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This is an interview with Donal Halloran by Jim Norgaard for the Smokejumpers Oral History Project in Missoula, Montana on July 20, 1984. OH# 133-44

JN This is an Oral History interview with Don Halloran... is that how you pronounce it? And it's taking place on July 20, 1984, in the University of Montana dorm... Miller Dorm. I guess I wanted to start out by asking you what you did before you smokejumped? What were you up to then?

DH Okay, at the time I started smokejumping I was 19 years old and I was in college. I finished two years of college by that time and, as opposed to a lot of people who were in the West, I was in college in Massachusetts and I was in Forestry School. I was looking for something exciting to do during my summers both to make money and to work in the field of forestry. Something related to forestry, and smokejumping had a tremendous appeal. I really can't pinpoint it exactly. I met a fellow when I was a freshman who had washed out of smokejumping, and for some reason, I always wanted to do that. Also, when I was a freshman I saw the movie, "Red Skies of Montana".

JN Oh, you did? Richard Widmark...?

DH Widmark and an imported French actress, who played a bit part. And all that... and for some reason I believed the whole damn thing, the exploding trees and everything else about it, and that just lingered in my mind.

And after... during my sophomore year, when I knew I had an upcoming summer, I wrote to the Forest Service and applied at that time, and eventually got accepted. I think I got accepted partly because I was applying from the East and they wanted to have a distribution of people from all over the country, at least, I was told that at one point.

JN Do you have any idea why they wanted that distribution?

DH I... it was never explained, except that every year that I was in the project, for the three years that I worked there, there was always a wide distribution. That's what was part of the excitement of the people, was that they were from all over the country.

Particularly... I got some pretty good friends from California, from Arkansas, and I always gravitated toward the Easterners. We had a kid from Brooklyn who was there and a couple other Eastern kids, and then people from right around here. The West, and all. It was that mix of all these different regional individuals that, I thought, really made the project. Because on fires, you know, with lulls in fire, waiting for fires, and out at night goofing around or, during the four weeks of training when you start talking to people, they were never people that were from your area.
It was the first time I ever met a Mormon. I thought they all had six wives, and that kind of stuff, at that time. I'd never talked to "died in the wool" Californians. Even then, who came up here in their... a couple of guys with pretty fancy cars, they were chopped down, and came tooling in from California with their hair all slicked back.

The first time I ever really got to know people from the South. Listen to their comments about race and their anti-black feeling, and all that. And also, it seemed to me that the Montana person was sort of the epitome of it. I mean, they were the people with the cold thumbs they always stuck in their pants. They were the cowboys that were... there was no... not much cowboy work, so they were now smokejumpers and....

JN You say the cold thumbs?

DH Yeah, people who would walk around with their thumbs in their front pockets. You could always tell they were from Montana. Or, after a few weeks, we all did it trying to... we stood around on the street corner with our thumbs in our pockets, pretending... pretending you were from out here. But it was... the Western person was the one we really emulated. They... we... I thought they must know the area very well. They've lived here and all. We were all imports from the rest of the country and I kind of deferred to them in their judgment, the people who came from Montana.

JN They were like the examples then [inaudible]...?

DH Yeah, they... yeah. Very definitely. Yeah, between them and... we always.... I always assumed that the trainers were somehow always from out here. But I guess many of them weren't. But it was a real looking up.

Course, I'm talking from the point of view of being nineteen. And a lot of us were nineteen and twenty, real young at that time. And we were in a transition group. The second World War vets were kind of waning out by '53, when I first started. Then the college age people were beginning to increase, so it was kind of a transition. I... I just remember most of the men my age would... were really... looked up to the vets and our trainers. And we just emulated them.

I know one fourth of July during training the first year, '53. The... one of our trainers, Allen. I can't remember his first name. There were two Allen brothers. There was a Max, who was a real cut-up, and another fellow, his brother, who was a lot more... he wasn't sober, but he was a lot more... he wasn't quite a jokester. But, he used to ride the rodeo, he went out to ride in the show at Dillon. I remember two of us came in to town, We bought Western clothing... a shirt at least, couldn't afford to buy Western boots so we... I don't know what we wore on our feet. Then we hitchhiked all the way to Dillon to see him ride in the show.

JN You and who else?
DH Myself and a fellow named John Brothers [John W. Brothers], I think. He was from Ohio. And he and I hitchhiked out there, it's only a couple hours away, and we watched him. We thought he was going to, of course, win. Because we had him built up as this tremendous person in our mind, bigger than life.

JN He was one of the trainers?

DH Yeah. Yeah, he was a trainer. I guess... I don't know whether he was specialized in any particular part, but he was jump trainer, or something. He was at Nine Mile. But, of course, he lost. He got thrown off in seconds, and... but it... it almost diminished our opinion of him because, "Ah, he couldn't win the rodeo." So.... But we went up afterwards and congratulated him. He was a little bit dejected because he didn't... he didn't, at least, win a few of his rides. So then we met up with a couple of other guys out there and got a ride back to camp, eventually, from there. You know... but we would follow these trainers. At least myself and a few of my close cronies, we'd sort of follow them anywhere.

JN Just to see what their life was about?

DH Yeah! Yeah. Just to be around them. You figure they were bigger than life. I can remember the first moment that I saw Allen. I wish to hell I could remember his first name! It was out at Nine Mile and it was a sunny day, like so many summers in Montana. He was standing there just with a, kind of, half smile on his face and we were gathering around him to get organized, you know, with the day's training. And he had on a second World War parachuter's hat with his wings on the front. Green hat... green cap. And he had this neat scar on his cheek, you know. I mean it just really.. he says, you know, "I'm tough", all over. And I said, "Look at that scar! Boy, that... that... if I ever had a scar, that's the kind of scar I'd like to have." You know, it's fantastic. And he had kind of a Western drawl, deep voice. And he'd just talk real matter of fact about what we were going to do. He inspired a lot of confidence, too. "You guys can do this." And boy, I was just hooked! This was the guy to emulate in every way.

In fact, every time I got a little nick anywhere on me, I kept peeling the scab, so that maybe I would get a nice scar. And I always wished for some... like, a twig to go by and just nick my face so that I could pick the scab and get a... get a nice little scar like Allen's, you know.

But it's funny, I wrote that in my paper, the only time I got a scar, was on my leg. I hit it, it wasn't jumping, I was on a project somewhere. I nicked my leg real bad, and I kept peeling it to get this damn scar. So I got a stupid scar on my leg. But, you know, no one ever sees it! And you can't open any big conversations with... you can't say, "Look at this!" But I always wished for a stupid scar somewhere.

So that's, kind of, me as a nineteen year old. Many of my friends who were that age, you know, kind of went in that direction emulating these people.
JN  How long did that last, that emulation?

DH  Um... for me it lasted, I think, most of the summer. It started waning a little bit as we became proficient ourselves, and 1953 was the biggest fire season in the history of jumping, till that time, and for a few more years beyond that. It was one of the big seasons. It was dry and there were fires all over the place. You could sit at Fort Missoula and look around from the porches, I even have some pictures, and coming out of all the hills... you could see smoke's pouring out.

I was on project work for, like, one week that season. Had training and project work in Idaho for a week, came back and never left Missoula. And I didn't jump as... I jumped nine fire jumps that season, that was average to low. Some guys were up to fifteen or so fire jumps. And it depended on your fire, how fast you could get in and out. So, that meant for August and half of July... six weeks. I had nine fires in six weeks. That's more than one a week. Some of them... I was just re-doing my log for that time, I was back here three days after I jumped.

Sometimes I jumped twice in a week and, like I say, I was kind of low. I wasn't able to work into September more than a couple weeks, but those that worked through September, I guess, had quite a few more, but by that time we came into our own. We felt pretty damn efficient as jumpers and by mid-August, first year men were going out together on fires. I went on one two-man fire up in the Flathead.

JN  Without any supervision?

DH  No, just... just two new guys. The other guy was told that he was in charge of the fire, but we just worked together really. He was maybe a year or two older than I was, but he was still first year jumper.

And it was so furious during the first couple of weeks of August, we were all checking chutes out when they came back, whether you were a rigger or not. They'd run those chutes up in the tower and anyone that was around would check them out. We didn't pack them. All... first year jumpers were checking out chutes, checking out the panels, [to] make sure there weren't any rips in it and....

JN  When you come back, in other words, you just basically [would be] making sure the chute hasn't been damaged then?

DH  Yeah, and then the riggers would pack them. Now speaking of damages: if it had more than, maybe, a foot or two foot rip in it, it would be repaired; if it had, say a whole chute had one or two rips in it, it was very often repacked without being repaired, for another jump anyways... and there were quite a few cases of blowing a whole panel open on the next jump because it already had a rip in it... in the nylon.

JN  What would that do to the jumper?
DH Probably not too much. It'd make you come down a little faster. But [we were] so frantic to get these things checked out and back... back on the line again, you know. Because we were coming and going all the time. It was an amazing summer!

It was so amazing, I said, "If this is the way it is, I'm going to come back here the rest of my days until I can't jump anymore." It was incredible! The excitement of... it was... you jump and back into town, wash, take a shower. And your name was probably high up on the list when you came back. The jump list was real short because it was turning over so fast. And usually you get back into town, take a shower, get a decent meal, go into town, have some beer, look for some women or have... if you knew someone, go out. Back [at] 1 or 2 in the morning, go to bed, and usually the next day they're shaking you, you know. You got a fire. Just, in and out, in and out, all the time like that.

JN A lot of overtime?

DH Yeah, quite a bit. I made what then was a lot of money. I think I made... geez, I think I made $900 that summer. But it might have been more than that because we were paid only $1.64 an hour and... straight rate, overtime, and regular. I made what was a bundle, I felt, that summer because, when I was going to college it was about $350 for a full year in college. Well, probably around $700 bucks. That included room and board, and all the tuition and books, and everything else. So, I had about $300 bucks left over from that. I could go through the next year of college... just, breeze through on that kind of money.

JN So you were pretty excited about the first summer? You liked all that action?

DH Oh, yeah! Yeah. That was fantastic and, again, I wrote about this in my little paper, the way I look back on it is... it was... Get kind of academic about it because I'm a teacher now. It was a "rite of passage" into... into manhood. Particularly for me. I'd had a pretty secure, sheltered life through high school, and all, and the first couple years of college were a bit of a break with my family, you know.

But coming out here and learning how to work with people... I came out alone. Being initiated into this, sort of, elite group of jumpers. Being taken into isolation out at Nine Mile for this months' training. And then we came into town. We were at the Fort... we were kind of isolated, there were no houses around the Fort [like] now, and having this very exciting job to do, it was a spectacular transition. I had to learn how to cope with men, cope with money and be totally on my own, and get used to the West, you know. I still have a slight Eastern accent, I live in Wisconsin now.

But at that time, my accent was so thick from Boston that I got the nickname "Boston". People couldn't understand a lot of what I said. The way I pronounce....

JN How about the other way around?
Oh! I had a hard time with them. In fact, I have a neat little story about that! There was this Southern kid that had a Southern drawl which I could hardly decipher. And some of the Westerners... that's... that slow drawl out here, was easier to understand. But this Southern kid was really difficult. And I came into town one day during training, on a Saturday, like, to get a haircut and buy some odds and ends; socks, underwear, and stuff. And he said, "Ya'll goin' to town?" And I said, "Yeah". He said, "Ya'll go in and get me some vesselin haro." And I said, "What?" "Get me some vesselin haro." And I said, "OK." And I was naive. I didn't say, "How do you spell that?" Or, "What do you mean? Speak English!" I said, "OK." Because I thought there was something called vesselin haro, you know. So I went in and went to Smith Drug on Higgins. I walked in there and the guy says, "Can I help you?" I said, "Yeah! You have a bottle of vesselin haro?" And he says, "What?" And I said, "Vesselin haro!" and he says, "Oh, OK." He says, "You want the large or the small?" And I said, "Oh, I guess, small's okay." So he put a bottle on the counter and there it was, Vasoline Hair Oil. And it was a popular "slick 'em down" on the hair, so... I didn't even laugh. I felt like a fool, trying to imitate a Southerner with a Boston accent, you know. So, I just got it and brought it back to him. I never even told him the story.

But, it was hard dealing with all of that, but by mid... the last third of the season, I felt a real part of the place. There was a real tight feeling in the group about who we were. First of all we were all a part of the project, we were all smokejumpers. And there was sort of a... there wasn't a barrier between us and the vets, but there was kind of a line there. We deferred to them a lot and we respected them, even though many of them were first year jumpers. There was a couple of them that got into it late for some reason, and some had been in it for five or six years. That... the group of us, the beginning college age people, we deferred quite a bit to them.

I admired the vets and I could, sort of see, a much greater depth of understanding of the whole... of the world, you know. We were pretty naive 19 and 20 year olds.

JN Were they a little older?

Yeah. Well, one of my buddies, a guy named Peterson, was 20... he was 28. I think there was a cut-off of age 28 in those days. He was, I think, 28. He'd been to Iwo Jima. He'd been a flame-thrower operator and he had stories that would, you know, just shake you up completely.

And so... well, anyways, we'd hang around with them a lot. Go out drinking. Mostly on... Woody Street was the place that we hung out pretty heavily. There were three bars in a row there that were, I thought, really tough bars. I guess they probably were... The Sunshine, and the Garden City, and the Cowboy were the three in a row there. You could always find a jumper there and get a ride back if they had cars. Or you could always hang out there until someone stopped in that had a car and get a lift back to the loft, or hitchhike as well.
I guess the main thing was that there was this, I think, a real "coming of age" for me. And a number of us at that time. When I went back in September to continue school and be with my family, and all, I couldn't begin to communicate what had happened, you know. It just... I used to get annoyed they didn't... wouldn't listen to my stories very long. And I had changed a lot. I had a steady girl when I was out here, and, you know, I just... I just couldn't communicate. There was a big gulf between...

In fact, going back... I worked to the very last moment, till a Friday. I had to start school on a Monday in Massachusetts. I used up some money and bought an airplane ticket and flew back. It took two days to get from Missoula to Boston. You had to fly to Helena and wait. And then, I got a flight out of Helena to Chicago, which was slow-prop plane. And it was a six hour wait through... like, from midnight till 6 a.m., in Chicago. Then in the morning you got a flight out of Chicago to Boston. You know, it was a long... well, I got inside the... [it was] noon, like, in Boston, leaving here Friday in the afternoon. But, in the airplane I was all charged up, and I was sitting with some older guy in the airplane. And I said, "I just finished a season smokejumping." And he says, "Oh?" He'd come in from Seattle, jumping across the country. And I said, "Yeah, boy it was really exciting." He said, "Oh? Yeah?" He said, "Well what do you do?" And I started explaining these neat jumps and he hardly responded to it. He wanted to read his newspaper, he didn't give a shit about who you were. Still, I had just turned 20 that summer and I was still excited about this whole thing. I was a new person. I was growing up and all that. He didn't even ask... he didn't even want to... I had to ask the question and answer it for him. So I gave up on him.

And then I found out my family, as long as I was safe, didn't have any broken limbs, you know, that was it. I had saved my money pretty well and, "Okay, now you can settle down and go back to college and be a nice college student." And my friends, I'd go visit my friends back there who were soda jerks or worked as lifeguards at the local beach, and I'd say, "Let me tell you about this woman I met. Let me tell you about going out here." They didn't give a shit. "Oh, that's interesting." And they'd talk about their clam bake and what they did with their hot rod car that summer. I could feel this gulf just widening and widening between myself and that circle of friends.

Even back in college among foresters that I thought would be interested in this as a part of Forestry, they didn't care. The Prof. had me give a fifteen minute talk on smokejumping in a course in Forest Protection, and he said, "Why don't you write a paper on that. That'll be your project for the thing." It came back with a... I think he gave me an A-. No comments on it. And, pretty much they just... "That's something that they do out west and it's a good... a newer and good way of fire suppression. It's efficient." And that was it! You know, I'm all charged up about, "Hey, this is something that'll change your life!" You know. "You can become a man. You can do it in ways that are going to really... be lasting!" No one much gave a damn about it, you know. It was pretty... I finally just gave up on it, "Ah,
the hell with them." And lived with my memories all that school year.

Then as soon as June came the next summer, right back out here again. That's when the disillusionment set in. The second... the next two years, '54 and '55 were very wet seasons and we were on project work for 6-8 weeks. I didn't do any fire jumps the second year because in August, when it was so wet and looked so improbable, I left with this same fellow, John Brothers, who we'd gone to the rodeo with... I'd gone to the rodeo with. He and I went to Mexico and lived it up a little bit and then went back East.

JN In between... in between seasons, or...?

DH Basically, we quit in mid-August when things looked pretty bad as far as fires go. We had been painting buildings and doing plumbing down here on Kelly Creek, in the Clearwater. We felt it was kind of below us, you know. We're supposed to be jumpers, you know. We're not supposed to be painting these stupid green buildings. So we quit early. Then I thought, "Well, I'll go give it one more try, see what's going on."

By the third year, '55, things had really shifted. A lot of these characters that I really emulated and wanted to be with, weren't here. They never came back. A lot of them were beyond the 28 year old age break-off, so they couldn't come back.

And Max, even Max... no not Max Elliot. It's Allen, but it's Max's brother, the trainer. He broke his back in '55. He hit... he came down and he hit a tree, a solitary tree while.... There was a practice, it was during training with the early group that we used to go to New Mexico. It was during a training jump and he hit the side of a tree, and his chute collapsed. So he tumbled down through the tree and hit the ground.

You probably know this, the worst thing you can do is to try and aim for a solitary tree to hang up in for a soft landing. Because if you hit the tree with your body, your chute [which] is 30-40 feet above you, is gonna just collapse. And it may capture the tree and you may fall a bit and hang up. Or more likely, if you hit the tree with your feet, you know, the chute will collapse, and you'll fall and hit the damn ground, and, you know, break your back. And there he was, laying out in the hospital bed at, you know, St. Pat's there.

JN Did you go see him?

DH Oh yeah. Brothers.... Wait a minute. He broke his back the second year, I think. Yeah, the second year. Yeah, because I went to see him with my buddy, John Brothers. He was laying out there and he was in a lot of agony. It happened, like, the week before. He was in bad shape then. I never found out what happened to him, but there was, sort of like, another bubble burst. You know, the trainers, these heroes can get wiped out. That was real sobering.

Particularly because that... it was the beginning of the week that we had our refresher training, which included two jumps at the end of the week. And one of those jumps I, you know, I
did the same damn thing. I came into a few trees, you know. I hit the sides and kind of tumbled down through the branches. My chute did hang up, so I didn't hit the ground, but....

JN But it was close to...?

DH But it was close to that same scenario, and from then on I was a lot more wary. In fact, we were warned about single trees. I remember watching a couple guys in training jumps. Whenever they were coming over a single tree, they'd grab those damn risers, and pull their legs up in the air, you know. Because they want to miss the tree. If your legs just ticked it, if you slowed up at all, that chute would start to lose air and then you'd fall through the trees. [If] the chute had lost enough to tumble down and hit the ground, then you'd be down through the branches and splat on the ground. But I remember guys slipping to the side and raising their hand and yelling, "Son of a bitch, I'm gonna miss this tree!"

Most of the sights that they picked for all the training jumps were... they didn't have some of those bad obstacles. But fire jumps is something you can't pick them as clearly. You gotta miss some of those things.

JN Why would a single solitary tree tend to collapse your chute more than if you landed in a stand?

DH It's because the jumper, the jumper's body hits the tree first. Now, going into a stand of trees is... as you fall down between the trees, the branches are slowing you up, and all, and there are enough trees around so that the canopy is gonna catch two or three trees, usually. An even aged dense stand, about 50 - 60 feet high, is probably the ideal thing to go into, because you're only about 8 or 10 feet from the ground when you finally stop. And your chute is hung up on a whole bunch of trees. It's a bitch to get your chute out, but it's one of the softest landings. You just slow up there and that's it.

But on a single tree.... Imagine a big field with a single tree out there. If you could come in low and let your chute hit the side of the tree, your chute would tend to fall into the tree and it wouldn't be too bad. But that could be bad too. Because if you hit the side of the tree, you can get branches poking into you if... and you can get a bad, broken stub of big pine, you know, like, it could go right through. So those were to be avoided. It was hitting the top of the tree that's so bad. If you come in, if you can't avoid the tree for some reason, if your body hits into the top of the tree, you land in the crown, literally.

JN And then while you're slowed down, the chute automatically loses...?

DH Exactly! There's nothing... there's no pressure underneath to keep the chute pulling down, and keep it expanding. It collapsed pretty quickly. And those older chutes, that Derry chute, seemed to collapse pretty quickly and then you start
falling. If you can... if you can grab the damn tree, you'd be all right probably. But mostly you start tumbling through the tree. Then when you hit the ground, it's pretty bad... or can be bad.

JN And there's not enough, usually there's not enough limbs on the top to grab the chute to keep you from...?

DH Well, right. The chute will miss the tree. It'll... if your coming in like this....

JN On an angle...?

DH The chute's... Yeah! The chute's... I forget, 20...? Well, it's 30 some feet above you, and it's gonna keep going ahead without... and it'll just collapse, and just sort of, fall over like a bag.

Now, there's... there's all kinds of permutations. I mean, you might be falling down one side of the tree and a few of your... your shroud lines can catch in the branches and you might stop. Or, if you hit the top and stop a bit and start, and you fall to the other side of the tree and the chute's being carried down this way, you'll just tumble down through those branches. If you can fall on the other side, you know, you might get hung up. You might get caught. So, it's... it's a nasty.... I forget if we had any term for that, but it's a nasty situation to be in.

JN So the reality of you being vulnerable came through then.

DH Yeah. That's a good point, yeah. And everyone who had done it for quite a few years had... usually, one or two close... either close calls or actual broken limbs. And, you know, broken bones were not too common. We had... that first season we had two to three training accidents. Broken ankle, I think a broken arm, and a couple of washouts of people who, I'm not sure why, but they just didn't do very well.

During the season we had... I can't remember the statistics. They had a couple of incidences, but they... it wasn't too bad a season. There were some minor bang-ups, but nothing... there were no deaths, of course. We had a plane crash. A Ford Trimotor crashed up on the Flathead and... but no one was killed in that. The plane was....

JN Everybody got out?

DH Yeah! Yeah. It crashed, I believe, on take-off, and it went to turn and lost.... Either lost power or lost lift, or something, and crashed in the timber.

I talked to one of the guys, I forget his name now, who was on it, and he said he could.... The Ford Trimotor has a big engine hanging under the wings. Two of them and the front engine. And it had these god-awful metal struts that hold.... The wheel, the engine are together, hooked to the wing and to the fuselage. And he could... when they went in, he could see the engine peel back, and these great big struts came piercing
through the body of the airplane. Missed everybody! They sort of ran through it.

That was... When I talked to him, either late that summer or the next summer, that was... his last image was these great big struts poking through the walls of the airplane as the wing and the engine were peeled back upon crashing. There were, I guess, some torn ribs and stuff. There was a rescue jump to get up there as soon as possible to see what the hell the situation was.

But that vulnerability came through. And during... building up to training, you think you're king of the heap. You're in reasonably good shape. But being in physical, you know, peak physical condition, wasn't a real part of it. There was a lot of people smoked and we drank too much. Not during training, but afterwards. And there was... Just any 19, 21 year old age bracket, you know, you're pushing your limits at every stage.

But we weren't into jogging, we weren't into running on the off-hours, and calisthenics were down-played. We had one guy who'd get out there and it was always a big joke. We'd do a few, maybe 5 minutes... and he would hardly move. We'd just pop around and he'd yell at us a bit, with no meaning to it. We were just running on reserve power.

I had worked out all that spring before I came out and I lifted weights back in college, and I ran on my reserve most of the summer. And then we were... you're tough enough at age... at that age to hack a lot of what was going on.

JN That makes me wonder what it was like, the basic training, when you got to Nine Mile?

DH Yeah, it was very well regimented. I thought it was efficient. Adequate for what we needed to do, and I don't think it was over... overly developed. We... you were... there were 75 of us that were in the new-man crew that year. We were split in half. You were in the morning half or the afternoon half. Each half was split into crews of, I don't know, 6 or 8 people, and we did all of the stuff which, I suppose, is done now.

You'd have woods training part... half of the day for the first couple of weeks. Cutting fire lines, using a chain saw, climbing trees with... with spurs, and using a shovel and pulaski, and all that. Then use the other half of the day and [we] would alternate, and [we] had classroom training. First aid, fire reports, and forms to fill out. How do do those things... map work, map reading and all that.

JN Is that the classroom work?

DH Yeah, that would be the classroom... what we would call the classroom stuff. All practically oriented, compass, and so forth. Then we did some rescue practice. We put a guy in a stretcher, those one wheel stretchers, and run them around the woods a bit. Up and down the trails.

The physical conditioning went along with... with our practical stuff. When you're on a... cutting a fake fire line for
a half mile through the woods, you know, that can get you into
condition as well as learning how to do a fire line.

And then later on... let's see. Oh, two weeks of that and
the last two weeks we had, basically, our jumps in the morning,
and then you got classroom or some more woods work in the
afternoon. It was seven jumps you went through, scared out there.
That's when it got real scary. Nobody... everybody got real
quiet that time. The braggarts started shutting up, you know.
They knew the moment of truth was coming. You have to jump out of
that damn airplane.

And I remember when they put the jump list up for the first
jump for the new people. It was like reading the obituaries. You
know, people walked over... and... and, all we talked about was
the practical subject. "What stick are you on? What plane you
got?" You know. Geez! You know, it was... it got real scary
then.

JN You didn't talk about your fears at all?

DH Oh, no! No. You... it was macho city all the way! Some
people might have, but I... I would never.... I never said a
thing about my feelings. Feelings.... I don't know how it is
today, but some of this California, touchy, feely stuff that
floats around, and all that, you know. "How are you feeling? How
do you feel about this, that, and the other?" I don't remember
any of that, you know. You felt it in your gut. You just felt
this knock down there, and geez! I mean....

I was out of a Ford. I think I was either... I think I was
eighth man on the list so, I was the first one in the Ford and I
was the last one to jump. We jumped two at a time. So I had to
sit there for four passes over the jump spot.

JN While four other people got out?

DH Yeah. They jumped two, and then two, and then two, and
then the last two. And I don't know how they arranged to jump,
whether it was alphabetical or what, but I was... I was probably
just scared shitless. And I.... and part of the fear is that...
that the jump simulation in those days, was... was nil. I came
out and looked at these jump towers here. I mean, that's...
that's sophisticated. That probably simulates the jump as close
as you'll ever come to the real thing.

JN What they have at the base now?

DH What they have at the base in Missoula now. Now ours were
absolutely primitive. We had a 2X4 platform, maybe four feet
high. We jumped off it and did a roll into some sawdust. That
was where you practiced your ground roll. I don't know how it's
done now, with these newer chutes, but our process was just, as
soon as you hit the ground you did a half turn and rolled over
your shoulder, and did a flip on the ground. It took quite a bit
of practice to do that. We used to go out in the evenings and
practice that stupid roll.

It's interesting because a lot of the ex-paratroopers
couldn't do it. They had been taught to do some other kind of roll, and they couldn't break the habit. One of them was out there, big burly guy, and he had dozens of jumps in the military. He could not do this smokejumper roll! He finally got it down, but he'd drop and... we didn't know anything else because we were taught that first off so it was easier for us.

And then the jump tower itself was a straight drop. You jump with a... I think it was a nylon rope. It could even have been hemp, and you just... you drop straight down and got a jolt at the end. You were supposed to go out with your arms folded, and when the jolt hit, raise up and grab the risers like it's going to be every time you jump. That's really all we had, was a primitive log jump tower that was built in the early... middle... probably early '40's, which we were still using.

And the rope... a guy just pulled the rope up, and there was no spring, and there was no... when the slack went out of the rope, you stopped, you know. It was this thud. And they kept telling us, you know, "You'll drop at so many feet per minute out of the plane. We had figured this out with this rope. And the opening... the yank on the jump tower is the same as the opening shock of the chute." And everything was supposedly the same.

JN Was that true?

DH NO! It was absolutely different, you know. When you went out of that plane, it was day and night different between that! And that's... people keep asking me about the first time you jump. And that to me was total chaos. It's like people coming out of battle. They don't remember a damn thing about it, you know. Except that it was noisy, maybe. And sometimes the smells. People in the military told me about that.

But, I have a hard time remembering the details of that first jump. I know it was confused... confusing. I know I felt like I was going to puke the whole time. To go around and around that damn jump spot for... well, three times around, the fourth time, I jumped... was just gut-wrenching. I just felt like I was going to lose it and it was just, you know, terrible.

And the... that was the first time... I hadn't... I had never been in an airplane. No. I had been up for, like, a $2 ride at a fair before I got into that airplane to go and make a jump. That was my only experience. I'd never ridden in a commercial plane. A lot of them hadn't. A lot of us hadn't, and we got into... I got into a Ford Trimotor. It was the second plane I'd been in in my life and, as I was telling friends, I had been up... I had made, like, seven or eight flights before I ever landed in an airplane. Other than my first fly... fly around for 10 minutes at a fair.

And so... I didn't know what it was like to land in an airplane, you know. I had forgotten that. Every time I went up, they threw me out the damn door, you know. [laughs] That was about it.

So, it was the confusion and trying to remember all your stuff and your chute. And then you're all... you know, hot July day in that canvas suit, and all that. And just worrying... just worried stiff about it. I used to say prayers in those
days. You know, I just... I didn't know what's going to happen. And then pretty soon you're up in the door and the air is going by, and that stinking exhaust is coming out. The plane is shaking and positioning into place, you know. And the guy whaps the first guy on the shoulder and he goes, I was second, you know. And out I went. And boy, I just... and I got...

I think the first time I got twisted around and it opened. I turned around and finally I was clear and could come in. I felt great when the chute was open. I felt even better when I was on the ground.

JN So it was just up to the point that you'd opened that was...?

DH That... you know, that was really just confusion and smells and noise, and attempted humor by guys on the plane. The second jump was still pretty much the same, but my experience was, by about the third or fourth jump, you knew all of the feelings of a jump. You knew the pressure, the smells, the noises, and the smell of other peoples' breath in the plane. You knew all of this stuff and it all came together as just, totally frightening. You knew what it was like to feel the real opening shock, not off the tower.

And then, of course, in between everybody analyzes their... what they think is their own conception of their jump. Some guys had inversions. Some had line-overs the first time. Some people missed the step. Some people landed bad. So everyone tells you all of these permutations of what can go wrong and your head is full of all of the things that can ever go wrong with the jump.

JN People... people talk about this in classwork or just among themselves, or what?

DH At dinner, bedtime, you know. [laughs] Walking around the compound out at Nine Mile. They just... that was the biggest thing that had happened to you in the last day or two, you know. You made this damn jump. And so we just would analyze... we just analyzed our jump. "How was your jump?" That was the conversation opener.

So, the point I want to make is, by the third or fourth jump, I don't remember which, you're built up to anticipate all of these damn things. And that was my absolute worst jump. In fact, when I went out, and I have to look it up. I think... I don't know if it was a Travelaire or Ford. I counted... one, two, three, four. Yeah. The fourth jump was out of a Travelaire. Small plane. It held four jumpers at a time.

On my fifth jump here they've got two bars next to it. Maybe I screwed up on it. But, the fourth one was... either the third or the fourth. When I went out the door, I missed the step completely. You're supposed to put your foot in the step that sticks out there on both those planes. The C-47, you just ran out the door. Three at a time. You just ran into space. But the Ford and the Travelaire, you're supposed to... one heel hits the step and then you step over that. And I missed the step, tumbled, because that makes you tumble. I tumbled, and as the
chute was opening, I went through my risers. So I was backwards in the chute and then I turned a bit. By the time the chute fully opened, I was not only twisted, I was backwards. I was reversed. And....

JN  Reversed, facing...? Reversed in what terms?

DH  With the chute and the tails, they enable you to travel in one direction. You go ahead... you're sort of jet propelled. And if you turn over in there, you're facing the opposite direction of which the chute is moving, you know. You're a 180 degrees off. Now, we... we plan for that.

I don't know whether the planes and the prop wash, and stuff, produced all these problems. I don't know whether they have these problems today as much. I just don't know. I don't expect they know that. But anyways, by that fourth, third or fourth jump. By the time I was open, I realized I was facing in one direction, I was going in this direction, 180 degrees off. And I was... and for a couple of seconds I spun around because my... my risers were twisted, which means you just unwind.

JN  Like on a swing set, huh?

DH  Yeah, same as a swing. And once you unwound... and I reached up to get a hold of my risers. And then I realized when I looked at the ground, that the ground was going away from me. I'm going down this way. So that... what they had taught us, which was easy enough is, you reach up and reverse your hands, and pull on the risers and do a 180 degree turn. Turn yourself around. Then you're looking in the same direction which you're going. It's a bitch to steer because you can't get a hold of those... those outer shroud lines as well, to steer. I think then, left is right and right is left. But anyway, it was just a madhouse. I had only 30 or 40 seconds before I'd be on the ground anyway.

[END OF SIDE A]

[SIDE B]

DH  ...fear and everything else wrapped up with fear. Anxiety and all that. And then, from then on you had... I had experienced enough twists and all that, so that, the last three training jumps... two or three, whatever it was, went smoother. I felt calmer and everything was a lot better.

But I think that's... other jumpers I've talked to have expressed the same thing. That you go through... at least from our... because of our primitive training devices, you'd go through this getting to know the jump personally. And then, once you know the feel the blast and the sucking of air and the noise, and all that... that's part of it, you know. Then you can get easier with the jump... with jumping.

JN  Now you were saying that the smells especially...?
DH The exhaust!

JN When the door was open? As soon as the door was open? Or when you get out?

DH Of the plane? Oh, there was no door! We... the doors are off the Travelaire and off the Ford. The C-47 had the door off. That's a DC-2 or DC-3? DC-3. OK. But the Douglas had an actual door and then a cargo door, so when both of those were open... it was like a barn open on the side. We flew it... the cargo door was shut and the regular passenger-type door was off. Off the hinges, I mean. The hinges were taped so that you wouldn't hook your static line on and rip it. And the Travelaire had... I never... I never ever flew in it anywhere, coming back from fires, that [it] ever had a door on it. And the Ford never had a door. [It] had a big oval opening.

And so they, you know, all the... when they started those engines, that exhaust just would be sucked.... It's like driving a station wagon now with your tailgate up, you know. You drive it and it sucks all that crap in. Most of the windows were out. Some of them slid and were permanently slid open on the Ford, in particular, because the spotter had to hang out the window in front of the doorway. So it wasn't anything like, we sit in a nice quiet cabin and then at the last minute, you know, "Whoooooo". The door goes up and you get in line and jump out.

No, I mean it was pretty damn... well, we didn't think it was primitive, but by today's standards it would be considered primitive. And when those engines... they had centrifugal starters. There was this [high wine and a pop], and then the engine would catch. When... the starter would spin, and when it got spinning fast enough it would somehow cut in to the... these big rotary engines and kick one in. And then the other one, and then the nose engine. The pilot would be up front in the Ford, which had three engines, priming those engines.

And a lot of times... I remember on one flight we were waiting, the controls leaked! There would be gasoline leaking out in the cockpit. It would drip out of the... of the prime handle on the floor, run down the floor and run out the door. And it would just evaporate in there and just smell.

JN Come... it'd run right...?

DH Right through. Because the plane... it was... it was a tail dragger. The plane... the... a couple of trickles of gas would dribble down along the floor and just run out the door, sort of.

There were no seats in them. You sat on the gear and held onto the wall. Some of the paneling was, kind of, coming loose, you know. I guess... mechanically they were okay, but they... they were not.... there were only a pilot and a co-pilot. There was no co-pilot. Just the pilot and the spotter up front, you know. So, God knows what happened if the pilot ever had a heart attack or blacked out, or anything. You'd be down in the timber in no time. But.... Yeah, it was....

That, and you can't prepare for that. You can't sit in a... suppose we could of sat in a mock-up on the ground and have them
pump car exhaust into you to experience what it's like, but.... And people have come out of battle, they said they didn't realize how noisy battles were. They didn't realize how gun powder smells, and... and you may notice this yourself. Often, in going back to an old house you've lived in or... or some place you've worked. Every time I get out West, from the East, the smell of the trees brings back all these memories. And even when I get... I'm a pilot now, private pilot. When I fly now and I get a whiff of exhaust, I... my... I go right back to smokejumping days.

Because my experience with it... with airplanes for the first time was: they were noisy; tinny; rattly; no windows; no door; and they stunk! Guys got sick regularly. We had these quart-size ice... cardboard ice cream containers that we puked in. Puke bags. We didn't have any bags then.

And going to fires was usually worse than fire jumps... worse than practice... training jumps, because you were getting bumped around there. A number of days, we went out on one or two dry runs. We couldn't... the wind was too furious. We couldn't get close enough, or currents were furious. And we'd come back and land, and my head... I'd have a headache. My guts... I'd be feeling sick inside and then, a couple hours later if they thought conditions were better, they'd pile you in the plane again. You'd fly back to that same place and maybe you'd jump, maybe you didn't.

Those dry runs, usually... I often got sick on them and usually when one guy got sick, the smell of vomit inside the airplane, everybody got sick. And some guys could hold off and some guys would chew snoose, snuff a lot. Some guys would try it for the first time on the plane and that would make them sick. Oh, gee, it was... I think back, you know. God, I didn't, you know.... Maybe you have to go through that as part of the 'rights of passage' stuff, but, you know. If I tried that today, I'd probably have a coronary, you know. It'd just kill me. It's just brutal treatment of... of yourself. Not so much your muscles, but just your guts and all.

My first fire jump... it came up in early afternoon and for some reason I'd missed lunch that day. There used to be a little store out at Hale Field. I was getting my gear together and I gave a quarter to one of my buddies. That's when you could buy nickel candy bars. I said, "Go get me some candy." Came back with five candy bars and I stuffed one or two down. Then I got on the plane and took off for the... down the Bitterroot. Martin Creek fire. I'll never forget it. I stuffed in the rest of the candy bars as we were flying out of town, you know. And oh, God, my guts just went [whoooom]. I had this stomach ache I couldn't believe. And it dawned on me, "This is your first fire jump, buddy." [laughs] You know. And oh, I just felt, just absolutely horrible. That was a dry run. We came back and I felt terrible. Then, later in the day, we went out again and finally jumped on it. It was really something.

JN I wonder... if you're in the plane and people are getting sick like that... [did] that happen quite often that people would get sick?
DH Quite... Yeah. Fair amount, yeah.

JN Everybody jump regardless? Even if they got sick?

DH Oh yeah, easy. By that... in the plane you have, at least, you have your face mask up and you can get a container. We always waited to the last minute because, you didn't want to admit that you were sick, you know. And, you know, you'd go tap it up, put it out the door or the window, or put it in the plane. But, yeah. Then, even though you were doing... even doing the dry heaves, some people, you know, we used.... I don't remember anyone who didn't jump because they were severely sick. There might have been cases like that. We always jumped.

The worse one I ever had was my last year out here. I got sick right at the door when my face mask was down. So I got sick. And we had narrow mesh face mask with... with a piece of old fashioned foam rubber with cloth on it, for a chin protector inside there. Often it would slip up to the side, it might even cover one eye. A pain in the butt, that thing was. But it kept your chin from hitting the crossbar. But I got sick right then. Right in the doorway, you know. Waiting to go [jump]... in the Ford. And so my face mask was full of vomit, you know. It was down in my beard. Oh, it was just terrible.

Out I went, had a half-assed jump and landed. When I landed, I felt so bad, I volunteered... it was about an eight-man fire, I volunteered immediately to be the cook. I said, "I'll set up the camp here. I'll gather all the gear together, I'll cook." I went to the C-Rations, popped them open and looked for a can of fruit in there. Opened a can of pears, or something. Put down a whole can of pears and it was pretty soothing, you know, that sugary stuff. And so they said, "Okay, you can be... I wasn't... even though I was a third year jumper, I wasn't a... I wasn't an overhead. All the guy... whoever was our overhead said, "Okay, you can take care of the camp." "Oh, thank God!"

So I got the gear together and got the camp area set up. We got... just got a place together and then I think I got out.... That was late in the afternoon, so I got off fire duty until the next morning and then I started working on the line. But I just felt...

JN Really needed that?

DH Oh. God, yeah!

JN Did the older veterans, did they still get sick?

DH I think some did, I don't have any... I was so concerned about myself and doing it right. You kind of ignore who you're with and not till you're on the ground are you aware of who you are going to spend the next few days with on your fire. I don't know whether some of them were better off or not. There was still enough newness to smokejumping. This isn't like a mass exodus from a big C-47 in the military. This was a few people in small planes, usually going to a fire, and bumping around. You
weren't flying over a big drop area and there weren't thousands of people jumping. It was a precision kind of work and I... I think that had a different slant to it, compared to the military drop.

JN Just wondering if it... if it didn't get to be a relief if you had all this exhaust...?

DH Oh, yeah! Yeah! Get me out of there. That was... that was... get out and get on the ground, yeah. There were some jumps that were pretty pleasant. I remember a couple in the... in the C-47. They were big, and it was a smoother riding plane. It was a lot quieter. Going to fire, most of the time, I get... after the training, looking forward to the jumps... jumping out. We used to say nasty things to each other, like, "You're gonna have a streamer." Or, "You're gonna have a line over." Or, "This is your last jump." Things like that. So, you know, we could joke about it, real gallows humor.

JN Did very many people wash out?

DH Not too many out of our 75. I remember two... maybe two or three, actually washed out because they couldn't hack training, or whatever. One guy broke an ankle and had it in a cast. He was kept on as a dispatcher. He was a guy named McGovern from Brooklyn. He got such crap from being from Brooklyn. We used to say to him, "What kind of tree is it that you had in Brooklyn there?" You know, there was a book out called, "A Tree Grows in Brooklyn." We were convinced there was only one tree in Brooklyn. He didn't know what the hell a forest was all about, but he was a good-natured guy. He was actually in Forestry School back there. He broke an ankle.

And there were... maybe another injury or two, but I would guess sixty of us... sixty-five maybe, finished training. Made it through the bulk of the season. The one guy who washed out was pretty heavy, actually overweight. He was always last in the obstacle course, last on the little run through the woods. They got him a... nobody was sent back in disgrace. They got them jobs around so they could maintain face. He worked up north, or something. Kootenai, I think, for the rest of the season. I think that was his summer.

But, at that time, there was a... there were a lack of people to fill positions. The '50's... the early '50's, you see.... In the Depression years, when the population went down... I was born in '33, there were just fewer of us. So, by the time we were 20, which is the early '50's, we had the pick of our jobs. There were fewer of us in the population, and so I... each summer I could have had three, four, or five, Forestry-related and good Forestry jobs. I mean, timber cruising... stuff that required you'd have some training. Not just brush piling or working as a groundpounder on a fire. But I chose each year to come back to smokejumping. It just, it had that... its own excitement. Plus, if you had a project, it'd probably be a pretty good one. I cruised some timber and learned some good skills about building and plumbing and things like that.
JN So the project work was valuable then?

DH Yeah, yeah. I found that it was. We bitched about it at the time, but it was valuable. For example, I built, with three other guys, two cabins that are still standing down in the Selway-Bitterroot in the Wilderness Area at Shearer. While we'd rather have been in Missoula drinking it up, and seeing the women, and jumping and having that heroic stuff. I appreciate it now that the skills that we learned in building these two log cabins, including making shakes for the roof, were invaluable.

JN Did you split cedar shakes?

DH Yeah, split shakes and did all that, and at that... you still have to fly into Shearer, or hike in. They... we had horses in there. And you went out and got cedar, brought it in, cut it up, and used a dibble and a fro to pop the shakes off of it. I remember standing around day after day, we had a little assembly line there, popping shakes off. Discussing everything, you know. Women, sex, politics, and everything else. [We were] all college graduates at that time, by '55. It was, like, intellectual discussion in the middle of the damn woods, you know, while we were popping off shakes there. Really very relaxing.

JN Can you remember what would you talk about?

DH Oh! Well, let's see. Mostly it was making it economically. Because those middle '50's was... were a time when almost unlimited growth was anticipated. Those were... at least on the surface, you know, they were supposed real good times. A lot of naivete, too. We talked about getting a high paying job and where the high paying jobs would be. We talked about how good our government was, and glad we had more bombs than the Russians at that time. Glad we were the peacekeepers. And most people thought that... well, the Rosenbergs, a couple years before, were electrocuted for giving away a ton of secrets. We thought that was the government's duty to do that. A lot of... a lot of patriotism.

And the time... it was a time when there were so few of us in that 19 to 21 age group... 22, in there. That we had the pick of our jobs. I've been looking back in old magazines of that period and it talks about that same thing. If you graduated from college up through '57 or '58, you had your pick of what you wanted to do. Engineer? Hell, here's ten engineering jobs there. Forester, or even teachers! All kind of teaching positions around.

JN So it was a bright outlook, personally...?

DH Oh yeah! Really bright.

JN What about... how did the Cold War affect you?
DH Well, not too bad in there, because see, we had had the Armistice and truce, and end of the Korean War in the summer of '53. So the next couple of years, even though we were getting into Viet Nam right then... You know, we were backing the French and giving them supplies. There was... there was tremendous patriotism and idealism, all during that latter phase of the fifties. The Cold War was just seen as, almost our duty. We were going to keep the world free. Be the peacekeeper.

JN There wasn't a lot of fears at that time? People didn't...?

DH There was... they were beginning to wane, I believe. See, McCarthyism was waning away. I don't know when he was, sort of, cut-off. But, McCarthyism was kind of waning down. People were getting fed up with that. That the Communist threat wasn't what he had portrayed it to be. We had so much wealth in the country, that we could afford to support NATO and be the peacekeepers. And we thought how we ought to be able to go in and, maybe, help the French out in Viet Nam and, you know. Get that thing. The phrase that I came across in a recent LIFE magazine was that, "We can see the light at the end of the tunnel."

It was just before the Kennedy years of Camelot. It was, sort of the end of the real naivete. Because, what I'm finding out now in looking at the news of the day is that, just below the surface of that, was... were all of the well-developed problems that blew up in the '60's. When got into Viet Nam in a big way, and when we got into nuclear arms in a big way. Kennedy was assassinated and Johnson became the hawk that he really came out to be. Those are... those are all just below the surface.

I had a good buddy here, I hope he comes to the reunion. A guy named Peterson. I can't remember his first name, but he was a last year jumper. He was 28 when I was 19. And he was a journalist, in journalism school. World War II vet from Missouri. And he would always prick this bubble, you know. We would be optimistic, even in '53, and he would always have these zingers that he'd drop in, you know.

JN Like?

DH Like, "I'll see you bastards in four or five years in Viet Nam." "What do you mean, the French have got their little battle, it's not our problem." And I hardly even knew about Viet Nam, it's just in Asia. But he had enough experience that way, you know, because being older, to be able to see that, and to cut through... his training, in the direction of journalism, he was looking for depth.

We'd go out on the town and I just let him talk. I couldn't believe what he was... I couldn't under... I couldn't relate to the depth of understanding that he really had. He was a real politician. He had that kind of political savvy about him, so.... Yet, he had a raucous laughter and he was a... was a.... I'd really like to meet him. Man! He wrote me a letter in the fall of '53 that was so good that I never answered it. I couldn't respond. He told me some stories about some women situations he had, about some things that were going on, and he was always into
some kind of craziness.

Out here, he was... I don't know what he was into out here. He had a lot of women hanging around him. Just a big tall guy, not heavy, strong and had a great laugh. And in the basement of the Ruby Hotel, Ruby... downtown, he used to store a little jar of dry cleaning fluid to keep his clothes clean. When he went into town in a truck or something, or he spilled something on himself, he'd pop into the basement of the Ruby. And up on the flush tank he'd have this little cleaner. He'd take it down, he'd clean off a spot, you know, and let it dry, and go back out.

And if you go into buy a tube of toothpaste with him, he'd... the clerk would come over. If it was a woman, and he'd pay for it and he'd say, "What time do you finish work?" And she'd say.... You know, I... I didn't know how to deal with women, you know. I had a steady girlfriend that summer. And, you know, she'd be just taken aback. And he'd say, "Eight o'clock, nine o'clock?" Drug store... works in the evenings. And she'd say, "I work till nine." "Well, I'll... fine, fine we'll go out and have a few drinks." You know. They sort of couldn't say no! You know. And then he'd say, "You better get lost for a few hours." You know, "I'll meet you at the... I'll meet you around midnight at the Sunshine. We'll get a ride back... get someone to give us a ride back to the loft."

JN So he was an old timer?

DH Oh, no! He was a first year jumper! Yeah. He'd been doing all kinds of funny things. He worked in the Forest Service all over the West here. In and out of college. He was finally trying to finish off this degree. But those are the guys that... that realized, probably from being in the war, that whatever's on the surface, whatever is going on there, is only a tiny bit of what's boiling up underneath.

And he could cut through that and get into, and talk about areas that us nineteen year olds... we didn't even.... We knew they, sort of, existed and some.... All it took was some Southerner, who was a real conservative type, to say, "Well, we need more men like McCarthy." And if Peterson heard that, you know, he'd start... he'd say, "What do you mean by that?" Pretty soon, you know, Peterson had the floor and he was laying this guy out like he was slaughtering a lamb, you know. Just demolished the arguments that... why we need people like McCarthy around. And I'd listen to that stuff and only vaguely relate to it. It was... it was just... it was too deep for....

In that same summer of '53: the Russians exploded their first atomic bomb; the Rosenbergs were executed; the Shah was kicked out of Iran, and then he came back in again; we stopped the Korean War, and then we started supporting in Viet Nam. That's all within a... like two month period. And these were... were minor headlines! It might make the headlines one day and then it was lost in the newspaper. But, Peterson always picked up on it. And this naivete that we had... we were gonna be the heroes of the West. We were the new cowboys out here, and we were gonna save the forest, and all this bullshit that... you know, people who [are] 19-20 have. He could see through it.
In midsummer I was on a fire with him somewhere, and I said, "Boy, I want to come back next year and the year after. And I might even marry Sally Hanson, from Missoula, a couple years down the line and live out in this town. I'm not gonna go back to Boston and live there." And he said, "I'm not coming back here." He said, "I never go back... I never go back to the same place. I know what it's like here. It's gonna be, maybe, the same next year, probably worse." And he says, "I've experienced smokejumping, I know what it's all about." I couldn't understand that he wouldn't come back. I was so enthralled with this... this job.

But his perspective of, you know... A decade older is all it took to realize and... plus his experience, what he had been through, put a whole different... different curve on things.

JN I'm interested in... OK, it was a "rite of passage" for you, and that implies that there's some real good growing changes out of it. What did you take from smokejumping then?

DH Oh... self-sufficiency. That's probably the big thing. And that being... I think that's... I guess.... In a nutshell, if you have to be sociological about it, I think self-sufficiency is the thing that parents want their kids to have, eventually. On your own. Get the hell out of the house. And by the end of that first summer, I... I could handle my money better. I could... just going into a restaurant ordering food, I didn't done... done that much, You know. Growing up... I ate in the dormitory, I ate in the cafeteria, you know, I didn't have to order stuff. Do my own laundry... well, I did that in college, but... finding a laundry place.

And then the bigger thing was having... there was this woman that... she was a nurse at the time. I met her at one of these nursing/smokejumper parties and we went out together the whole summer. And... learning to deal with a fairly serious relationship. That was... that was spectacular.

Then, having a demanding job, you know. A life, and a job with life and death in it. It's not like licking envelopes at a business office, or doing typing for somebody, or selling drinks at a soda fountain. You had... your equipment was... had to be maintained. Well not.... Well, yeah, maintained by yourself. If you had ripped... parts that were ripped or torn. And we had two sets of jump clothes, stuff. We had one... you... one on the fire with one and when you got back your equipment probably wasn't back because we were slow in those days. We had a second set back here that you put on the shelf for the next jump. So, you had to maintain two sets of equipment. But all of that was a part of it, a part of the self-sufficiency and...

JN You were responsible for your own life and death, then?

DH You really were. And there wasn't anyone telling you too much after.... Training was pretty regimented. After that, living at Fort Missoula, I lived out... slept on the porch outside. You know, you just had to watch out for every... everything. Being on... like, if you were on the jump list. You
had to be at the right place, you know. Be available in case there was a call, and if you weren't.... I don't know what they did, if they put you on the bottom of the list, or if you.... If they couldn't find you because you were goofing off, you know, they'd probably boot your ass out of there. It was... it was a serious job in terms of the fire, and all.

And the government! The interaction with the bureaucracy, you know. They... they weren't too flexible. They had their regime set up and you had to cow-tow the regime. It wasn't rigid, but you had to cow-tow to it, you know, pretty much.

So, by the time I left that... [at the] end of that summer, I felt... well, I couldn't articulate it then, but I knew something had happened. And I wanted to convey that, as I was talking earlier, to friends and family, even the guy in the airplane. He couldn't have cared less. To me, it was important. Living with men. Living, again, in a barrack situation. I had to deal with individual personalities, that was a real growing kind of thing.

I think that a sociologist could have a field day with the group there. It was all done without anyone ever saying what was happening, you know. No one was around analyzing the whole thing. It was like getting... going down a rapids, you know. You get, sort of, sucked in there boat and you get tossed around through it and come out the other end.

I remember standing in the Federal Building there, in that stone floor and tile wall. Pretty ominous... pretty massive building. Standing in there just quaking in my boots, waiting for the truck to come and pick us up the night before training. We... none of us... we all had little small talk, you know. "How you doing? Where are you from?" All leary about what was going to happen. It took a long time to get... when you get a little bit cocky about... as soon as someone got too cocky, usually something happened. Like on a jump, you know, they'd bugger up themselves a little bit.

And it was always like... it was something to... something to knock you down if you got a little too sure of yourself. The jump was a real leveler. I mean, no matter how many you did, each one was another... it was a beginning experience. It's not, like, if you do ten, the next fifty are gonna be simple. It's not like that at all. Each one is its own... own leveler.

JN Is it an equalizer, too?

DH In terms of...?

JN In terms of everybody on the crew. Did you feel, like, comraderie?

DH OH! Very, very definitely, yeah! I should have emphasized that. Overriding any personal feelings about blacks and religion and politics, the overriding behavior, yes, was to cooperate and get the job done. Once the job.... once the fire was contained, then, that's when it got kind of interesting. Spend a little more time watching it, working on your meals, and then you started getting to know people better.
But when your solitary on a line, just... grubbing the ditch. Then you get bumped to the next section. You move up and everybody grubs some more, the way we had that ditching being done, you're all alone, basically, all during the day. Until, you know... until the fire was under... was contained. And then as it quieted down, if you weren't replaced by a ground crew, you... I mean, you could start talking to people. And that's when you got to know individuals.

I... I do a lot of listening, and I did it then, too. Probably because I... I was pretty glib-talking fella. I was pretty... very shy person. I think I still am, kind of, shy in some respects. And my shyness meant I listened a lot to people. And my head was just spinning with beliefs that other people had about everything. Politics, and religion, and women, and everything else, and I was just... a lot came from the listening process. A lot of guys had neat experiences which they... might have a hard time talking about them. It came through in kind of a steady, but subtle... subtle way.

JN I don't quite understand that last part. A lot of... you need the experience yourself or you needed to listen...?

DH Well, I say, besides what I got from the actual experiences, I got a lot out of just listening.

JN Hearing how other people solved their...?

DH Yeah. Yeah. And seeing some of the Mormons reading their Book of Mormon. My thought was at night you go out and... you drink. I'd go out and find... see if Sally's off work. Go out with Peterson, and, you know.... and I went out. And I'd go by beds out at the Fort, and some of the Mormon people would be sitting there reading the Book of Mormon. And I thought... my whole life I'd never seen my father read the Bible! I'd never seen anyone that interested in their religion.

I was a Catholic, in those days and we just went on Sunday. We were pretty nominal about it. We just went on Sunday as a duty. We went to confession every so often, because the law was down there, and that was it. We didn't wear our religion as a... as a badge, you know. If there were T-shirts with slogans in those days, the Mormons might have worn... there might even be Mormon T-shirts around. I don't know what their symbol is, you know. But I was just amazed. I wasn't... I don't think I was judgmental. I was just "Wow!" and I just let it go at that. Maybe that's a part of growing up.

Well, I don't know... there was a real lack of judgment, of personally judging people, and that's what... it probably served us real well because we had a common goal of the job. That's... we were there to do the job, fight the fires. The idea that a fire could be let go, that fire is valuable from a forestry standpoint, was not even talked about. We had to knock out these enemies in the woods!

But... you know, a real lack of judgment. I don't remember any, any real arguments, any real fights or bickerings between people. I don't remember... could be my failing memory, that's
thirty years ago, you know. I can't remember. I remember just a real... real... real lack of bickering and a....

JN I wonder if part of that wouldn't come from a mutual respect? You knew that everybody had to go through the same thing.

DH Yeah. Yeah. It was clear. One of the things about the '80's and the '70's is that, all the norms are being tossed up for grabs. There... what do they call it? The normative process? How women and men are supposed to behave today. How you are supposed to dress. We had... we had norms then, and I don't think.... Wow! When you look back, you always think it was better. But, you know, women seemed to behave in a certain way, and the other women of the night.... I don't think prostitution was legal in Montana, but there were a lot of women hanging out in the bars and that was one type of woman. The nurses were another type of woman. And the people that were clerks, sales, waitresses, they were in their respectable category.

My girlfriend Sally, we discreetly did our physical thing. We kissed and hugged, and that kind of stuff, but that was it. It wasn't expected that you do anything more. And yet at the same time, myself and others, if women pick you up in bars and you talk to them... and go off. I lost my virginity that summer, you know. [laughs]

That was part of it, too. I came back home. I was no longer a virgin! I handled money, all these things and, you know, I... what I wanted to say was, "Hey folks, I'm a little... I've changed." And I was still... some people had gone from age nineteen to age twenty and my mother was still yacking at me for the same things. So... and it's not until you really move away, I guess, that you really break that. Even when she would come to visit, it was always... she was always your mother.

It takes time, because first the anger at being treated like a little boy, and then it takes time to respect whatever their... your parents impact, is on you as you get twenty, thirty, forty, and so forth. Yeah, that mutual respect for each other and the mutual direction of the job really, I think, solidified... solidified the group. We really stuck together.

JN One thing I want to ask you... want to get at is: OK, you went through this experience. You described it as riding through a rapids and coming out on the other side. You're exposed to all these different lifestyles and values, like, the Mormons reading the Bible, the Southerners, and everything. Somewhere from that, it seems like you... well, obviously you took something, and you went on and you made your own decisions from that point. You left smokejumping. What...? See, what I'm sort of getting at? What happened after you left? You made your decision to leave. Why did you leave and what happened then?

DH Yeah. Wasn't a conscious decision to leave for good in '55, and I could have worked in it permanently because I had a forestry background. I could have got on, probably, permanent staff, if I had chose to go into that. I think, for me, it had...
well, the two slow fire years meant that most of the time was kind of boring, at the time in comparison, we worked on projects, you know. I was also searching around for what I really wanted to do. Did I want to work in forestry for the rest of my days or not? And there was some kind of a change coming in there. I didn't see forestry as my field even though I had a degree in it.

I think... well, what really... what I was... what I've always been interested in, probably since I was in the womb, was in conservation. As a... earlier, [as] a kid in Boy Scouts, conservation got locked onto me in a big way. People can use the world in a way that doesn't destroy you. This is today environmentalism: "Are you an environmentalist?" "Yes, I'm a card carrying environmentalist." And I always saw us, and was taught by men way early, guys over to the CCC's when I was... who worked... [when] I was in Boy Scouts, as using the resources without abusing it. These guys... early, before even I was out here, they taught me a lot of wood skills. You know, hand tool stuff, and respect and understanding of nature that has never left me.

I went into Forestry with that in mind. It was the only conservation-oriented program in the... at that time. There was no such thing as environmental education or... even wildlife was looked down on as a program, but forestry was okay. But forestry, my experience with it, was all management. Forest management for timber and economics, and all that. I really didn't... wasn't interested in that direction. So, when I worked out here, I got to know the Western woods, and all that. I got a real appreciation for massive wilderness areas. I just loved being back in the boonies. I loved the walk outs, I just thrived in that. And I could see... in those times, I was... I appreciated there were few little roads that trickled back through the mountains, and that we could fly people in with planes or choppers and do our jobs and get out without riddling the damn hills with roads all over the place. I had the illusion that it might sort of stay that way. That the big thing would be air. You wouldn't have to put freeways and access roads and all this stuff into the woods. You look on a map today and, you know, it's... you can hardly find a spot, except if it's a protected wilderness area, where there's not a road through.

So conservation is what interested me and then [for] some reason I got hooked on the educational part of it. Of convincing others and Boy Scouts... I was in charge of a patrol of Boy Scouts. I always tried to teach the kids rather than just go camping. And that emerged out of me. I think part of smokejumping helped to get out of my shell a bit. To be a little more vocal about things and to be less... less shy. Once I got over that and I realized that I could probably do something besides be isolated in the woods in forestry, as a timber cruiser, or something.

That... [for] some reason teaching appealed to me. I thought, "Well, if I taught I could have my summers to do different projects." And then I could do something socially valuable, you see my Catholic guilt coming through, you know, [laughs] in the school year. And at the end of smokejumping, because of the draft situation, I went into the Navy. Then I went
on and I went into... into... got a certificate to teach high school and I taught biology for a number of years.

But the thing that I carried out of the smokejumping and earlier experiences with Boy Scouts in the woods was: This commitment to conservation defined in a way that it's not just preservation. It's proper use of things and that's what I think I took out of... proper... that we can use the resources wisely. And I, for some reason over the next few years, shifted into teaching to get that concept.

And then my summers. I always did something. Like I've done... I was a naturalist in Glacier for four years, not last year, but the previous four. I was a naturalist in Bryce Canyon, in Utah, for two seasons. I went into the Peace Corps to work in conservation in Botswana for two and a half years. I worked on the Grizzly Bear Project up in the Yukon with leading... Wildlife Service for two seasons and wrote some papers on it. Then I traveled and camped... a friend here and I went down the Yukon River in a raft, and just, you know, that... the lifestyle that I was exposed to, that first summer, just stayed with me. And it has been with me and...

I'm still in teaching, I teach at college level now, but I still, each summer, go off on major expeditions and trips. That's what... I never went into a business in the sense, I never tried to make a million bucks out of it. I never came out of it as a macho guy that wanted to make his... make a bunch of money. I came out of it, I think, sensitive to the fragility of the forest and hills. I was a bit shocked to realize how much... how easy to see how much erosion occurs out here with different kind of soil than back East. Seeing rivers running brown was a shock to me compared to the East where they tend to run much clearer. I realized that different parts of the country, you know, need different treatments to them. So, that's what... that was the lasting thing that came out of jumping.

JN Do you see that effect happening to other people as far as their sense of belonging to the wilderness?

DH Yeah. A buddy of mine who jumped the same three years and quit the '55 season, he was married for that last, Bill Calder [William A. Calder], who I hope shows up. He's now a full professor at the University of Arizona, teaching Biology. He's a world expert on the kiwi bird. I got a letter from him last summer and... long ramblings about his Sabbatical to New Zealand and he said, "I was up in Montana. I was up..." What's the resort... oh, station up here on Flathead Lake, UC?

JN Yellow Bay?

DH Yeah, up in there somewhere. Either giving a paper or something... and he said "Then I started walking in the woods." He said, "Then I realized that the most thrilling experience for me, for my whole life, has been walking through the goddamn piney woods of Montana." And he said, "I could walk forever through those woods." And it all started when he came out here on blister rust for one year and the next year, in '53, we were bunk
mates out here at Nine Mile. He was a real good guy, he never drank. [laughs] He's from Georgia. And we never went out together and raised hell in town, so we kind of... we were on fires. The next year we were on project work for eight weeks together and we've been lifelong friends since then. But he would stay home Friday night and wash his clothes by hand, and others of us would go into town and give our clothes to a laundromat and go out and raise holy hell.

We never destroy... it was never destructive kind of fighting, find some locals and "punch 'em out" kind of stuff. We just.... what we'd talk about raising hell was to drink a little too much, and talk and tell jokes, or find a woman. Have a date maybe, or things like that. When I say find a woman, I mean, uh... one of these ones that would be in the bar and you might go out and have sex. Or... have a date meant you had someone lined up who was respectable and it was... and that was understood. And when I came back from a date with Sally, nobody ever said, "Hey, did you get it?" They just... I mean... if they had seen you in some bar talking to a kind of floozie character, they would say, "Oh, how was your night?" That was... there was this easy dichotomy between one and the other. So it... but, that's affected him. I've lost track of an awful lot of them.

A friend of mine came out the second year because of my admiration of it the first year, and he jumped in... in '54. He stayed in forestry and worked down in Utah. He's been pretty much of a solid conservationist. Married and had a family. He stayed with the Forest Service, but not on this project, all through his professional life. I'd... be interesting to see, just from the questionnaire, what people have done with it. I might have just gravitated towards people like that.

I just... I feel most at home out in a ponderosa woods. That's my favorite forest. That open... where the trees smell like vanilla. You can always find a campsite because it's open and soft. If I could live in a ponderosa woods the rest of my days, you know... if I was gonna retire somewhere, that would... I'd... a little cabin out in the ponderosa forest. That's why my buddy and I are going to fly into the Selway and spend three or four days in a ponderosa woods right at Shearer, you know. Right at the cabins that I helped build. I just feel my whole spirit just coming back when I'm in these kinds of areas.

I guess if I was in jumping today, you know, myself and a few others, we'd be sort of the nature freaks of it. Where, "You guys are too sensitive to this kind of stuff. You gotta pick up an ax and level it and make a buck on it." I just felt... and, what shocks me today that... is that the power of technology to, clear cutting, and new roads and stuff, to just almost... well, just to dominate nature so much. In those earlier days, I felt like... felt like nature was totally dominant over us. And these rickety planes. I thought, "Geez, we're lucky to get there!" You know. They were apparently safe enough and all. I'm sure the FAA had them... had their... had them checked over. But I felt that nature was in control. And when you walk two solid days out of a fire to get to a tiny roadhead, picked up in a...

[END OF TAPE]