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This is an interview with John "Jack" Dunne by Jim Norgaard for the Smokejumpers Oral History Project in Whitefish, Montana on 8/16/84. OH# 133-31

JN Well, I wanted to start out by asking you what you were doing before you smokejumped, Jack?

JD How far do you want to go back, I mean way, way back?

JN Well, just immediate...

JD No. Well, the war I was a tailgunner in the Army, in the Army Air Force. Then after the war I came back and I went up in the woods at J. Neils, [J. Neils Lumber Co.], as a choker setter. I went from there down to Potlatch, [Potlatch Lumber Co.], as a sawyer, and then back up to J. Neils as a sawyer. And then my partner wanted to go work for the Forest Service so we left Libby and we went down to Missoula in oh, let's see... June of '46 and then we started jumping together. He quit after awhile and went and got another job. I stayed with it for the next... that year and the next three years so I was with them four years.

While I was down there we finished jumping and then the... you don't mind if I just talk? But the... Cooley came over, Earl Cooley, and he said, we've got a big problem, we need somebody to take care of the saws and the tools. And my partner being Irish, his name was O'Boyle, he said, we can do it. And so we went over and I picked up a set gauge and I said, what's this? And he didn't know what that was... we won't use that. Then I picked up the raker gauge and I says, what's this? and he said, well, I don't know... well, we won't use that either. So, for the first couple days all we were doing were filing the teeth of the saws, you know. And I knew I was going to get in trouble at that rate because the teeth were higher than the rakers. And so, I went down and talked to the saw filer at Harper's, there at Alberton, and then a couple other guys that knew what they were doing. And they were, everybody was quite decent. And so I went back up and practiced, you know.

And they had hundreds of saws in those days, crosscuts, and finally got so I could file them and then hang axes and shovels. So, anytime I wasn't on fires I was over to the tool room. I had a permanent job in the tool room whenever I wanted. It was very nice, I just... I'd start following year '47, '48 and so on and I'd come and there'd be a stack of saws maybe a foot and a half, two feet high, and I'd just start filing and filing and hanging tools and sharpening tools and so on until the fire started and then I'd go out on fires then I always had a place to come back. It was nice.

Then if the guys... had a hangover or anything on the weekend they'd come see me first thing Monday and they'd say, geez, I can't go, I just can't go out, you know? Can you get me a job? And I'd say, sure! And I'd go over and talk to one of the bosses and they're very decent about it. They knew what was going on. I'd say, I need two men, I got them picked out, I want them to sharpen saws, I want 'em to sharpen axes, or pulaskis or shovels or something. And they'd say, you bet! And so the guys
would come in, spend two days with me and sober up and then they'd go back on the job. It was a very nice... it's kind of a A.A. type outfit and it worked out very well.

JN  Did that happen often? Was that a consistent thing?

JD  Not often, no, only on Mondays. [laughs] Mondays and Tuesdays. It was, it was delightful. I did learn a great deal and they were very... the Forest Service people knew I didn't know a damn thing about it originally. But they were very nice about it, and they gave me plenty of time, didn't encourage me, but gave me plenty of time and I figured it out. So I always had... I was a step up on everybody else and then I had a... something to do. Something that... worthwhile to do. And then when I got tools taken care of there and I wanted to go somewhere, then I could go up to Spotted Bear and work with a crew up there or I could go anywhere I want. They were very decent. Now, what can I do for you?

JN  Well, let me ask you how you got started in smokejumping then? From being a sawyer at the log mill there?

JD  Oh, I see, well... well, we went down to Missoula. See I'd worked for the Forest Service in '43. They let kids work for them and before I went in the Army I worked that summer of '43 at Libby. And my partner wanted to go back, he'd been in the Merchant Marines, he wanted to go back to the Forest Service instead of that... instead of falling trees. Because we would have killed ourselves eventually and uh... so the Regional Office was in Missoula so we went down there and went in the office and... his name was O'Boyle and he's a fast-talking Irishman and he went in first and came out and says, it's all taken care of, we got our jobs. We'll go to work in I think two weeks. And then until then they were gonna take us out to Miller Creek and we're gonna stay out at the guard station out there and then we're gonna work on the lookout and do a little brushing around the place so for a couple weeks before. But on the way out he said, the job we've got is smokejumping. And I said, I don't like the sounds of that at all because it sounds like parachuting and I've seen enough of that. Not that I had done any, but I, you know we, I'd seen, you know, aircraft shot up and shot down and everything else and lots of parachutes all over the place.

But I wasn't very comfortable with the thought, but we went out to Miller Creek for a couple weeks and then we came back and then they trucked us out to Nine Mile and we went right to work. And they, we were well-trained, there was never any doubt about it, that you were comfortable, you had the hell scared out of you, but you were still comfortable. You knew, you knew the equipment and how it's gonna operate and if it didn't operate what you could do in case of emergency chutes, that type of thing or if you got hung up on an extra large tree or something. But we were well-trained and so the jumping never bothered me anymore than, I was as scared as the next person, but nonetheless, I did know exactly what was happening and I was, I had a lot of faith in the equipment and the instructors. So they have, they had a
very nice organization, it's deluxe now, it's quite extra nice now, but they've always had a good fine group.

JN So you were impressed right off with how they trained you?
JD Yeah, it was kind of military-like.

JN How did it compare with your military training?

JD Well, it was pretty much the same. The other guys uh, you know, the Marines and the paratroopers and everything, which most of 'em were, it was quite a bit easier. But in the Air Force, Army Air Force we were quite casual so that's the kind of relationship they had also, so I was quite comfortable, there was never any complaints at all. I, I was quite struck by the group of paratroopers or the combination of paratroopers, marine paratroopers, marine raiders, and army infantry-type all mixed into one. Well, when you stop and think of it now, that was quite an explosive group. Anytime you got paratroopers and they were keyed, I mean they were still hurting, some of them were and they were still keyed up, still gung ho.

JN Hurting, what do you mean?

JD Hurting, well, some of them had been injured in the war and some of them had been, you know, there's many kinds of hurts and some of them were still punchy. You'd speak out of turn and they'd sock you, you know, that type of thing and they were hard drinking. But it was the combination, you know, you take a marine raider and a man from the 82nd Airborne and put 'em together six months earlier and they would have beat the hell out of each other. But for some reason that blending worked out and they were some of the toughest men on earth, really, seriously, they were. They were elite people, but we never had a fight, never had a disagreement or anything.

JN Why do you suppose that is?

JD Well, a good share of it was, of course, the overhead they had down there, then reasonable people. And of course, your job was on the line, too. But they were reasonable people, we had this training we had to do together and then we had the job which, of course, was putting out fires. Which is a, you know, it's a type of war, really, and we did get that way, but when those men went to town, God help an outsider that ever bothered because, I mean, they would just sock 'em in nothing flat. They were, there were some real tough people in that outfit. There was a few sissies like me, but there were some real tough people, but never had any sort of trouble. I was amazed.

JN Were they, they pretty heavy drinkers?

JD Well, yes, they were... heavy, uh, you'd have to define heavy. At that time, after the war, I mean, we had a hundred about a 140 veterans. Most of them were ex-combat and it wasn't
heavy drinking for us because we'd done heavier drinking elsewhere. But it was steady, we went to town on Friday night and we got back to the base usually on Sunday afternoons, Sunday evenings, something like that. It was heavy, right, but it was a...

JN  Experience.

JD  Right, yeah. When the fishing was good, you get fishing or something like that, a good many of us did that instead. But, you know, rainy days and things like that, you'd spend it in town.

JN  So those were your, would you say those were your two main activities on weekends?

JD  What was that?

JN  Fishing and drinking?

JD  Oh yeah, oh yeah, no doubt about that at all. If they wanted us they knew where we were, they were in 'Merle's or The Flame or someplace like that, I mean, they knew where we were. But if the weather was decent then a few of us were quite hard to find because we, you know, there's a world of fishing around that country and then we had enough money, planes were cheap, we could fly out of there real easy into Idaho and places like that.

JN  What would you do over in Idaho?

JD  We could fish, I mean, ya know, if the weather was bad in Missoula we could go down to Fish Lake or someplace in Idaho. But generally speaking if the weather was decent then we got out and travelled a bit, but if it was bad or something like that on weekends then we were in Missoula in the bars which was a way of life at that time for most of us.

JN  What about women, what was your... ?

JD  Oh gosh, there were some real operators which you would find in a group like that, very experienced operators. Ah, most of us were quite ignorant. Ah, we were looking for a, we were putting in time, I guess, waiting to look, to find a real job. Not smokejumping, but a real job, a 12 month out of the year job, which smokejumping wasn't. Looking for a job, we were looking for a girl... to marry, we were looking for a place, a place to live, you know, a town, a city. We, most of us were all mixed up, war does that to people. We lost a few years, we came back and wanted to settle down. We'd seen, we had too damn much going and then I think most of us, I think without a doubt 99% of us were ready to settle down.

JN  Just sort of get all that confusing stuff out.

JD  Right, right. We weren't, most of us weren't capable and I think if you went back, I think I had close to twenty or thirty
jobs there in a couple years, you know, after I worked here and I worked there, just kind of mixed up. And I think you find that general pattern applied to most of us. There were a few who knew exactly what they were going to do, but I think maybe they ran into problems later on down the line. But there was an adjustment and then all of us seemed to have settled down really well after. The veterans at a later date and some Korean veterans and Vietnam, it's a little different. Why, I'm not exactly sure, but we had a couple years of looseness and then we settled down quite well. Most of the jumpers I know, the other two or three in town and all that I've known down there have all settled down and turned out real good.

JN So, did smokejumping in some way help that out or was it just another job?

JD No, I don't think so, it was just another job. Of course a summer job, it was an ideal job for people going to college, it was just superb. You'd get out of school, get out of school in May and then just go home and drop off your school clothes and your chutes and everything 'cuz you didn't need them and then you'd take off for Missoula, it was ideal. And then as soon as the last fire in the fall was out, then you'd just head back to college, you might get back a week late or so, but you always had a good excuse, you know, I was out on a fire. Oh, well, that's all right, then. And they would accept you in college, it was great. But as soon as one got out of school, then it was strictly a part-time job, it was a summer job. Now they seemed to have developed it into a full job, a permanent job. But when I was there, there were only a few permanent people and the rest were just summer people.

[ Interruption ]

JN Before we closed the window there we were talking about smokejumping basically as another job, a fill-in as you were making a transition back to being a civilian again from the war.

JD Right, it was a, it was a summer job. The first, probably two summers, they were mostly ex-paratroopers in the outfit, 82nd and 101st and Marine Raiders who were originally para-troopers and then they folded that outfit after Guadalcanal and then they put them in the 5th or 6th Marines. But, then there was a subtle change went on in about '47 or so, there was lots of applications from college students throughout the nation. And so they started taking the college students rather than taking the ex-paratroopers, who were probably a little more difficult to work with and probably a little more difficult to train because they'd already been trained in one process of jumping and they would have to re-train them. So in the group there was a subtle change there in '47 or '48 in that more and more ex-college students were coming in and more paratroopers, veterans were leaving. There was nothing wrong, they were both equally the same, but there was more college students available, of course, and they were probably easier to work with.
JN  Easier to work with, you said both as far as training because they hadn't been trained in another way of jumping?

JD  Right, yeah.

JN  And also emotionally?

JD  Oh, I'm sure there was, they were a different type of cat entirely and they were equally as good, you know, for the job. There was never any, there wasn't any difference at all, but they were probably a little easier to handle in town than the jumpers were, than the original jumpers. They lost something and they gained something, but in the long run I'm sure it was a plus for them.

JN  At the risk of putting you on the spot, what'd they lose and what'd they gain when they switched to college students?

JD  Well, the jumper, you know, you take a corporal or a sergeant from the 101st or the 82nd and say, that crew of five down there, you go take them, you're the boss, and you make sure they clean up that fire alarm on that south side. It was taken care of, I mean, when you said you're the boss and you, I mean these guys had, were accustomed to taking over if there was ever an emergency, which I can't recall any off hand. They were good, you know, if they said, well, this is what we're going to do, we damn well did it, this is what I'm going to do, that guy did it. I mean, because, they had been put on spots before and they were, they were men. I mean they were tough bunch of men and if they said they were going to do something, they do it.

You lost some of that, I mean they were good men and the men coming in were, became good men in time, but they weren't quite as hard or as aggressive as these men. But in the long run they turned out equally as well as soon as they became experienced, as soon as they were around a while, they were all right. They are a very terribly interesting bunch of people, they would sit around and start talking and the experiences that these guys had, uh, you know, one would say, at Bastogne, this is what happened, you know. I put the, I had the water in my helmet boiling and I put this can of soup in there and then this guy took a shot at me. I shot back at him and turned around and I saw the can of soup bulge and then it exploded and blew hot water all over my friend and he was gonna punch me, you know. This type of thing and uh, they would get talkin', it was just grand listening to 'em. We had a deep sea diver, ya know, and he'd get talkin' about gettin' tangled up in a propeller down there and he'd have to send a special torch down and cut off these bars, metal bars so that he could get himself up to the surface. And there was amazing things, there was, one guy was talking about when he was fighting for the Spanish in the Spanish War before World War II and they had just a world...

JN  He was um, one of the what they called 'em, the—
JD I don't know what, I don't know what side he was on, he never said. [laughs] Yeah, he could have been with the Legion Brigade or anything. But, then, I remember that fellow was talking and then later on I heard him talking about when he was a raider down in Guadalcanal and I mean, he was a professional soldier and but these stories these people, they had. I mean, they were just, one fellow was down on New Guinea and his squad was knocked down to the ground and wiped out except two or three of 'em. And the squad leader was killed and so he got up and knocked this position out, and got the wounded out and then he was just waiting till some more replacements came out. And they took 'em right out of the line, brought him back and made him a second lieutenant and gave him an extra large bunch and sent him back up again. Things like that, you know, you don't hear about very often cuz they're not, they're not ordinary. You don't read about things like that, but these guys they had some marvelous stories, some of 'em were true, [laughs], they were all interesting and some of them were true.

JN How did these college students react?

JD Well, they couldn't enter into it because they hadn't been there and very few people had been there and they couldn't enter into it very well. But I'm getting too serious, I suppose. But, we were talking one day and one of the guys said, and Norm, what did you do? They'd been talking about Guadalcanal at the first marine, what did you do Norm, and Norm said, I was a litter-bearer with the Marines in Guadalcanal. And this guy said, you were a little bear? No, no, hell, he says, I was a litter-bearer. Ok. Then the next time the two got together, hey, little bear come on, just like that the name stuck and he's been Little Bear Watkins ever since.

There was a lot of fine masculine humor. I remember we were sitting out there at Nine Mile and a gopher came up and the old Ford sort of landed here, I believe they were Fords that day. They were landing right in front of us and the gopher came up and he was chirping because I suppose we were bothering him. This boy from the south said, you know, we're doin' all the work and that son of a bitch is over there is complaining, [laughs]. And he took off his shoe and boot and unhooked his shoelace and he made a little loop and he went over and the next time the damn gopher came up looking around he pulled it. So he came over haulin' the gopher up by the neck, ya know, and one other guy, you know, kill 'em, kill 'em. No, no, he didn't want to kill him and so just about then they came over and started dropping off drift chutes which were tiny chutes of little sandbags in the same proportion as a large chute to a human. So they came over and dropped some drift chutes, and then they dropped, next time over they dropped some more paratroopers, meantime we were standing out there in the hot sun with a 110 pounds of gear on us, canvas suits, hotter than hell.

So the guy that was holding the gopher, the gopher was tryin' to bite him and everything and one of the guys said, well, let's jump him. So fine... got out and got one of these drift chutes and cut the sandbag off and tightened the strings around
the little guy. One guy grabbed him with his leather gloves and next guy in, you know, and so they took this little guy up with 'em. So the first time over they dropped out [laughs] and out went the little gopher and so all of us waddled over to see, and we kind of formed a circle around the guy. He was lying flat on his belly with his feet out like this, flat on his belly, looking all around, moving his head, but nothing else. I thought he was all broken up and so they cut off the strings. Finally the gopher got to its feet and then he stiff-legged over, we all got out of his way 'cuz he was kind of mean lookin', stiff-legged his way over and there was a hole there and down he went and he never came up again. This is that kind of humor, ya know, there was a lot of that going on, a lot of that.

There was a shot in the middle of the night, everybody sound asleep, and there was a shot in the middle, well first of all, there was a scream, don't shoot, don't, I didn't, and just about then a shot was fired. And these guys were spooky and they went outdoors and some of them opened the doors, some of them just went out the screen door, just like this, out the window, came back in about ten minutes later. We were all over the brush and one guy was still sound asleep. We accused him, but he said, no, I didn't hear a thing, ya know. There was a lot of that going on, nothing malicious or nothing mean, but a lot of fine humor.

JN  Is that a carry-over from the military?

JD  I think so, I think at times you had to laugh, you had to make fun of things otherwise it'd drive you nuts. You had to laugh at misfortune otherwise the misfortune would take you. It was just a carry-over, the humor was, like the language, was rough at times, but nothing mean or anything like that. Oh, that was great times. That was some magnificent camp for us, too.

JN  The Nine Mile?

JD  Yeah, Nine Mile was nice, they had good bunkhouses and good in the sense that they didn't leak, and there were stoves in 'em and they had a decent mess hall and then they had a room with pool table, billiard table. And then there was grounds to play volleyball and baseball and it wasn't fancy so that you didn't have to watch yourself, uh, you know. The floors weren't hardwood or anything like that so you didn't have to worry about it, but it was a very nice camp out there. The food was excellent and I guess the pay was good, too, but the food was great. I remember the food more than anything.

JN  A little better than overseas, then huh?

JD  Oh, there was no comparison and then I fared better than most of 'em, too, overseas, 'cuz some of those guys, they'd lived on K-rations for a month and then C-rations for three months before and two months after. But this was just superb food, maybe... I don't know, it was terribly heavy for me. I wasn't used to pork chops and gravy and potatoes for breakfast, but we ate it, we got by just fine.
JN  Sure. Well, before that break I don't really know what we were talking about, that's beside the point. I am curious, very curious how those college students ended up fittin' in with the paratroopers and Marine raiders and what you guys, you guys that came back from the military, what you thought of those college students?

JD  Well, there wasn't any, any problem, uh, in that the new men always stood back and watched what the older men were doing and when they were ready they joined and there was never any problem. Quite often we hung around with our group and the college boys hung around with their group, but, on fires or anything else, or in training and everything there was never a problem. But socially if you were going downtown then you always went with a couple of your friends who were ex-military because you were more comfortable with 'em. Besides, you know, they would always take you home if something happened, but you weren't sure about the other boys. But the college boys, quite often they would go over to the college or to the SAE house or something like that. They would go over there and then they had girl friends at the college or something like that, whereas we didn't have. We didn't go to those places, it's as simple as that because there was no reason why we should, we weren't comfortable in places like that. Uh, there was no problems at all. But there was a subtle change in that these ex-paratroopers had gone off and found steady jobs, had gotten married, had settled down, some in Missoula and some elsewhere. But they weren't coming back and they were being replaced by men equally as good, but men that were a little different.

JN  So you say they, a lot of the servicemen ended up getting married and earlier you said they were looking to settle down.

JD  Right and... it took awhile for most of us to settle in to find out, we were just mixed up, to find out what we were looking for. And we wanted to settle down and we had to find a job, had to find a woman, had to find a place, a town, a city, or farm, or something and one by one they just took off. In my case, when those boys were killed in Helena, my wife's dad was Forest Service, So she got on the phone and called him, he called the supervisor's office and asked if I was one of those people in Helena, one of those boys in Helena. And they said they couldn't tell, tell her who they, who had been killed. But they could tell who hadn't been and I wasn't there at the time. And so, that fall, she said, I don't think we want that anymore, and I got married the following spring.

JN  She doesn't think you want, she wants you in the smokejumpers anymore.

JD  No, she didn't want me there anymore, jumping anymore, that scared her pretty bad. Then I was married in the following spring and I mean, it was just either, [laugh] go jumping or get married, I mean, it was just as simple as that. And I was ready to settle down, it had been quite a few years of running around,
but I was ready to settle down and I did and I've been a good kid. Now, in fact, I'm so good now I hardly have a beer or anything, you know. I'm just that good now, but it hasn't always been that way, thank God.

JN When, in that transition period, were there a lot of, a lot of you fellas that um, would you say were womanizing, did a lot of womanizing and drinking in the process of looking?

JD Oh yes! Oh, that was part of it then. There were some operators, I mean, there were some real operators. Um, most of us weren't, simply because of our background and inexperience and our, you work up in the woods, you don't, you don't learn the social graces up there in the woods, you know. You learn how to fall a tree properly, but you don't learn the social graces at the same time. And most of us were, liked working the woods and everything else so we were quite backward in a sense. But there were some guys that, you know, could dance and could visit with women and easily and they were always running around, they were always busy. But most of us, it was a slower process, it took us years to settle down. It was a, it was a mixed up time, '46, it took most, it took me, I shouldn't say most of us, it took me a couple years. Jack hammer and I would drop packages in the street, things like that. You finally get over it and loud noises and sudden movements don't bother anymore. Once you're over it, then you're fine again, I guess, until it happens.

JN Do you think, um, being at Nine Mile base helped that process, being out in the woods there?

JD Helped what, the process, what do you mean the process?

JN Just um, gettin' over shell shock and everything.

JD Oh, yeah, it did. That was a, that was nice. That was like a country club in a sense that it was quiet, genuine, quality people, quality food, and it was a good life. They worked us hard, the exercises and everything that went into pre-jumping and things like that. And we made hundreds of miles of fire trail up over the hills and down the valleys and it was, they worked us hard, but they fed us good and it was, it was nice. Most of us felt comfortable there, some of us felt comfortable for the first time in years there, and it was pleasant. Then they moved us, of course, they moved us into the fairgrounds as soon as the fire season started. We lived right in one of the fair buildings, in fact, the ladies were canning jars of pickles next door. But the airport was right where the high school is now and we lived right in one of those buildings in the fairgrounds. So once they moved us to town, then of course we had, we had liberties, you know. Every night we'd walk to the closest bar or to the closest restaurant or, 'cuz sitting around in a darn ol' building wasn't much, you know. There wasn't any facilities there at all for us, but we'd just walk over, maybe have a beer, maybe even a cup of coffee and come back and that would be it for most of us.

I remember one night, you don't mind if I ramble? The
fairgrounds is adjacent to the airport and we got over to the carnival that night. The carnival and the fair were in town and we came out and they had, in the circus portion, they had an elephant act, you know, they had elephants. I never saw the circus, but I know there were elephants. But out there there was a large peg about four inches across and it was into the ground and there was a heavy rope about an inch rope and here was this baby elephant about, oh, maybe four feet, wasn't a big animal, about four feet high and five feet long, just a typical baby elephant. And so one of the guys says, let's take it, [laughs]. So he untied the baby elephant, you know, threw the rope over his shoulder and the damn thing led real well, you know. So he brought it back to the barracks and brought it in the barracks and said, hey guys, look at this! Here's this damn elephant, you know, and it was very docile, it just walked up and down. It was like a dog, you know, in fact, it was easier than a dog, ya know.

And the guy didn't want to walk him back and tie him up again, so I said, well, what'd you gonna do? Well, I don't know, he says, I'll tell you what, there's a lot of gifted men over there and he said, let's turn off the light. By that time it was 10:30 or 11:00, let's turn off the lights and tie the damn thing to the door knob. So OK, fine. And waitin', all of us sitting up in on our cots, waitin' for the first guy to come in the door, you know. So two guys came in and they were loud and they'd been out drinking, opened the door and the little elephant saw the light outside, you know, and made for the light and one of the guys says, my God, what's this? I don't know, but son of a bitch is alive, yeah, it's alive! They were feelin' around the elephant and this one guy says, Oh hell, I'm going back to town. And he never did find out what it was, he just went back to town, went back to drinking. He didn't, he wasn't even interested in what kind of an animal. The other guy figured it out, [laughs] you know, 'cuz the tail on one end was bigger than the tail on the other end. And then we walked the elephant over and tied him up and nobody missed him. The following year they had the, the donkey baseball and so we were gonna go through the same thing. But we got that damn thing untied, one of those little donkeys and it damn near kicked us to death. We couldn't get it in the door of the barracks so we brought it back, it wasn't, it wasn't suitable for that type of entertainment. Now, what's on your mind? [laughter] I can't be talkin' about the elephants all day long.

JN So um, what'd you guys do on your off-season, when you weren't jumping then?

JD That was quite varied. In my case, I went to school and I went to Teacher's College in Dillon and I repeat, it was just a beautiful job for that. But some of the guys went out on the farm and worked taking care of cattle, feeding 'em in the wintertime, and some of 'em had jobs elsewhere. They'd go to hiring office and one year they might be roofing until the snow flew and then they'd be on 5220 or something, on some form of welfare the rest of the winter and then they'd come back. There was a few guys that got on the railroad and they were, you know,
on bridge crews or something like that.

But they weren't good jobs, they were just fill-in jobs so that they could go jumping the next year. If they did get a good job, then, quite often they wouldn't come back, you'd never hear from 'em again. Whatever happened to Bud, well he got a job down there in Arizona or something. Trucking or something like that and that's it, you'd never see Bud again. But after a couple years, most of us, most of 'em decided that you couldn't make a living jumping. It was exciting, a good group, the food was good and everything, but you couldn't make a living at it and slowly, one by one they all disappeared.

JN Tell me a little bit about the fire jumps and how you liked the actually jumping. You said when you first entered, you weren't real enthused about it. How'd that turn out for you?

JD I wasn't enthusiastic about the actually leaving the airplane. This is unrelated, but we came in from Grangeville one time and this kid was sitting, they'd sent a Ford down to pick us up, we'd come off a fire. Coming into Grangeville and this kid was nervous and I said, well, what's the matter? He says, are they safe? Oh yes, I said, it's the only way to go. I said, this jumping out of parachutes isn't really the best way. And, but he had been up eight times and had never landed in an airplane, see, and he was a little apprehensive.

But, the fire jumps, you were, the jump was just a process of getting you from the airplane to the ground and really, that was the only exciting thing about it, you know. But you saw the fire down there and you kind of estimated what is it? And you were kind of hoping it was a little, a little two-man job, you know. Go down there and then you mess around, you know, for ten or twenty hours and eat a couple meals, make a pot of coffee, then put it out completely. But while you're standing in the door, looking down, you're looking at the fire and figurin' just, now how much am I gonna have to sweat on that bugger down there.

The jump was terribly exciting and uh, you know, it is scary, too. And anybody says it isn't scary is not human, you know, because it isn't normal, if God had meant us to jump out of airplanes he could have equipped us, ya know. Made us round so we could bounce or something. But uh, for most of us, the jumping was terribly exciting, really, and then when you get down you make a decent landing, let's hope. Then you take off your suit, then you sit down on the ground, and light up a cigarette and that was real satisfaction. I mean, really, really was good when you knew that you could walk around and then you had to go to work, that was, of course, the idea. But much like hunting, you know. Elk hunting is so exciting, you know, then you kill an elk and then it dawns on you, my God, I've got a dead horse-like animal here on the ground. And then all the fun is gone and jumping is the same way. You get on the ground, very enjoyable, and then you walk over to the fire and my God, I gotta put a trench around that whole thing.

But uh, the work was, was very difficult work, uh, on little fires it's not bad at all. But on big fires, you know, where you
have to put out for long periods of time, you go 15, 20, sometimes 30 hours without stopping, you know, just stop and grab something to eat and go right back because it's moving. It's actually alive and you have to, you have to stop it and once you knock it down, you know, get the trees out that are burning, and get the trench around it. Then you can relax, then you can get in there and start digging around the coals and putting them out. But when the fire is moving and then you have, you know, trees that are, dead trees that are burning, throwing sparks up ahead, then you can't rest at all. You have to get all of that down, get all the fire down and a line around it. Then you can relax, and then you can start visiting again, talking, and things like that. It's terribly hard work. I guess that's all I've ever done, I've worked for the Forest Service... ten seasons and I guess that's all I've ever done for them was fight fires, never did anything really good. [laughter] You know, like making posters or signs or anything like that, I never did that.

JN So that um, what was the attitude of most of the fellas on that, just the fighting fires, the hard work aspect, was it something they tried to get around?

JD It was just something that, I mean, it had to be done and they were paying it, paying for it and uh, as long as they were paying us for it, we would do it. There was never, I don't recall anybody that didn't work, that didn't put out, you know. On quite a few jobs, this guy over here and that person, this doesn't work, quite often there are sitters, they'll sit and watch and everything. But I don't recall, I never recall anybody being fired for not working. It was there and it had to be taken care of.

JN Well, it wasn't an attitude, you take a real pride, well, I did that, I put out this fire, it wasn't that kind of thing?

JD I don't, I'm sure it was present, but it's just that, I mean, the darn thing had to be put out and that was it and we were the people to do it... and by God, we did it. There was never, I never heard of anybody being fired for not doing, I'm sure there was. I recall a guy that wouldn't jump out the door one time and he was fired. I was next in line and I looked out and I didn't want to jump out the door either, the guy had smarts, you know. But it took more guts to say, I don't want to jump out into that dead timber, than to be stupid like the rest of us and jump out. But I never hear of anybody that didn't, yet, you know, it was a, it's a form of war, you know, it's a job that has to be done. This is what has to be taken care of and you do it, that's all.

JN Did you have any sense of um, being a special crack outfit? Some other smokejumpers will talk about that and they felt really elite and they were, really sort of...?

JD I know what you're saying and it is a very elite outfit if I can use that word. But no, it just, we were just a bunch of
people that had a strange job and most of us had been in combat and with special... I was with a B-29 outfit and most of these guys were in special outfits. You take a Marine raider, he's special and you take a man from the 82nd or 101st, he's special. But no, I didn't feel that, I felt that I was with a marvelous bunch of people and we had something going for us that was different than anybody else, anybody else in the world. But as far as being elite, well, it was a, I mean, it existed, I guess we knew it existed, but we were just too busy.

END OF SIDE A

SIDE B

JN Well, here we are on Side B of the tape here.

JD How 'bout that. (laughter)

JN What I'd like to ask you about now, since you were working at the time of the Mann Gulch fire, I'd like to ask you what connections you had with that, what you know about it basically?

JD OK... about a week before Mann Gulch, a crew of us jumped on Edith Peak which is northwest of Missoula. I was a Sawyer and so I took the saw and both handles and took off and starting cutting out the fire line. And I didn't, as a rule, I didn't want anybody to saw with me because if you don't get a good partner, it's work. So I just, I had the extra handle in my pocket and I was just bucking and I could do that quicker by myself than I could with a poor partner. And it was, I loved to saw and I didn't mind it a bit working alone and this young man came up and he says, give me the handle. And I said, geez, well I really don't need any help. And he said, give me the handle. And so I handed the guy the handle, he was just a kid, too, about 18, I guess, and I held the saw and he put the handle on and the guy was good, I mean he was real good. The saw has a particular singing sound when it's working right and it was an absolute pleasure with that man and we walked all the way through the fire line. It was a big fire, too, and cut out all the trees that were across the fire line, you know, not cut out, the chunk and roll 'em out of the way.

His name was Sherman, I believe it was Sherman and I thought to myself, now, there's a young man that's got an interesting background of some kind. I'm gonna have to get to know him because the guy had class, as simple as that, as far as I was concerned. That was a week before the fire and then about two days before the fire, we had a boy break his back up on, at least that's what they said it was, up at Bonner's Ferry. And so they asked a couple of us older people and a, to go in and Bob Gorsuch and myself went in and I jumped with the stretcher. I jumped with the wheel and Bob jumped with the stretcher. That way you followed it down and wherever the damn wheel went, it would bounce quite a bit and you had to follow it. Then I got the wheel and drug it up and then Bob got the stretcher and we put the two of them together and then we got the jumper who was Stan Sites
and we strapped him on the stretcher. Then the crew of us came
down and took him out of the woods and put him, got him on the
trail and with stretcher with a wheel on it, you could really
move.

And a, so we were going down the trail and I had the
stretcher in front, and there were guys running along the sides,
but they weren't necessary and they weren't doing anything. I
came to the, to a crack, the trail went up the hill, but it went
through a crack in the rock and I got up a ways and I couldn't
pull the damn thing, I couldn't pull it up. The man on the
stretcher weighed a good 40 pounds more than I did and so
actually, we were stuck, they couldn't shove and I couldn't pull.
Then one of the new men, he said, hey, just wait a minute, and he
worked his way around the face of this rock, which is part of the
trail. And he leaned over, it must have dropped 50 or 60 feet
there, and he leaned over and grabbed me by the arm and by the
hand and between the two of us we drug the stretcher up through
this crack in the rocks. And I thought, well, there's a good man,
cuz he didn't have to do it, there was other people that
could've. But I'm gonna have to get to know him, so there was two
good men.

Then we got back down to where the truck was waiting and
the ambulance was waiting for this man and I talked to Bill Woods
and I said, Bill, we've got all those parachutes up there. I
said, let me, in the trees, and I said, let me take a crew up and
get the chutes out. So I took a crew up and we went up and sawed
down three or four trees and climbed a few and got out all the
parachutes for this crew that had jumped in. And the fire in the
meantime was out and then we carried them all down to the trail,
then we walked out to the end of the trail and the truck was
waitin' there for us. So we walked, we rode down to the Ranger's
Station at Bonner's Ferry and the next morning, we stayed at the
Ranger Station that night, the next morning the ranger came in
with the newspaper and said that weren't a couple of these boys
here yesterday? And a couple of the names were given immediately
and they had been with us the day before and that young man that
had helped me saw the fire lines, he was dead, and then the boy
that come up around the side of this rock to help me was also one
of those boys and it hurt, it hurt quite bad.

And then we went down to Sandpoint and Lee or Bob Gorsuch
called in and asked if his brother Lee had been with that gang
and he hadn't been. But it was one of those things that, it
happens every, statistically speaking, every so often you have to
pay for these things and it just, we, they were blessed, the
jumpers were blessed. Wings didn't fall off or anything else, uh,
anytime you're using aircraft to transport you have to expect to
lose airplanes and people. I mean, you have to pay a price for
things like that. So the jumpers had been really blessed. This
foreman was a marvelous man, Wag Dodge, was the, I thought the
world of him. But he wasn't around the men all that much in that
he was, he took care of equipment and he worked, if you needed a
road or a building wired or something plumbed or anything else
why it was the guy. He'd do it or get a crew and the crew would
do it or so, so the younger men didn't know him as well as a lot
of other foremen, I don't think. Consequently I felt that there
was a little bit of a, maybe they didn't have confidence in him because he hadn't been around that much. But he was, in my book, he was a real fine fella.

And he was the foreman that jumped in, he came out alive, uh, he told the crew what to do and the crew didn't respond and of course, difficult to respond under conditions like that because it must have been quite frightening. And they choose to try to run out of that basin and they didn't do it. But he came out all right, he had the knowledge, but they just didn't have confidence in him. I would, if he had told me to do it, I'd, there wouldn't have been any hesitation at all because he was very experienced and he thought well and there wasn't, he was just a good man. But I knew him and perhaps these other young men didn't, I don't know.

But that was the, after that, that was pretty much the end for me. It wasn't that I was scared of that or scared of anything else, but it was, I got married the following spring and I was involved in other things and 'cuz I did like jumping and I did like the job I had. I mean, the tool man, I could always, I was doing something worthwhile and there wasn't all that many saw filers around. I was doing something that I was quite proud of and I looked forward to it every year 'cuz I'd have a big stack of saws and everything. But um, the job, I just came to the end of that and I had to go on to something else.

JN And you, earlier on the tape you had expressed your wife wasn't too crazy about, after that fire, she wasn't too crazy...

JD That's right, she didn't want, she didn't want it anymore and I can understand her reasoning there. But I wasn't the least bit worried personally that it would happen to me, um, not that it couldn't. But I wasn't worried personally, I was never frightened, I'm more comfortable in the woods than I am in town. But uh, you know, you have to make a choice after a certain time and it's a, it was a nice fine job for going to college. But it was just a part-time job, you couldn't make a living at it, and a, it came to a natural end. It just happened to come to an end before in '49 with my wife saying, nope, I don't want you to do it anymore, and that was it.

JN Did um, do you think that, how'd that fire affect other people you worked with, how'd they...?

JD I don't, I don't know, I talked to a lot of people. A few of them had gone up and retrieved the bodies and everything else and it was just, we all knew that those things could happen, that might happen... in one way or another, one circumstance or another. But it just, those things happen to us. We were just blessed that it didn't happen more often and it... take the airplanes now and that, the old Fords, when they got through using the Fords, they put 'em in a museum and the Travelaires was, the Travelaires were ancient and they got the new C-47's, well, the new C-47's were old and beat up when we got 'em and they were the newest ones. So we were actually using airplanes that were museum pieces and they did the job, they were marvelous airplanes
for the job, but they were museum pieces when we were using them. And I believe those are the only flyable Fords in the world, I think they're the only Fords left in the world. So under those circumstances, we were terribly fortunate that wings didn't fall off.

JN When the, when the tribunal or the hearing was up about that Mann Gulch fire, was there any scuttle-butt or any talk among you fellows? What feelings did you have about that whole thing and Wag Dodge being put on the spot?

JD Well, I don't, I recall when the trial went on and the Forest Service did send us the hearing, the transcript of what went on. They have it right here, and uh, I felt that it was necessary, that it should have been done.

JN The trial?

JD Right, and Wag Dodge was the boss and so he was responsible, but I felt that he was a good man, a real good man. I felt that uh, he was, just circumstances, had there been a few of us, perhaps, had there been a few of us older men with him and a combination of two or three or four of us could've held the rest of 'em down. But they were, I repeat they were mostly young men if you stopped and looked at, most of 'em hadn't been there, that was their first year, maybe one or two of them had been there longer than that. But I think if there had been a few more of us it might've been a little bit different, but you never know. It just, those things happen. During the war, so many of us would go out and so many of us would come back and uh, you'd bomb up and arm the guns and everything and so many of us would go out and so many of us would come back. I mean, that's the way it was... you, to do a job you have to pay a price and that's the price you pay. They have been so fortunate and I'm glad for 'em, but they've been terribly fortunate.

JN Well that, after that fire, the Missoula base was, people or jumpers were permitted to choose not to jump if there was a fire and they thought they shouldn't jump on it and that was a result of that fire. Did you, were you familiar with that or was that after?

JD No, that was after me. It's a, sounds like a good idea within reason. I only shot once, we were down out of Troy and there was a lookout and to the east of the lookout was all fire killed standing timber. And we were to jump in that and it was a mess, it was bad. [laughs] The guy in the door said, I'm not gonna jump down there, and I looked down and I wasn't too pleased with it either. So the guy went and sat down and I was gonna sit down, too, and the spotter said, well, aren't you gonna jump? And I said, I didn't think we were gonna jump there. [the spotter said] Oh yeah, he just doesn't want to. So I got in the door and jumped down into the trees. But uh, sometimes it made sense not to jump. Generally speaking, they used... real good knowledge and advice and they'd say well, we can jump you here, we can jump you

17
over there, or maybe we shouldn't jump at all. I mean, it was quite reasonable.

JN Would they, would they actually discuss that with you, the spotters?

JD Oh yes, oh yes, you betcha. It was a, that was the way we operated, it wasn't, uh, in the Airborne, they would probably say, you men jump here, go, you know, that type of thing. But it was more relaxed. But, you know, if the fire was down there, then you'd have to get down to the fire one way or the other. So uh, there are times, not very often, but there would be times that I think that would be sensible. That... maybe you get a feeling that you don't want, maybe that green down there isn't grass or moss, maybe it's swamp or maybe it's rock, you know. You get a feeling that, sometimes that, you know, that maybe you don't want to jump in that particular place. But they've always, I shouldn't say always, uh, in my experience they were always reasonable. If you had a complaint or something, you could always take care of it without anybody getting mad 'cuz it was the wrong bunch to get mad. They were a strange bunch, they didn't want to get mad at you, you know, for any reason at all. It was a marvelous way to spend four summers.

JN Was there ever any discipline problems or effects?

JD None, absolutely none that I know of. I'm sure there were some, but not that I know of. I'd gone fishing one time in Idaho, raining like hell and the car we had, had had the top taken off by a truck. And so all it was was a kind of like a pick up without a cab and it was raining like mad so we stopped at the Forest Service cabin up there at the top of Lookout Pass. We had the Forest Service key and we went in and I mean it was wet. We cooked supper and I heard this sound outside in the front so I told my buddy, I'm going out to see what it is. I thought it was a deer or something walking around out there and this, got on the porch and I'm looking and this guy put a .45 automatic to my head and pushed my head up against the wall and said, I'm gonna blow your goddamn head off if you move. Yes sir. Went in, a few minutes later my two buddies were lined up against the wall. This guy had a deer rifle and he had lined them up and they thought we were breaking into the place.

From the lookout, they'd seen the light, you know, and so they called down to the station, the Ranger had come up and come up to shoot me in the head or something. And they turned us into the Law Enforcement agent in Missoula and he had called Earl Cooley and told him that three of the jumpers had entered the cabin down there. And so that Monday we went back down to the Ranger Station and introduced ourselves properly and got a fishing license and went fishing for a couple days then we went back to the jumper base.

Monday morning for breakfast, I was sitting there eating, trying to eat pork chops and gravy and potatoes, never could put that one done, and the boss, Cooley, came in and pushed me to one side, pushed my partner aside and sat right down between the two
of us. I thought, the guy's gonna fire us, you know, for breaking and entering and he turned around to me and said, how was the fishing down at Powell? And I said, it was good. Goddamn it, stay out of those cabins from now on. Yes, sir, and that was it, he never, that kind of trouble would happen occasionally, you know.

It wasn't intentional or it wasn't anything that, anything big or anything like that, but that kind of trouble happened occasionally. And they would handle, [laughs], it this way, I'm gonna fire you if you do it again, and that was it so we never did it again. I don't think I've ever gone in another cabin any way. The ranger, the guy with the .45, lives just down the block from me. He's retired of course, now, and I'm retired. He still sees me and grins occasionally, he remembers it, I remember it. I wouldn't move 'cuz you could tell he was shaky, he'd been up in the CBI during the war, he was still shaky, I wasn't gonna move. I'd still be there. Well, are there any more questions or are you gonna let me go?

JN Oh, I think we're winding down here. Um, you know, it's always good to have a last polishing-off question.

JD Right, right. You should have one of them.

JN Let me see, I guess my polishing-off question would be would you go back to smokejumping and if you wouldn't, is there something or if you weren't for that matter, would you change it in any way? Is there anything you didn't like about it, thought should be done differently?

JD No, I was, I was terribly pleased to be associated with these people. They were a marvelous bunch of people and it was a good job, it was a dirty, filthy job at times, but it was a good job. But with a crew like that, you could do anything, I mean, it was a, just nice being associated with people like that. You had a group of pilots that you just couldn't believe how skilled they were, a bunch of our airplanes that still flew somewhere, and the equipment was good, it was war surplus, [laughter] things like that, but I mean, it worked and it worked well. No, I would, no it was splendid, I wouldn't have changed a thing. I think they, I think they, they had something real good and I think it's better now. I don't think the people are any better and I know they're not any better, but I think the skills are better now and they're in better condition now than they were.

JN Better condition?

JD Oh yes.

JN How so?

JD Well, these... these, there are many training conditions that are enforced now. This physical education test that you had to go through, I don't think that many of us could've passed that, I'm not sure. But now with the weight lifting and isometric
exercises and things of that type, uh, I mean they're in far better shape. I don't think they're any better people, but they're in better physical shape. I don't even think, I don't think they are as woodsy as a good many of us were. No, it was, I wouldn't have changed a darn thing, it was great, you know, from the gopher to the elephant, it was just all great. It was a, ya know, a high point of my life, really.

It was like, I'd come in in the spring of the year and these guys would be waiting and I used to carry, oh, four, five, six hundred jokes with me at a time, you know. I could reel them off without stopping to peek and a, they'd say well, have you heard any new ones? Well, you bet I had, you know, three or four said get in the corner and another twenty standing around and I'd start telling the new ones and then they'd come in with theirs. It was just like, just like a summer camp, you know, like they have back East, you know, we would get together and from that point on, the new man would, you know, I'm Dale or I'm this and they would eventually get in within a couple days.

We had the same, same staff every year and the jumpers would, generally, there was that core there and then the new men came in next, the cooks were, generally speaking, we had dandies. They were always the same ones, quite crabby, marvelous cooks, but when they mopped the floor you sure as hell didn't want to get on it, you know, they were typical cooks and no, I wouldn't change it, that was one of the high points of my life.

JN Well good. Well, thanks very much, good interview.

JD You're welcome. (chuckle)