that wouldn't go. Wouldn't jump. Few of them, get up to the day or two before they just resigned, quit, and leave.

JN Pack their bags...

WD They just decided they just didn't want to do it. You can't blame them. Some of them made a jump or two and then left. But, really, you're always afraid. You're always afraid. Like I say, I think if a person said he wasn't, wasn't afraid, he was either lying or a damn fool. So that's the way I've always looked at it and I'll say you bet. I, every time I got in, in that door, I'd say, "What am I doin' here?" And you'd have that feeling in the pit of your stomach. But not to the point that you couldn't do anything. But you better be scared. You might make a mistake. You're thinking better then. I think anybody thinks better when they're really, really scared.
JN Well, thank you very much.
WD Thank you.

END OF THE INTERVIEW