Oral History Number: 133-034, 035  
Interviewee: John Ferguson  
Interviewer: Floyd Cowles  
Date of Interview: July 21, 1984  
Project: Smokejumpers 1984 Reunion Oral History Project

Floyd Cowles: This is Floyd Cowles interviewing John Ferguson for the Smokejumper Oral History Project at the Aerial Fire Depot here in Missoula on July 21, 1984. John, can you furnish me an autobiography of yourself?

John Ferguson: Well, I was born in the East, I was born in Harrison, New Jersey on, January 26, 1919. And I spent my early years going to grammar school and high school in New Jersey and in New England. My father immigrated from Scotland, and we were members of the Ferguson clan but we’re [a] Scottish clan. I lived with my parents. My father worked as an engineer in concrete construction and so in my early years I traveled to Japan where my father was responsible for some of the concrete foundation work—earthquake proof work on the Imperial Hotel and the Bank of Japan. He was in the Panama Canal and different places [working] on many of the big, long range gun foundations of the shore batteries, you know, and this type of thing. So, in my early days I traveled quite a bit with my parents.

When I was about 11 or 12, my parents separated, and I lived with my aunts while my father was continuing his work. I spent my childhood days in both in New Jersey and New England, upstate New York, and in New Hampshire, and Bar Harbor, Maine. I went to Carney High School in New Jersey. It’s just on the outskirts of New York.

FC: Excuse me, but you mentioned Bar Harbor. There was a pretty big fire there in ’47.

JF: Yes, there was.

FC: Were you here? There?

JF: No. I was here then—that happened, but I had some relatives that lost some timber lands in that fire.

FC: Well, go ahead John.

JF: Well, as I said, I was going to Carney High School and I was—during my high school days, I was quite athletic. I was a baseball player and football player and on the track team. I held the New Jersey State half-mile championship and various athletic awards like that. I run on a championship mile relay team back in the early days and I participated in the Penn relays and some of the Olympic trials for 1932, and that. I lost in the quarter miles finals with some of the fellows that went on to win. Metcalf and [unintelligible] and, well...at the high school. After high school, I had an urge to get away and see some of the country. I traveled with another fellow

John Ferguson Interview, OH 133-034, 035, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
down the east coast on a motorcycle, and so forth.

FC: What year was this?

JF: Oh, back in about 1934 I imagine, or '35. Course, as I mentioned, I was living with my aunts and they were more or less the Scottish, Puritan New England type and being a little restless I wanted to get away from home, so I joined the CCCs and I ended up going to Fort Dix, New Jersey, to a training center for the CCCs. I came west on a troop train to Shoshone, Idaho, when they were first building—during the construction of Sun Valley.

At the time, Shoshone was just a way—spot railroad—on a Union Pacific railroad track. Like, Indians in dress on the station, and so forth, and on the they had it was typically the wild west which I had no previous knowledge of. The road from Shoshone—

[Interruption]

The road from Shoshone to Ketcham, Idaho, and Sun Valley and over the Galena Summit to Redfish Lake was just a dirt road and we went up from the station in 1935 Dodge trucks. I went to the Redfish Lake CC camp and I spent the summer in that camp. It was a tent CC camp [Civilian Conservation Corps], and, at that time, the enrollees were made up from all the various state contingents. They came from New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, and all over.

When I first got into the CCs, I was fortunate enough to get acquainted with the forestry end of the work right away and I became, within a reasonable amount of time—I don't know exactly how much time, maybe six months or something. But I became the first—the forestry clerk for the forestry end of the CCCs which was...My position then was comparable to the top sergeant that was on the Army side of the CC [unintelligible] camp. So I worked with the superintendent from, which was a Forest Service employee in the forest in the employment [unintelligible]—Forest Service people. I advanced with—I left that camp and went to the camp at Riggins, Idaho, on the Idaho National Forest and I sent time in the Riggins camp and in the French Creek camp. The Riggins camp was mainly New York, New Jersey [recruits]. French Creek camp that I worked in was made up of more Idaho recruits and Oregon and Western state people.

I advanced in the CCCs from the forestry clerk to a temporary position in the Forest Service as a CC foreman and I was transferred to the Boise National Forest. Blanche Pass CC camp as a CC foreman. Then the CCCs closed down. When they closed down, I was offered a position with the Forest Service. This this was in 1938—‘38-‘39 period. So, I went to work and worked at various positions as an alternate ranger on a district on the—

FC: On the Boise?

JF: On the Boise [unintelligible]. I was partially on the Boise Forest and what they call the Old
Payette Forest. Because it's not the Payettes. There was a consolidation in later years and the Payette Forest now is the old Idaho National Forest and the Weiser National Forest. The Boise Forest, at the present time, is the old Payette Forest and Boise Forest. See, so you get kind of little mixed up there. But I worked on a high valley district of Payette Forest. I worked in the supervisor’s office of the Payette Forest in Boise as a clerk, and then I went to work. I went to work in McCall as an alternate ranger on the Krassel district of the—

FC: With fire fighting responsibilities?

JF: Yes, but primarily I worked—at that time my immediate supervisor was, the fire control officer was Jack Koch at that time, and later it was Glen Thompson. His brother, Lavelle Thompson, is at this reunion. I worked for, oh, I guess some months or during that year, ’39 probably, on what we called the super crew, the fire super crew.

FC: That's a regional crew of today?

JF: That's what it was. It was primarily a crew made up of firefighting specialists. The project work when you wasn't on fires was road construction on the South Fork of the Salmon River, on the old Idaho National Forest there. Then the Super Crew was primarily for fire suppression detail on any of the R-4 [Region 4] forests and also Regions 6 and 5. We never did—we never came to [Region] 1 because 1 had their own fire suppression operation but they—

Then to continue with the super crew, I was working with the super crew and had a temporary ten-month appointment with the Forest Service and during that time, I got married in 1941. I was trying—I was interested—I always liked the Forest Service, and I was interested in advancing in the Forest Service. So, I wanted to get on permanent for the ten-month appointment to the full year [unintelligible]. One options that was open at that time—I was an SP-5 grade as I recall, and one of the options that was open at that time was they were just contemplating the formulating of the smokejumper unit for Region 4. This is in late, late 1941. So, I talked it over with my wife and I bought—it's kind of a standard joke with me because in later years I was often asked by some Washington officials, particularly, Pat Thompson that was the head of fire control back in those days in the early ’40s.

FC: That was before my time.

JF: Yes. Well, he was the head of fire control and so forth. and various [unintelligible] and used to praise you for being so great to get into the smokejumper deal. But my basic reason for getting into the jumpers was to advance myself in the Forest Service to a professional status and also to get a raise in pay. It was really no thought of a lot of glory or perfect stuff like that.

FC: But you had prior fire experience as an alternate ranger.

JF: Yes, I'd been...In fact, Jack Koch that was—he's retired from the Forest Service, but he
continued in his career through—he became forest supervisor and so forth. In my early days, he was the fire control officer, and we didn't have the communication facilities, and that you have now a days. But old Koch used to take me as his runner, so to speak. A flunkee is a good definition of the word but we'd go—we were on, oh, numerous Class-E fires. Doe Creek Fire, Banks Fire, there was...My experience is probably 150 Class-E fires.

FC: That's an awful lot.

JF: Yeah. Then a numerous amount of smaller fires, you know.

FC: Well, you got fire experience when you were in CCCs too.

JF: Yes, yes, we had fire suppression crews. I was on the Sawtooth—I was on fires on the Sawtooth Forest and Payette Forest and then Nez Perce Forest, and that as a CC enrollee.

FC: That pretty well groomed you to get into the jumpers then.

JF: I never was—I was always in the leader capacity at that time. A supervisory capacity because I was the—as I mentioned, I moved up. I was the forestry clerk. So I fell into that line and at that grade. So, like I say—and Koch, in those days there was lack of communication on fires. Getting manpower and supplies and so forth to fire camps and knowing when you had to build up the strength of the crew. When you had to get marine pumps to a certain drop, you just didn't call on the old SPF radios as frequently as you do now a days, and so my job in many instances was to—well, you know the little brown Forest Service peg books? Section peg books? Well, these different fire control ranger, fire control officers, they'd write one paragraph notes, then they send you about 20, 25 miles up the trail to deliver the thing. [laughs] So, I became quite familiar with the primitive area in the backcountry and that. I was familiar, I was quite familiar with, what you call the Idaho Primitive Area and Salmon River country, and South Fork of the Salmon, Middle Fork of the Salmon.

FC: All tough fire country?

JF: Well, it goes everyplace but flat! It's up all the way. In fact, I went to a fire one time on Tomato Point, it looks down over the Salmon River. [It] took all day from early morning till late at night just climbing uphill from the river to get up there.

FC: I was in the fire riggings, the same story.

JF: Yeah, that's...so, I learned to be a pretty good walker. I know that I, well, I've made, during that time I was—took messages and hiked clear from Chamberlain Basin to Big Creek or from the Middle Fork to Big Creek. We're talking in the ranges of anywhere from 10 to 20 to 30 to 50 miles walking back in those days. So I got quite familiar with the country and I got to know the stalwarts in the Forest Service. The old-time rangers like Dan LaVann that was a ranger at Big
Creek for 30, 35 years before he—

FC: Where's Big Creek under—

JF: Big Creek is right. It's on the Payette Forest, but it's in a primitive area. But it's right at the end of the road, it's the last—

FC: I'm not that acquainted with Region 4.

JF: Yeah. Well, it's at the end of the road and from there to the Middle Fork, to the main Salmon. That's all a matter of trails and small airports. Like I say, I became quite familiar and buddies with the rangers and they liked me and they helped my career considerably. I advanced in the Forest Service and then I signed up to come to McCall...or come to Missoula.

FC: For the jumpers?

JF: Yes.

FC: And what year was that?

JF: This was in 1942. 1942, I'm sure. You'll have to...You know, the dates get a little vague but I'm pretty certain of the dates. I came up that year and I was the first one from Region 4—the initial Forest Service man from Region 4 to get involved with the smokejumping program. Glen Thompson was the one, he was the fire control officer at McCall that arranged for me to come to Missoula for smokejumping.

FC: The regional office didn't necessarily get you up here to start jumper programs down there, it was just—

JF: The initial purpose was—the fire control between the regions were had going to previous discussions and Floyd Godden was the fire control—the director of fire control, so to speak.

FC: Dave Godden?

JF: Floyd Godden. He was the fire control director out of the regional office but Glen Thompson, who later became supervisor, and so forth, he was the fire control officer at McCall at that time. McCall is—well, to our way of thinking, we're not prejudiced—but we always thought it was as hot a fire spot in the West as any part of Region 1. That area of McCall; the old Idaho Forest, the Salmon, the Challis, the Nez Perce and all those—that was considered the hot spot for fires, you know. The discussions lead to forming a Region 4 smokejumper unit.

I was the first one from Region 4 and then one of the other fellows from Region 4 came about, oh, a month or so later than I. Stewart Sandridge Johnson, better known as Lloyd Johnson, and I
came to Missoula for the initial program. At that time, the smokejumper hierarchy here was...Oh, there was—Earl Cooley was...Rufus Robinson [Rufus P. Robinson], Jim Waite [James V. Waite], Bill Woods [William C. Wood], Al Cramer [Albert Cramer], Art Cochran [Arthur M. Cochran], and this was the basic group here.

FC: Chuck Nash?

JF: Yeah, Nash was one of them. Glen Smith was another and...I can't think of the names. There wasn’t all that many, and I think that’s the majority of the names. So, Johnson and I were the only two permanent Forest Service people but at that time, to get the smokejumper grade they had to—personnel management being what it is, they had to make arrangements for our appointments to be made in Region 1 because they had—I guess they had—the only authority to give the smokejumper grades at that time. So, we were appointed as smokejumpers with an assignment on the Lolo Forest, which was Missoula.

FC: That was at Seeley Lake?

JF: No. Well, the appointment was right in Missoula. But it was just a paper transaction. We were really Region 4 people and our identity with Region 4 was never a matter of question. We were always the Region 4 unit, it was just that the personnel action caused us to be appointed as—smokejumper squad leaders was the first title. SP-7s I believe it was at that time.

So we came up to Missoula and we spent time—well, I spent the winter learning to be a parachute rigger and I had...I finally qualified and had one of the earliest parachute riggers licenses in the West. I think, as I recall, I was one of only—somewhere around a figure of ten. In the ten. Art Cochran and Wagner Dodge, Jim Waite—they were here, and they were the ones that...and Frank Derry, of course, who was the general instructor of the jumpers, gave us, gave me the training in parachute rigging. As I say, I qualified and had one of the few parachute rigger licenses issued at that early date. It was kind of something new. We—even in the FAA were less—didn't have many in the United States.

Then I went through the training process and I trained at Nine Mile and I trained at Seeley Lake and at Six Mile and also here at what you call Johnson Fields, you know, during those times. Following qualifying through all the preliminary jumps for the training, I returned then to McCall. Johnson and I returned and we—our main purpose was to formulate the smokejumping unit there. The operation—Johnson and I were similar. We were the same grade and so the work was more or less split between us. I had the parachute loft responsibilities. The rigging—parachute rigging and so forth and fire suppression. Johnson had general administration and the training program. We more or less worked as co-leaders. We were co-leaders, and then, as I say, the primary job was to build the smokejumper camp. We didn't have—there was no great amount of funds available—

[Interruption]
JF: There was no great amount of funds available to build things so we had [to] scratch around and do what we could. So, we took old CC buildings and made a cook shack and mess hall out of one—these are those old portable building types, you know. Then we took another one and made a smokejumper barracks and the parachute loft. I was interested in one of books that was recently published that said the first loft—shows a picture of the first loft in McCall. Well, the picture is actually the first loft that looks like a loft, but the first parachute loft we had at McCall—well, let me back up.

The site of the smokejumper unit was plans for what they call the McCall Nursery. It was a U.S. Forest Service nursery and it just was about a quarter of a mile back of the supervisor's office over a small hill. It's where the present unit is. But the only building over there at that time was a work building for the nursery and an open air, patio type of enclosure attached to it. It was this open-air patio attachment that we developed for the first parachute rigging loft there. We made our parachute rigging tables, and so forth, and had them at that spot. Then, I'm trying to keep this in some type of continuity, in the season of 1943, '42-43, the McCall unit was made up of five individuals. The five, as I say was, Johnson, Lloyd Johnson and myself as the permanent Forest Service people and then we had three conscientious objectors. You're probably familiar with the early days when they had that. They were made up of Quakers and Mennonites.

FC: Do you remember their names?

JF: Yes, very well. The one was Lester Gahler [Lester E Gahler].

FC: Where's he from?

JF: Well, he was from back—I believe they were all, more or less, from the Pennsylvania area but I'm not...I believe they were from the Pennsylvania area but I'm not absolutely certain about Gahler because—but in later years, Gahler was, he lives outside Salem, Oregon, and has lived there for a good number of years. I've only seen him once or twice too in the last 40 some years.

FC: Who were the other COs?

JF: Lester Gahler was the one and Keith Utterback was another one. He was a Mennonite as I recall and Gahler was a Quaker, and then there was another Mennonite—Jerry Hoffer. That was the three that made up the initial squad at McCall. On August, well, they helped with the construction of the unit there. This is a picture here of Lester Gahler and myself getting into the old Travel Air to make the first fire jump in Region 4.

FC: Do you have copies of this, or negatives in case they want—

JF: No. These here were taken by a Forest Service clerk in the supervisor's office that was an
amateur, more or less, an amateur—

FC: Photographer?

JF: Photographer and professional photograph—he’s Claud Embrose. But these are the initial—that’s the initial picture taken getting in the plane to go to the fire. There’s the clipping out of the Idaho Stateman, and of course—this is the photographer, Claud Embrose, he’s retired from the Forest Service. He may still have the negatives. This is a picture of me at that time jumping with the Eagle chute.

FC: Was this in the Boise Statesman?

JF: Yes, yes.

FC: In about what month and year?

JF: Well, this here fire jump was on, well, let me get exactly for you. It's right here. It was August 14, if I recall, 1943.

FC: Oh, you were involved in the first fire jumps in Region 4?

JF: I made the first one.

FC: The first one in Region 4. We'll have to talk about that a little later.

JF: Here's the Forest Service publication, see. To quote it: "In 1943, a five-man squad was trained at Missoula and sent to the Intermountain Region at McCall, Idaho, for duty on the Payette National Forest, formerly the Idaho National Forest. A Travel Air airplane owned by Johnson's flying service and piloted by Penn Stohr was used. On August 14, John Ferguson and Lester Gahler—that should be Gahler—aided by spotter, Lloyd Johnson, hit the silk over a fire at the head of Captain John Creek." That constitutes the first fire jump in Region 4. And then the brochure, if you can read it, goes on to give some of the other facts about the McCall unit.

So, the next year we made a number of fire jumps and now...Cooley used to keep a complete log of all the jumps and that, but I understand that it was destroyed here. A typical Forest Service faux pas.

FC: I don't know.

JF: You might ask Cooley about it, but I understand that somehow it got destroyed. But he had a very authentic logging of all the early jumping, and that. And there was records at McCall and I think some of the records may still be available in McCall.
When I left the jumpers, I had trained up Wayne Webb [Wayne R. Webb]. After the war. This was after the return from World War Two. Wayne Webb took over, more or less, my responsibilities in the smokejumper unit, and—I don't know if you're familiar—he continued on till retirement in the smokejumper unit and he's been retired about eight years now.

[Interruption]

JF: Wayne Webb would be an excellent candidate to interview for the oral history of the McCall unit because—I spent that. Well, let me get back to about 1943-'44. That's when we trained the jumping doctors, so to speak. Amos Little and Fletcher [Maj. Fletcher, M.D.], and so forth. I have here pictures of Fletcher, and so forth. I'll bet there's more of this in the back. Here's a little—see these are some of the—all the jumping doctors. This is that Paul Victor [Lt. Paul Victor, M.D.]? Oh, he was a Frenchman. He was an authority on the Arctic, and he came—he was here at Missoula. This is Major Reardon, this is Colonel Fletcher that became the doctor. This is Major Kelly that was—flew the Noordyne at that time during the rescue training and, this Sargent Gates that was in the unit.

FC: How many doctors were involved in this project? Half a dozen?

JF: I'm rather vague, but I thought there was—I kind of feel like there was about 20.

FC: Twenty? Here in Missoula?

JF: Twenty—somewhere in that neighborhood. Cooley and some of those would have a better recollection of the number.

FC: What type of training did you provide them?

JF: Well to start with, there was some controversy about smokejumpers. The ability we had to maneuver chutes verses the similar parachute training given in Fort Benning. [pauses] The paratroopers at the first part of parachuting in the Army just had the straight parachute which lacked the ability—the steering capabilities, see. Course, when we first started jumping here, the initial chutes were the Eagle Chutes. They were very tough on opening shocks. They opened just the opposite from the later date slotted Irving chute. Derry's invention with the slots, opened just the opposite in the air from each other. The Eagle had a tremendous opening shock. When the chute opened—

FC: [It would] jar your teeth?

JF: Oh! It left strawberries right on your hide, and any of the old-time jumpers that jumped the Eagle chutes will—I would think one of their most vivid memories is the fact that they always had some strawberries from the opening shocks on the Eagles. Yet the Eagle chute was, oh, it was a wonderful chute. I jumped, if I remember, number 527. It was a 27-foot chute, and the
later chutes were 30 and 32 feet, you know. But that 27-foot chute—I landed standing up virtually most time. I'd land so easy that I'd hardly be able to tumble on the

FC: What did you weigh in those days then?

JF: Oh, I guess I weighed about 150-60.

FC: Been a little different if you'd have weighed 190, I suppose?

JF: Well, no. I think—there was several factors that that contributed to it too. If you jumped, sometimes...well—

FC: A denser density too?

JF: If you jumped it high, at higher altitudes, you'd come down harder, but it wasn't—that wasn't necessarily so. Many of the jumpers that I jumped, spotted for and that—I watched them land from the Ford Trimotor and Travel Airs. I'd see them barely touch the ground and never fall over at high altitudes.

In fact, well, we jumped up at 11,000 feet—practically 11,000 feet in the Seven Devil Ranges in the Hell's Canyon of the Snake River there. I remember I dropped—I spotted Lloyd Johnson in there on one where he hit pretty hard. He hit into a bunch of down logs and he actually damaged the helmet that he was wearing at that time. This was up at 11,000 feet, and I can remember him, to this day, seeing him hit. The cloud of dust and debris [laughs] that more or less flew when he hit. Johnson, he took a few lumps, but he wasn't hurt.

FC: And you were dropping at that time or still in the plane?

JF: I was the spotter. I spotted from on this fire on the—up in the Seven Devils. At the same time, I jumped my 27-foot Eagle over on the Zina Creek fire, which is up in the same, practically the same elevation. Just east of McCall in the High range, just east of McCall. Smokey Stover, who was the squad leader of the unit at Idaho City, jumped with me, you know, Smokey Stover and I. When we jumped on that fire, I never had no problem. I don't recall as closely as I should, but I don't think I went to my knees.

So, the elevation may have had some effect at times, but it wasn't constant. But the Eagle chute was excellent for maneuvering. You could just drive around the sky in the Eagle chute and you could just come right in on your spot and if you missed your spot, well, if you didn't touch some part of the spot like the—when we put a cross out in training, it was considered very poor standard.

FC: I didn't realize the Eagle chute was that good.
JF: As I recall, Smitty—Glen Smith—wrote a, had some of the facts about the Eagle chute, but it had a forward speed of about seven to ten miles an hour. Something like that. So, if you were in a ten-mile wind, see, you were...You were going with it, you were going a lighter. You had the ability to go forward and just kind of drive around the sky, more or less, and to where you wanted to go. Then it was so quick to respond. Are you familiar with the shape of it?

FC: They've got pictures out in the [unintelligible].

JF: Well, it has an initial canopy, and then it has a secondary ring. That was one of the problems. It had these secondary lines, and they—

[Break in audio]

JF: Well, if they weren't packed correctly you had a chance of a malfunction by having a line over the chute and a number of the fellows that jumped the Eagle chutes had to sometimes pull their reserve chute because of serious line overs that they had. I had one or two minor line overs, but I never was required to use my emergency chute. I never—

FC: That's just what I was going to ask you. They weren't bad enough to abort?

JF: No. I had one that was just about half and half one time and I rode it all the way to the ground and I hit rather hard but I never injured myself in any...Trying to think back, but they—the jumping with the Eagle chute, I participated in some of the original trial jumps at Seeley Lake of Frank Derry's new, improved, slotted Irwin Chute. That's the one that you normally [unintelligible]. In fact, I have one of the distinct reputations of fixing Derry’s chute up. One of his initial chutes, I don't know whether it was the first one or the second one, whatever, that he made of the new improved chutes. But I jumped at Seeley Lake and hit into a snag—big old black snag—and it wrapped around and it tore the thing. Tore the new invented chute completely to pieces. [laughs] It was never salvageable. We always used to—when we jumped we had rips. We'd get tears from the brush and stuff and that was part of parachute rigging operation was to patch the chutes and that. I became quite a seamstress in those days on sewing and patching the chutes.

FC: Well, what improvement does the Derry slot have over the Eagle?

JF: See the norm—this is the normal chute that, more or less, the paratroopers used without the slots. Frank Derry, his modification of this chute put two slots n here. The purpose of the slots was to allow air to funnel out through the chute, through those slots and it caused a little forward motion. The Irwin chute, in my opinion, never had the maneuverability and the quickness of control that you had with the Eagle chute. Yet with Derry's slots I think they modified them at different sizes at different times. Waite and Cooley, those fellows knew more about that.
FC: Yeah, they're continually improving chutes here.

JF: Yeah, Well, at that time, this was the first invention of the slotted chute. And it gave some of this maneuverability that you needed in order to give you forward speed to be able to land in a spot. Otherwise you just—the only other means you had of trying to fall into a select area was to pull on one side and collapse the portion of the chute to allow you to fall faster so that you’d be closer to the—change your glide path to be able to hit an area, you know. Then, of course, you had to let go of the risers and so forth before you landed. Another way was to—they taught in the training, was to raise your hands up and grab the risers and pull them down and it more or less tipped the front of the chute down and it also caused you to accelerate with the moves. So that's primarily the difference between the two chutes. But the first of those, of the Derry slotted chutes, was experimented with at Seeley Lake and I was there at that time. Bill Woods, that’s at the reunion there—

FC: Yeah, I saw him last night.

JF: He was there. In fact, we were talking about the old Derry chute that I tore to pieces [unintelligible] and that. There was several purposes for that Seeley Lake area beside the fact that it had a little air field. But it had Seeley Lake which was a big body of water but it. The area was an excellent location to find out if you were going to have problems in certain types of terrain because it was studded with burnt snags. It had a lot of second growth, and it had a lot of potholes. All over the place, see. So when you jumped, you had the option of getting a dunking in some water, or hanging up in a snag, or you could hit in some heavy brush.

FC: What training did you get on in case you got into a water drop—or dropped in water?

JF: Well, I guess my recollection of that type of training was that if you were gonna land—if you were absolutely certain you were going to hit in the water, the thing to do as a safety precaution was to get as much of the harness unfastened while you were still coming down in the air. The purpose was to allow you to drop out of the—at the last moment, to drop out free and clear from the parachute into the water. Which would leave you the capability of being able to float in the water without any [of the] the chute and lines tangling up with you. As I recall the great safety factor was they'd just tell you to stay the hell out of the water! [laughs] That was it.

FC: Yeah, but you know, sometime it's going to happen.

JF: Yes, and it never happened to me but some of them did hit in some of those puddles, ponds, sloughs around Seeley Lake and that. That was quite a place. I always recall Seeley Lake because the year we were training up there. Oh, in fact, Bill Woods and I were talking about it yesterday. We got bears in the cook shack and tore up our cook shack, and [we] shot the bears. It was only—oh, much later date that somebody found out it was in a wildlife preserve—preserve of sorts—[laughs] and you wasn't supposed to be shooting bears but somebody wondered for
years where the hides was! [laughs] I don't know all the circumstances, but I remember when the bears were in the kitchen and the incidents.

There was another occasion up there—the place was alive with bears. One of the jumpers got on a motorcycle, and I thought I...He was young and adventurous, and I think he had a date with some girl. Anyway, he took out of the Seeley Lake Ranger Station going as fast as the motorcycle would go and went down the road. He went around the curve, and he run into a bear. Hit him square, right in the middle of the road.

FC: He went right over the motorcycle?

JF: No, when they found him, the motorcycle was laying on one side of the road and the bear and the jumper were laying on the other side and they were all out cold as I recall.

FC: You don't remember his name?

JF: I can't think—we were trying to think who it was, but it was one of the fellows that was up at Seeley Lake. At that time, somebody in [unintelligible] region. It was one of the Region 1 fellows, I'm sure.

Then, well, during that period—this is also the same period when we had the jumping doctors, and you were asking about what kind of training did we give them. That's what started—we got a little off the subject, but the training we did give them was just the standard smokejumping training. We fitted them with the smokejumping suits that you see. These normal jump suits. This is the old time, initial canvas heavy padded suit. See, I have in this picture, this is one of the first. That's me in one of the early modified bit. These are those leather flying pants, you know, that the bomber pilots and crews wore during the war.

FC: The bomber, B-17 [unintelligible].

JF: Yes, and the B-17s. Yes and—

FC: You jumped in that leather?

JF: Yes, we modified—I had these modified and we sewed straps onto them. You can see we modified the pocket.

FC: Put a rope—

JF: Put [on a] rope pocket. But I never—the one problem I had with this is that, if I knew I was going to jump in high timber, I could never carry—I could only carry a rope about half the regulation length because of the pocket I had on it. So, as I recall once or twice, I wore the standard canvas suit. I liked this here the best and I had a jacket that was modified. Less
padding and so forth. I always, more or less, felt I lived a charmed life, and I wasn't going to get bruised up.

FC: You were ever injured in jumps?

JF: Never was! Never was.

FC: On the leather pants, they'd be hotter wouldn't they?

JF: Well they, yes, they were...No, I don't believe so. I don't think they were any more maneuverable than the canvas one at that time. You know they had a number of modifications of this suit from heavier duck to lighter type duck and they eventually eliminated some of the weight of the canvas and made the suits a little more maneuverable when you were in them. But I use this here—similar. A lot of these pictures has this here modified suit. I made this when I was at McCall, see. In our own loft there.

FC: What other innovative design things did you get into?

JF: Oh, during those days we were having a tremendous problem with the cargo, and that, catching on the tail of the plane. At our McCall loft, we worked on a projects to modify the cargo chutes and we tried various types and went through many—a number of experimental trials of having a chute come out of the bag or the bag, or the chute pull free and have the bag on the lower end or reverse. The bag on top of the chute pull free, and so forth. We did—made many tests and developed the plan [where] the pilot [would be] throwing the tail of the plane up when you did kick out the cargo. This here caused the tail to be out of the way if the chute and it's tray opened closer to the plane. During that time, it was a wonder we didn't lose a number of planes because—I recall on the Big Creek fires, on the Doe Creek fire, and several others, where hindquarters of beef got caught. [The] chute and hindquarter of beef got caught in the tail, you know. In most instances the pilots, they didn't come any better than old Johnson Flying Service pilots and a few of the others. There was old Bud Zimmerly from Lewiston, Idaho. Zimmerly is an old pioneer back-country flyer and I knew all of those old pilots.

FC: What were some of the other pilots' names?

JF: Oh, well, the one that I spent most of my career with was the old, more or less, the original Johnson bunch. I started—see, prior to going into the smokejumpers, when I was in fire control, one of my assignments was dropping cargo. I dropped cargo with Penn Stohr. He was the Johnson Flying Service pilot, and he was a renowned pilot of mountain experience. You probably recall the name.

FC: Chewing cigar?

JF: Yes. Always smoking a cigar. He did it for two reasons. One, he enjoyed cigars and two, he
liked to see everybody turn green back in the plane. But they didn't come any better fellows than old Penn Stohr. He taught me to fly and all those things, but I was the forest cargo drop—air cargo dropper. Also, when my appointment—at that time when my appointment was up—and I had a few months off, you know, I also worked for Penn as a helper out there. I spent a lot of time dropping; I dropped cargo on many, many fires.

FC: Did you develop, or help develop, any of the cargo dropping techniques? Obviously, you were in a—

JF: Yes, well, we worked on these cargo chutes and we finally modified all of the cargo dropping chutes in Region 4. In this, at one time, we had some experiments. We had Pat Thompson who was the director of fire control in Washington specially, came to McCall for one of these—

FC: What did you experiment on? How did you modify the chutes? What did you do?

JF: Well, the chutes wasn't so much modified as—

FC: [unintelligible]

JF: We tried different techniques. I'm not all that familiar with all of the things we tried. One of the things was at the apex of the chute you used to use cord and tie the top of it into the inside of the bag, see. When the bag—when the lacing broke, the bag opened up, see, but the apex of the chute was tied in the bag and so that the lines and stuff would string out, see. [unintelligible] So, we tried different weights of cord for tying the apex into the chute. We made attempts of dropping the cargo without putting any—tying any—apex to the chute bag at all. We changed by trying to fix the lines. You had to fold the lines and put rubber bands on them. We tried different techniques, as I recall, for that—having them come off faster, out of the bands and so forth. Most of the chutes were surplus chutes anyway.

FC: What about doing things with the paracargo so they're not aerodynamic? Problems like tail winds, weight, cross-section density type of thing?

JF: Well, one of the things, as I recall, we tried using longer static lines. See, the problem with the chute opening and getting in the tail of the plane was that it opened prematurely. All kinds of factors would come into it. You could just be, unfortunately, in a little down draft about the time you threw the chute and the cargo out and the plane could be lower than you—immediately be lower than you thought. It would be [an] excellent opportunity for the chute to tangle up on the tail. Or the wheel! The rear wheel used to catch it. I think that more of them were caught on the wheel and on the rudder, than were caught on the rudder. I only recall ever seeing one or two where you really had a blossomed one over the—

FC: Were you ever in any near misses when you were dropping?
JF: Well, I was on the fires on the old Idaho. Penn Stohr and I were dropping cargo and we were in the smoke and we were dropping to a fire camp there and there was a plane up above us. We always accused A.A. Bennett, he was an old mountain flyer with a considerable reputation in Idaho, and we always felt that it was old Bennett or Zimmerly that was above us. And they'd throw out these rolls of about six and eight sleeping —the big K-pox sleeping bags. They [the bags] were coming down, and they [the pilot] didn't know we were below them. The damn things just come streaking just like an arrow right down close to the plane. Not very far away. I think they missed us [by] about ten feet.

FC: Well, that's quite a near miss.

JF: Yeah! I don't know what it would have done. Probably would have punched a hole in the fabric but I never had one inkling of doubt about Penn Stohr's flying.

FC: What about tail hang ups—tail-wheel hang ups on ships that you were aboard? You have any of those?

JF: Yes, I was in dropping cargo. We did have one or two; but they...we shook them off. We immediately shook—

FC: Oh. What about the immediate performance of the aircraft at that time? Do you see a reaction speed?

JF: Well, you have—as I recall, you have a slight vibration. A little more vibration than turbulence, momentarily. But the ones that I was involved in, I don't believe they lasted long enough for me to get any great impression. Although, I did see this one with the hind quarter of beef and we thought he was headed for the ground. That he had, so called, had the course! But he got away. He got out of it and I—

FC: [He] was able to slip it off?

JF: What? I believe he—yeah, he got rid of that one. But I was trying to think of another one that they flew back and landed at McCall with the chute still hung on part of the far end.

FC: Partially deployed?

JF: Yeah. About two halves over the deal but—I don't recall too many of those type incidences—but they, this was some of the experimental trials. There was good coordination between Missoula and McCall. We more or less looked to Derry and Cooley and Waite, and that crowd as being the experts but we—after our first initial training—we felt we were, [laughs] we were similar experts.

FC: Well you said you were jumping from the period '42 to '49.
John Ferguson Interview, OH 133-034, 035, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.

JF: Yes, but I didn't jump as frequent in that—

FC: Later on?

JF: Later on. After I came back from the service. Well, to continue there after the jumping doctors. You were asking about the training. I was pointing out that we trained back here, back of the Johnson Airport, back in the hills there. We put jumping doctors in groups out in various canyons and had to live on the land for, I don't know, three or five days and get back to the field here and stuff. Kind of a survival training stuff. But the normal jump training was just the standard smokejumper training plus some of the little innovations that the Army, or the—it was the Army Air Force at that time. Not the Air Force, you know, they had some suggestions at the time. But after we trained those jumping doctors, I was one of the ones assigned by the Forest Service to Galland Field in Boise, [Idaho], to the Search and Rescue unit there as a—I was a permanent Forest Service man, but my assignment was down there. At that time, I went through all of the emergency crash training of fires. You know, fire training and aircraft and spent time in the hospital. Fletcher was the instigator.

FC: You were in the hospital yourself?

JF: I trained in a hospital and learned how to chop off arms and legs, all those things. Emergency things that you would have to do to get a person entangled in [a] crash plane, out fast. They'd have these old bomber bodies and they'd put 1,000, 2,000 gallons of gasoline and oil in them and set them on fire and you'd have to go in this—you'd put on asbestos suits and try to retrieve the bodies, you know. As I recall, the main thing was—the training was to get you well aware of flashback fires. Flashback is where, well, with the fire equipment and the spray behind you, they had to keep it in a certain relationship till you get going up on the fire in the bomber, because the flashback would—the fire would just whip right around and close you in from behind, and that. So this was part of the training, and stuff. We participated in bomber searches for crash bombers down in Death Valley and Mount Whitney.

FC: Did you actually get involved in any real incident?

JF: Never. We were on some missions and found the bombers, but we never jumped. They never jumped till later, after I had gone into the Air Force later. Because the ones that happened were so badly smashed. Crashed so badly that there was no purpose in take—one of the purposes was that you didn't jump for the hell of jumping. It was one of the calculated risks that you took and so you, like a bomber, was all torn to pieces and there's nothing much left. There's no point in jumping "jumping doctors" on that type of a crash. That's a ground crew problem. The same with jumping on fires. One of the initial things about the smokejumping program was the initial attack. The elapsed time from the discovery of the fire till you could get physical man on the fire for the suppression. But there was a number of instances when the wind was blowing—we determined that the wind was blowing at too great a risk to the jumper.
and so we would land at Salmon, for instance. Then jump the jumpers in the daylight the next morning in the calm and the cool, see. Which they would land much easier.

I can remember a fire on Observation Peak on the Challis. The only spot—it’s all large rocks all over the place, very rocky. There was a little lake there by Observation Peak and the only possible place to get any kind of a decent landing was just in a little, flat, green, marshy spot just at the head of the lake.

FC: And probably a couple snags right around there?

JF: It wasn’t...Yeah! It wasn’t very big either. I doubt if it was much—about four times the size of this room. So, the decision was to not jump in the afternoon. You get the fire to—you get the word at 2:00 in the afternoon. You get to the fire at 2:30, right in the heat of the day on an August afternoon. It’s not practical. You could land right in the—that’s one of the possibilities of landing in the lake. So, we flew to Salmon and flew out the next morning and dropped them at daylight. The two jumpers landed in that little green square, like I say, about two, three times the size of this room. Just slick and clean, nothing happened. This is where the training pays off.

FC: Right! How about some more jump experiences during your years, on actual fires or cargo drops?

JF: We jumped on a fire, a whole crew of us jumped on a fire on the Deadwood, on the Boise Forest.

FC: What year?

JF: This would be in 1943, I imagine. I think we jumped eight jumpers on the fire but the fire was one of those that just took off and took the whole country right now, you know. It was one that you could have saved the jumpers in the first place because you never was going to make an impression on the fire with eight jumpers. Although, we did. We jumped and we worked like a beaver. The only place you could control this fire was try to keep it on the ridges, inside, in that particular canyons or draws and stop it along the ridges. So, all we were doing, more or less, was just digging fire line.

FC: Flanking it?

JF: Flanking it down the ridges. But we got down into it and then spot fires, oh, half a mile away and a mile away, just blew up like nothing and the wind began to prevail. Wind coming right up the canyon! It just came for us and we had to run like the devil to get off to the flank and get out of that.

FC: Nobody got in trouble?
JF: No, but we had—

FC: Came pretty close to it?

JF: Many close calls. The worst—I think the worst one as far as fires is concerned happened down at Targhee Forest in later years and it wasn't really a smokejumper fire but I was on the fire. Both the ranger and I got caught in the fire and we had our jackets and stuff all burned off of us. But we had to put our heads in a badger hole, and things like that. I know that it scared me quite a bit at the time but the ranger was Joe Peters [unintelligible], and he was a pretty calm head and knew how to handle ourself on fires.

And that brings you back to the Mann Gulch fire, you know. We were always reminded if the jumpers had paid attention to Wag Dodge, that more of them—it's quite possible that all or more of them would have survived.

FC: What are your experiences with regards to the Mann Gulch fire? You're acquainted with Wag Dodge and—

JF: It was a region...Yes, I have a picture right here of Wag Dodge.

FC: You were in the region at the time?

JF: Well, I was in Region 4. It was a Region 1 fire, it was on the Helena Forest, you know. There's not much I can tell you about the—well, this is the group. This is Cooley. Cooley and Bill Wood, Cramer, and Jim Waite, and Francis Lufkin.

FC: But you knew Wag Dodge?

JF: Yes.

FC: And you trained with him, you say?

JF: Yes. My wife...he was a good friend of ours. Here was one of the Ford Trimotors that crashed up Big Prairie. [shows photo] I had a picture here of Dodge. Here it is! Here's a picture of Wag Dodge right here. He was one of the initial group.

FC: What do you remember about Wag?

JF: Well, he was a prince of a fellow. He was a very, very good fellow. He was a typical Forest Service—we had a standard in the Forest Service in those days. I think it's kind of a little different nowadays but the men were men, and Wag Dodge was one of them. He knew his job. He was a professional as far as the fire prevention and suppression worked and jumping was concerned. They didn't come much better than old Wag Dodge. He was always a good-looking
guy. He had a great sense of humor.

In fact, I've always reflected on the caliber of the initial group of smokejumpers. The caliber of men that they were, the initial bunch. Glen Smith and Art Cochran, Cooley, Wag Dodge, and that. Like I say, we had one reservation about all these here books that are written about smokejumping. They're usually all—the authors have always been trained and jumped in Region 1 so the books are primarily Region 1 jumping, and so forth. There's not much ever written about our Region 4 jumping.

FC: Yeah, I read one book, and I can't remember the name, but it was a jumper from here that was assigned down in New Mexico. Most of the stories were about New Mex.

JF: Yeah. There's very little in print about McCall jumping—Region 4's operation.

FC: Well, you'd better write a book.

JF: Region 4 was—Well, I left the jumpers in 1949.

FC: Then what'd you do, John?

JF: I went back to engineering.

FC: In the regional office?

JF: Yes. I was well acquainted with the engineers, I worked with the engineers and construction superintendents. Like when the old supercrews—the project work was on road construction in the South Fork of the Salmon, and bridge building, and that. So I went back as an assistant to the forest engineer on the Payette National Forest in engineering and my first assignment there—in fact, I was still assigned to the smokejumpers but my actual work in in '48 was—the winter of '48-'49, was as a Region 4 representative on a cooperative bridge across the Salmon. 435-foot bridge across the Salmon River above Riggins, [Idaho]. It's called the Lake Creek Bridge. It was a cooperative effort. The bridge superintendent came from Region 1, and so I was assigned there as an assistant to him in charge of getting manpower. We used regular union labor from the Steel Worker's Union and had to get equipment from all over the country, you know, and so forth.

FC: Yeah. You said you retired from the Forest Service in Region 4 in 1980. Well, in the last 30 years or so in engineering, were you involved in smokejumpers at all?

JF: No.

FC: Training wise or consultant?
JF: No. No, my association with the jumpers, after I went into engineering, and—

FC: Ceased?

JF: I worked as a—I advanced myself to a professional engineer's status. I'm licensed in a number of states, and so forth. My work was primarily in—initially, was in road construction—surveying and construction [of] roads and bridges. A few years later I changed into surveying. Cadastral surveying, the boundary surveys, right-of-way surveys, and geodetic control survey work. Then my career in the Forest Service is essentially as a cadastral engineer. I performed that. I worked at different assignments on different forests to—finally went to the regional office several times. But the last time I've been there 17 years now, but I've been retired. I think I worked—before my retirement in '80, I had been in the regional office as regional cadastral engineer for 15 years.

FC: How come you didn't stay in the jumpers? You were pretty young in '49.

JF: I was also more interested in becoming a professional engineer and surveyor and having a—you can't jump forever. The opportunities—I was always, I had a reputation as being pretty sharp and I had...I was with engineers and—

FC: And you liked engineers?

JF: I knew many of—not like going to work on the forest now a days. I knew the regional forester personally and I knew all the supervisors, and I knew all the rangers. It was different atmosphere at that time. I used to play cards and drink good whiskey with the regional engineer and the regional forester, and those things that, you know, doesn't happen now a days but for an up-and-coming junior Forest Service employee, I advanced up the line. I was more inclined to get up—to have a permanent job, a long-time permanent job where I could continue with my job in the Forest Service to retirement. I worked toward that end and I retired in 1980 with approximately 40 years' service.

FC: What do you look back on your smokejumping days as now?

JF: Well, I consider myself one of the original smokejumpers. We were part of—I guess we were the secondary level of the original group, you might say. I'm kind of proud that I was one of the first one and I'm particularly proud of making the first fire jump in Region 4.

I noticed in the oral history questionnaire, there seems to be some questions that relate to racial and social atmospheres in the jumpers.

FC: Do you find [unintelligible]?

JF: I think it's a stupid question because we never had any of those problems even with the
conscientious objectors. I guess that to start with when I first heard the words conscientious objectors, that I had the feeling—I was young and full of vinegar in those days, and I had the feeling that they were draft dodgers and didn't want to go to the service and this and that. But I can assure anybody—and I think it would hold true of most of the original, permanent Forest Service people—that there was never...I can recall no animosity towards the Quaker or Mennonite conscientious objectors at that time. And very quickly when you associated with them.

FC: As soon as you got to know them?

JF: As soon as you got to know them.

FC: That was your sincere—

JF: Everyone was a prince of a fellow.

FC: That was your sincere conviction and you [unintelligible] that.

JF: That was my conclusion. My conclusion was—and it proved out because, now you take Gabler [Lester E. Gabler], that made this first Region 4 fire jump with me. He went into hospital duty, didn't he? I think the hospital duty. Utterback, he actually later went into the service but he went into the service in a non-combatant role. Hoffer—I think he was similar but I don't recall just exactly what he did. But I think all of them served in a capacity other than just going out and fighting as a fighting soldier.

FC: The other people I've interviewed, and most of them are the same age group that we're in, 40, 50, so on—60 maybe. Didn't figure there was—that they noticed any of the social problems that conscientious objectors and the black 555th, and there was really no upheaval in their knowledge either.

JF: Well, you see, I—

[Break in audio]

FC: Continuing the interview of John Ferguson at the Fire Depot on July 21, 1984, on tape numbered as 7-A. We were talking about some of the—discussing some of the cultural problems, or assumed cultural problems, with conscientious objectors and veterans and so on.

JF: Well, my personal opinion, we never had a problem. I don't believe Region 1 had a problem with the early conscientious objector people. They're not, as I previously mentioned—I think the caliber of personnel, not only the permanent Forest Service people, but the conscientious objectors and the World War Two returnees that followed in 1949 or 1945-46 through '49 when during my period connected with the jumpers, they were all excellent people. I know of
no problem and you mentioned—you made a reference to the black paratroop—

FC: 555th as I understand.

JF: 555th paratroopers. I guess all I can say in that case, that I was aware that there was a black paratrooper operation, but we had to—we never had any black people in the smokejumper organization. I never knew it to be a problem and I never knew even by conversation that there was any—would ever result in any prejudice or a problem. But we never had any and I think the question is out of order, I think.

FC: I wasn't even aware of the black paratrooper, smokejumper combination until a couple of months ago when I got involved in this.

JF: Yeah. I knew they were over in Italy but now the paratroop...As I said, the majority of the, the World War Two returnees that came, and I'm talking of people like Ace Neilsen [Glen Neilsen], Ray Mansisidor [Ramon Mansisidor], Kenny Roth [Ken Roth], Curley Rea [Lonnie Rea], we had—they had up to about 50 each years through, I think, through, '46, '47, '48 during my period. Each year, 50 or more each year. And they were from every branch of the service. They were from the infantry, they were from the paratroopers. Tall Siepert [Terrel K. Siepert], was a top sergeant in the Marine Corp. They were in the Navy. Ed Case [Edward T. Case]—few of these. In following the return from World War Two there seems to be an indication that the smokejumpers were made up of paratroopers, ex-paratroopers, after that, you know. It was not the case. So, I don't know how to elaborate on it any further but to say they were a mixed bag, but they were fine fellows. I think Region 1 probably had the—and 6—that had the same problems Region 4 had. I guess I was the morale officer, or something, because it was my responsibility to keep them from fighting and getting and rowdy, and that. That was a man-sized chore in those days. They had fun but it was clean fun.

FC: John, your wife mentioned as we were changing tapes, about an incident.

JF: Oh, well, I guess I was—I'm party to one of the tragedies in the smokejumping field, and that was—it'll have to be confirmed—but I believe it's the very first fire fatality jump.

FC: This wasn't the snag that fell?

JF: The snag that hit Lester Lycklama from our McCall unit. Johnson and I [were] sharing responsibilities. I ended up with the 4th of July responsibilities. It was also a period where the fire condition was less than real serious so we allowed most all of the jumpers except one, more or less, crew, to be off duty and we had an available first—one crew.

FC: Well, what about the date, the fire name, and the forest name before we get into—

JF: Okay, Lester Lycklama was a smokejumper from McCall unit, and he was assigned to jump
with Paul Wilde, [Paul F. Wilde].

FC: How do you spell his name?

JF: Lacklyma. L-a-k-y-m-a?

FC: L-a-c-k-l-i-m-a?

JF: Well, I thought it had a Y in it, didn't it? Well, anyway, Lester Lycklama was—he was an ex-paratrooper, he came to our unit in 1946 and was trained in Missoula here in the first wave. We had several groups trained. We had several, or at least two groups—two different groups—that trained that year. And Lester was part of the first group that was returning to McCall for the fire season that year. The fire was on the Payette National Forest in the area of Council, Idaho. Lester and his fellow jumper, I believe it was Paul Wilde, parachuted—was parachuted—to the fire which was a small Class-A fire, more or less, and the plane returned to McCall. During the suppression operation on the work on the fire by the two jumpers, a widow-maker snag fell and struck Lester from behind, hitting him in the head and critically injuring him.

FC: Any way that could have been prevented? Probably not?

JF: No, I've been on a lot of fires and you say you've had fire experience. You know that you can walk through a burn and they fall, and you don't hear the—nothing until they hit the ground, so. In fact, I was on other fires where they've come down and hit a fellow carrying a saw and cut his head off, these kind of things. So they're those typical widow-maker snags that just fall and if you don't see them coming, you—there's absolutely no way of getting out of the way. As a means of preventing them, the only prevention for those is to be looking at every tree in every direction all at the same time or not go into the fire in the first place.

Anyway, we received a radio message from the other jumper that Lester was seriously hurt and so I formed a jump group that consisted of, now I'm trying to think who all they were. Myself, Ed Case, Seymour Peterson. I'd have to check on the names of the ones—I think Wayne Red would probably recall the area very well. But anyway, we managed to assemble a crew and we—it was the 4th of July as the—1946 on the 4th of July. It was right on the holiday. We parachuted an eight-man crew on the fire for the sole purpose of a rescue mission and to carry Lester by stretcher off of the mountain to the nearest accessible road. We also contacted—in the interim—we also contacted the local doctor, in Council, Idaho, to be at the site where we would hit the road. He [Les] was brought to the road. He was still alive, but he was pretty seriously hurt and as a result, he was—he died. To my knowledge he was the first smokejumper—but he was lost...his life was lost on the basis of the fire, not the smokejumping.

FC: Was it because of a concussion or a broken neck?

JF: One of the limbs, the knot—the broken limb knot punctured a hole in his head and it was
pretty serious. He was hurt pretty serious. I doubt—two things come to mind. I don't believe anybody could possibly have gotten there faster than the rescue jump crew. It was just a short distance. I believe we were on the fire within 15-20 minutes after we got the message. It was fast. I don't believe that Lester could have been saved regardless of any effort, but it was the— to my knowledge, the first time we lost a jumper. I haven't kept up during my career what fatalities they had, but I don't believe the jumpers have had any jumping fatalities. They lost a fellow up here that was practicing on his own that was a smokejumper, I believe. I'm not up that.

FC: Well, you're not someone more intimately involved.

JF: Lester is never—never reflects in any of these books and publications that are written, but I believe that's part of the smokejumping history and it should be included. I guess, while I'm making statements, I would be prone to make a statement that the Forest Service should initiate grants to write the complete history of the smokejumping without any respect to regions and get the story rather than the personalities and the regions.

FC: John Harper, who's kind of spear-heading this project, he's an active jumper at that base here and I don't know him very well, but he apparently has a personal interest in it and—that I understand he has a history degree and—or related, and a jumper. He has rewritten the smokejumper history here at the base and corrected it. So he's probably read as much about smokejumper history as anyone that hadn't been in the program all their life and knows as much about it. He might be a good one. Have you met John?

JF: No, I haven't. I have no particular objection to the different publications that the Forest Service has put out, and different ones that had been written by the ex-smokejumpers. My only thing is that I—they need to get some of the personal touches out of them and they have to be more unbiased, and so forth. Region 1 can be very proud that they were the initial ones into the smokejumping program. We're quite proud that we were the first—Region 4—to come in, to follow in their initial effort and that.

FC: Well, I guess we got Don Webb waiting outside, and he's the next interview. I'm trying to find a [unintelligible]. So, thanks an awful lot, Jim. It's sure nice to have met you.

JF: Yes, I appreciate the opportunity. Anytime.

[End of Interview]