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Bob James as interviewed by Renee Gouaux on July 21, 1984, for the Smokejumpers Oral History Project. OH# 133-50

RG This is an interview with Bob James on July 21, 1984, during the Smokejumper Reunion at the University of Montana. The interviewer is Renee Gouaux. OK, the first question I'd like to ask, Bob, is what first attracted you to smokejumping?

BJ Well, I just heard about it. I didn't know anything about jumping. I had seen a few jumpers in Oregon and just, talked to them, but I've never seen them suited up or anything like that. So I thought, "Oh, what the heck." I was on a helicopter crew. "I might as well put in... try jumping." Because I made a sport jump before and I hated it. It scared the heck out of me. So, for some reason I just thought, "Yeah, I'll try jumping." So I put in an application and Missoula hired me right off. I was kind of shocked, said, "Well, OK. They hired me but I haven't made it yet." I got my papers and everything, got the physical and started driving up to Montana. Never been to Idaho, or Montana, and on my way up, it was pretty scary because I was, you know, was 23, but I was still scared about what I was doing. You know, totally different country, and I expected the jumpers to be big gorillas. Just real hairy apes. I was completely wrong. I thought... you know like, Floyd Bethke was one of the big tough looking guys, I expected them to all look like him. He was about the only one that looked that way. So, when I arrived I was kind of relieved that I didn't have to be a... you know, weigh 200 pounds and be solid muscle. I could be tall and still be in shape.

I got here and started talking... oh, to some of the jumpers, and they were as nervous as I was. We started, right then and there, we started making close friendships. There was 40 trainees in my group the year I trained, in '75. So... we got to know each other pretty well, and I mean, really were close... because we were all scared to death.

So, the first thing was, I had to go out and buy boots. Because they told me, "Don't buy boots until you get here." I didn't, you know, being from California, J.C. Penney's boots was all you needed, so I got here and [they] said, "Well, buy some heavy duty boots." So I bought some boots. Then what I did was, first thing, pass the physical fitness test. Got to do that, and that was step one. Step two was the line dig... all night. So I was... went out and got the boots and I was breaking them in on the line dig and the packout.

RG What kind of boots did you get? Just out of curiosity?

BJ They were just some, uh... Westcos or Santa Rosas, or something. Just, downtown here at Missoula. I bought the boots and I was breaking them in on the line dig and the packout. My feet, by the end of it, were just totally bloodied. I mean, they were just blisters and scars. But I was still determined to go through with it, so... even with sore feet. Then we started into the units, going through all that. And that was a killer. You know, every day that... my first summer, that I got
out of bed, I had to lift my head up because my neck was so stiff, the muscles were so sore. I was sore everywhere, just like everybody else. So... I got through that. I got through the units. My feet were all messed up and [I was] still nervous about this whole thing. Because during our line dig the squad leaders and the foremen would be hiding out in the trees with their headlights on watching us. I was going, "Well, OK. They're finding out who we are and whether we can do it or not."

So then... that was OK. Then myself and two other guys were picked to go get some more water, back at the busses. A mile or two back, I don't know what it was. And I thought, "Well, this is just great, my feet are already killing me, so now I got to walk an extra four miles." We did it, and we got, kind of chewed out by one of the squad leaders, because we took a little too much time. But that's... they were making it rough on us, you know, just to see if we could put up with it. And we got back and we did the packout. Then, as I say, we started the units and got through that.

RG What do you mean by the units?

BJ That's the training... the obstacle course, the let downs, the landing simulator, the exit tower... all that. So we got... went through that, and we were all sore and all. Everybody was all nervous still.

So then, let's see.... After that we started... we went out to make our first jump. It was probably the best exit I ever had and one of the worst landings I ever had. I mean I went out absolutely perfect, no problem. They had it on video, just great, you know. I wasn't as nervous as I was the first time I made a sport jump. I really, I was prepared for it, but it... I was still in the units. When I went out the door, they said look out at the horizon, and that's exactly what I did. Some guys say they closed their eyes. I could never close my eyes. I had to see what was going on. So I went out, perfect exit. My landing was feet to butt. [laughs]

Then we went on with our other jumps. We never made a water jump that year because, we could never... the spotters could never... the wind was so messy, so squirrely, that they couldn't get the streamers to hit the pond. So we'd try. Pretty soon they were using us for streamers, basically. [The spotters would say], "Well, try to hit the water if you can." None of us ever hit the water, so we had come back the next year and do it.

But after we... we finally made our, I believe it was our 8th jump, and we were feeling pretty good, we were riding back in the bus and... OK, this... you know, we were just letting it sink in. And Jack Babon, who trained with me, he just let out a big yell. Just, "We did it!" And everybody started feeling really good about then. Then we went through the... ceremonies of receiving a pin. Which... I didn't know there was any ceremonies, I was just so dumb about the whole thing and just... so we got our jump pin and all that. By then we were just... as new man you feel just really hot. So the first thing you do is you buy a tee-shirt that says "Smokejumpers." Then you head downtown and
you show off. [laughs] So that's basically the start of it all. You're... you're just a big shot then.

Then the next year you've mellowed out. You realize, "Hey, it's a great job. Probably the best job you'll ever have but you don't have to flaunt it so much anymore." Until you get out of it. Then all of a sudden you're buying an arm load of tee-shirts and things. And you want to tell people, "Hey, this is what I did and pretty proud of it." In fact it's just the only time I worked for the Forest Service, that I enjoyed working for the Forest Service, I have to admit. I don't... I work for them now, and I just... I'm really sorry I do. It's just a big let down to leave this place and go to another forest, because... I don't know, it's just... it's not the same. It's not the esprit de corps. The people are different. You meet a few jumpers that you get close relationships, and then, "Ah, you jumped out of Redding? Yeah, I jumped out of Missoula." And then you're good buds after that. You're just, you reminisce and all the other people in the crew don't know what you're talking about. So, it's, uh... it's been fantastic. If I become a rich, famous executive, or whatever, it'll never top what I've done here. This is... this will be the highlight of my life. Even if I made the Olympic team and won a gold medal [laughter], it'd be hard to compete with what I did here.

RG Right. I'm interested in the... some of the things that you were just saying about making water jumps. I didn't realize that smokejumpers are encouraged, at times, to jump in the water?

BJ Well it's a safety precaution. It's... we first go to a swimming pool with our suit and parachutes. We just jump in the pool and they throw the chute over our face, and tangle us up in the lines so we can... so we won't panic. And just, you know, just come out of the chute and get untangled and... just learn not to panic, is basically what they're trying to teach, because the suits will float. You will stay above the water unless you start splashing or kicking. So we do that first, the swimming pool simulator, and then we go up, jump out to a real pond, or a lake, just to see what it's like. It's in case you do jump a fire and happen to get pulled by the wind to a... up over a river, or lake, or something, so that you will know what to do and how to get out of it.

So... it was great training. Some of the other jump Bases, they just did it in the swimming pool. Whereas here, they give us the pool and the real jump. It was one of the funniest jumps I've had. One of the guys, John McKay, he still didn't hit the water. He treed up at the end... [laughs] at the... right on the edge. You know, it's one of those jumps that were, "Well, everybody made it but John." A few other guys didn't make it, but it was real... it was real fine.

RG What part of your equipment is buoyant?

BJ Well it was the padding in the suit. The shoulders, the legs, the... you know, the back. That's all... it'll all float. You don't float real high, or anything. The water is just under
your chin, but when you calm down and relax, you can get out of the lines and pull the chute off yourself.

That's the biggest fear that most of them have, is when the chute comes over their face and they don't know where they're at. Then they just start panicking and trying to rip it off and that's where you start losing it. But in most cases the chute won't come over your face because, when you hit the water, the chute will either go over the top of you, or behind you, or to the side, depending on which way the wind's blowing. So it's fairly easy that way.

But, uh... this... like I say, I made a sport jump before. It was the worst thing I've ever done. I mean, in one day they throw me out of an airplane. They weren't going to throw us out here until they were sure that we could make a landing, we could do everything right, which... I have more fear of sport jumping than I have jumping here. The chance of injury is greater. The chance of death is nil. It's just, it's just... you know, nonexistent in this outfit. Sport jumping... in fact they kill them all the time. Which bothered me. But I really, I really enjoyed it. Really respected the people that were giving us the training. I'd say it's the hottest part of the Forest Service, the jumpers... the Missoula jumpers. I don't know about these other guys. [laughs]

RG Right, right. How many years did you smokejump?

BJ Uh... 5. I jumped 4 years, then I quit a couple years, then I came back and jumped 1 more year after that. I never did get to jump that new XP-12 or T-12 or whatever they call it. It was the XP-5 when I was jumping. When I came back they had to use up the T-10's, so they had a bunch of those to use up. I was one of the jumpers that had to use those up, and the other guys were jumping with new chutes, I never got a jump in. Everybody, was really ranting and raving about how good it is. I believe them. [laughs]

RG Right. Can you tell me about those chutes and also about the chute that you jumped with? I'm sure that they're different from the Derry Slots that were used in the '50s.

BJ Oh yeah. Yeah they... the first, FS-5 I believe it was, we made a few jumps in that. There was a few chutes left over, so we made timber jumps, and I believe we made a water jump in that. The only way to guide them was to have green shroud lines. Those were your steering lines. All you had to do was just reach up and pull a bunch of line down, to make a right turn or a left turn, or whatever. And that was how you controlled them.

Then they went to the T-10s which were, they had toggle lines which just... 2 fingers steered left, [2 fingers] steered right. Just using your fingers, so that was great. You had better performance. You came down a little... I think you had a little bit more forward speed than the FS-5s, but, uh... came down a little bit softer. They handled a little bit better, so they were the hot parachute.

Then they came up with the XP-5 or the X.... Yeah, the new
one. [laughs] I can't remember, it's been a few years but, um.... That one was low porosity material, so you came down slower and had better forward speed. You could make a turn low to the ground. If you made a turn low to the ground with the other chutes, you'd oscillate. You'd get possibly... time it wrong, where you'd oscillate and slam into the ground. But these, you could turn low to the ground and you just pivot and you turn all the way into the ground if you wanted. I actually saw a guy make a stand up landing in one, on a fire. Which I'd never... you know, you see that in sport guys, but never on one of these, and this guy made a stand up landing! I was just amazed, because I came augering in. I just... I saw stars for awhile, but uh.... They were, they were a great chute. You could hear them open up about a mile away. They just made a big loud pop, compared to the T-10.

RG Huh, that's interesting. What kind of helicopter work were you doing before you started smokejumping?

BJ Helitack crew. It's just basic... well, I was up in Oregon and we had the jet rangers, you know... of four guys in the helicopter, and the same thing, fire fighting. They just go to the fire, try to find a place to land and step out and fight the fire. I do that now but even the helicopter crews, they haven't got this free... like the jumpers have. It's just not the same. I... you know. But something... I, it's weird. I think about jumping every day since I started jumping. I mean, you just sit there and you're driving, or something, and it just comes in your mind. Every day it's just... without fail. It's so ingrained, you know, that you actually got to do this. And it was just more of a... more of a dream, or only the real rough and rugged could do it, you know. Heck, most of the guys were teachers, or there were a couple of lawyers, you know. Doctors... just everybody. It was a great mixture.

RG Did working on a helitack crew prepare you then, for being able to be a smokejumper? I guess... and also you must have been familiar with the fire fighting?

BJ Just the fire fighting part of it. The helicopter part, it's totally different. You have to work... actually on a helicopter crew, you learn to work around helicopters. Basically, if you go to a big fire, if you initial attack it, well, you'll do what you can with the few amount of people you have. When it goes into a major fire, you pull the helicopter people off and then they run the air operations, Helicopter Operations Base, or the Heli-Base. And that's where we shuttle people in, put them in a helicopter [and] fly them to strategic locations so they can get to the the fire line. Cargo... you know, shuttle cargo, bucket work. Have the pilots do water drops... totally different, really. As a smokejumper, you're on the line, digging line. With a helicopter, or... person, which I just got off a fire, just last week... for ten days, I didn't dig an inch of line. It was all strictly working the helicopters, being a radio operation person... being a load master, or just... you know, just run the
air show basically. It's nothing to do, really with fire fighting anymore. It's just, in other words, with the helicopters you're using your brain more than your back. With jumping you're using your back more than your brain, but still, as I say, most of the jumpers are... you know, we don't... they all ready... they use their brain enough as it is being doctors, and all that.

RG Right, they're not without brains.

BJ Yeah. So... but, uh... it's... I never felt that way about jumping. Like, "Well, we're just backbone." You know, it was... we all knew what we were doing, we were supposed to dig line, so we accepted it. All these other crew, they go, "Geez, that's all they want us for." You know, here it's accepted, "Yeah, you guys know what you do, but that's the way it is, you know. We all know you're all intelligent, and with it, so we're not going to treat you like 17 year old fire fighters where we have to lead you by the hand." And that's the difference between jumping, and helicopter people. If you have a foreman that's never jumped... so, he doesn't know anything about it, well... he treats his people... you know, 30 years olds, like they have to be led by the hand all the time. Here, everybody wears a different color hard hat, you know. Different shirt, they don't walk in lines, they hold each other up when they're hung over, you know. It's just totally different. There's no comparison at all.

RG Can you remember what your first jump was like?

BJ Yeah, I remember that real clear. It was, like I say, it was the best exit I ever had. I was... I got pretty good at exits and landings, because I always came down like a ton of bricks. You know, I always had to roll good. My best exit, the first time I jumped... Boy, I just went right out there and it just felt like there was, really, no opening shock. I didn't turn towards the tail like you normally do for some reason. I just went right straight out and I just came right down. Just felt like I was at the top of a swing and started swinging down. That was the last time I had that feeling. [laughs] Usually... after that, I turned to the tail a little bit more, because my adrenalin was so high on the first one that I think I launched myself about 30 feet away from the plane. But after that, my jumps were real... fairly decent exits and landings. But my first fire jump was... had me worried, because that was the Salmon River country. And I'd always heard about it, you know. I'd never been around the country. So they go, "OK, you're going to the Salmon River country." And just, "Oh, great!" There were two Doug loads of us, and Floyd Whitaker, (who everybody in Missoula knows), he was in the other Doug. So I was sitting there, waiting my turn. The other guys were looking out the windows, and they were going, "Wow, look at that, looks like just a fan." You know, "What was that?" "Somebody's having a malfunction." And I'm going, "Oh, that's just great!" I didn't want to get up and look, I just sat there. And so we didn't know who it was, but he got his reserve out. So, after that I got out. Jumped... landed... did a...
the spot just right, and just felt real good. And found out it was Floyd Whitaker who had that malfunction. So we asked, "Well, hey Floyd, are you gonna call that guy up and talk to him about that malfunction you had? The guy that packed the chute?" He goes, "I'm not calling anybody, I'm going right up to him and tell him what's going on." But I guess he's had three malfunctions and... I don't know, it was just funny the way he was just leaning up against a tree smoking, he just... you know, cool, and just, "Yeah, I'm not calling, I'm going right up to him and tell him about that malfunction."

RG What usually happens in a malfunction... like, you saw this, or people saw him from your plane and...?

BJ It's usually just line overs, they call them Mae Wests, or if they're real bad... they're just a bunch of lines over the top and so all you get is, the chute tries to open but it can't because the lines are draped over it. So it just... would be a corner inflated, or none at all, or a full streamer and... with, uh... with that, the idea is they taught, us pull your reserve, pull the handle and just grab the reserve... and usually you're spinning too, because... you know, it's... there's not an equilibrium... if one side is loaded. But then you're just spinning to the right or the left and so you say OK. Grab it and throw the reserve in the direction of the spin... your... the opposite direction of the spin, [inaudible]. [laughs] But, uh... and then that way it wouldn't wind up around your, or be caught in your lines. So, basically, it works out. Floyd worked out great, and a few other jumpers I know did ride them in and, uh... you know, they got their reserve tangled in their main, but they... they hit hard and they were hurt pretty bad, but they were jumping the next year. One incident I was, uh... there was going to be a reserve jump. We come down... we go up, go out on our main chute, and then we'd pull our reserve out, just throw it out, and come down on two chutes. So I was talking... well, I was helping Crash McClure, everybody knows Crash, and so... he was suiting up. So I was going to get him his suit off the, or, uh... chute off the shelf. So I grabbed one, put it on his back, and he buckeled it up and [I] said, "Well Crash, I think this one is going to work. It looked pretty good, it might work." And it didn't! [laughs] It... he had a... he had a bad malfunction. I mean, I felt bad because I was just kidding with him, you know. And so we were jumping 1000 feet higher than we normally jump and so he went out, had a malfunction. And, uh... so he pulled his reserve, it got tangled in the main. He had to pull it back in and throw it out again. And he came down, and that was just.... And he made it, you know. I just... I felt real bad when they says, "Somebody had a malfunction." "Oh yeah, who's that?" And they said, "Crash." "Oh, geez!" I grabbed this, you know, the chute for him. So I felt pretty weird about that, but, uh... it's, you know. Yeah, he... I... I'm pretty... he didn't hold it against me. [laughs] He never said anything. No, he just, knowing Crash, and that's just the way he is. But now they've got anti-emergent vents on them, and as far as I know, they don't have malfunctions anymore.
It's just like a s... 18 inches of volleyball net sewn to the bottom of the skirt in the chute, and I can't remember exactly how it prevented.... It prevented line overs, which, basically what a malfunction is. And for some reason, with that volleyball net there, it doesn't happen anymore. So, it's really... jumping has come a long ways since the guys in the '40s. These guys, I mean, they were tough back then. We're a little bit softer now but... and it's a whole lot safer now.

RG Did your parents have any reservations about your doing this kind of work?

BJ Well, yeah. My dad... they don't like me riding a motorcycle, but they always said, you know, do what you want. They never... if I wanted to buy a motorcycle, "OK, be careful." That was the way... my mother hates what I'm doing. She's real proud of it. [laughs] She, uh... when I fly, she hates when I fly. She doesn't like flying, she definitely hates jumping but, uh... you know, they just... they just feel real good. They felt... you know, after the first few, they felt a little bit better. They're, you know... she was always worried about it, and she... they wouldn't show it though. They just... I knew they were worried about it, but it was... you know, I probably aged them about 20 years, but they were all for it. They said, "Yeah. Do what you want to do." Everything I've done has basically scared them to death, [laughs] but they've... they just love.... They came up here one time and got to watch me jump. They just, you know... when my mom left, she was crying. I don't if she was crying because she didn't want me to jump anymore, or just hated to go back home. But she doesn't like me flying in the helicopters, and all, but, uh... it's something I do. Out of the fourteen seasons that I've worked, I've been... let's see. 3 seasons on the ground, you know, on engines. So I don't stay on the ground much. I like being up in the air. I took 2 seasons off. One to be on the ground, the other to work for Boeing aircraft, and then I was flying. So that's, you know... But, yeah I'm really surprised. I'm really sorry if I'm putting them through this, but they seem to be holding up a little bit better. They know there's nothing they can do about it.

RG Right. Were you ever involved in a malfunctioning situation with the parachute?

BJ Not what you call a real malfunction, or... four times. One time I went out and the chute opened and I looked at it... I got in the habit sometimes looking up a little too soon. I just kind of like watching the chute come down. You're supposed to keep your head down. And after about, you know, two seconds, I just kind of looked deep back and watched it deploy. And one time I saw it open, then close! Something... it was really weird, I don't remember. So I remember I just went down, put my hand on my reserve. Put my hand on the handle, and I looked up again before I pulled it and it had opened again. But I realized... I wasn't scared, you know. I was... my vision, everything, was so crystal clear that I thought I was set up and I might have a
malfunction, but it... I was just thinking, you know, just 100 miles an hour, and it was all very clear what I had to do. And then when I checked it one more time, it was fine. And the other times were just... they were malfunctions, but they really can't be called... you know, not like... it was just my, uh... three times in a row as a matter of fact, my steering lines were tangled up. They were wrapped around my shrouds, so I couldn't steer it. I could make a left turn but I couldn't make a right. And the other time I could make a right, not a left. And after the third time, I was getting a little upset, you know, really! [laughs] "Hey! Who's packing these chutes. Is it me, or are they winding these," you know, "my steering lines up in the lines?" It was... it was really weird that just three... you know... it never happens, but then three times in a row it happened to me, so.... I, uh... but, uh... never had, really, anything to talk about as far as, you know, really, a situation where I had to pull my reserve, or anything like that. In fact, I've never even seen a malfunction. I could have, if I had peeked out the window on that one, [laughs] but I didn't want to.

RG Were you ever injured?

BJ On my 50th jump. Yeah, I was... I thought, "This is great." I wanted to make 50. That's just, kind of a goal. Everybody... at least 50. And then from 50, go to 100. But on my 50th jump, I was just outside of Jackson Hole, Wyoming, beautiful spot, right in the saddle of a little meadow. Small fire, you know, just wasn't doing anything. So we... the spotter was checking the winds. A little bit gusty, but he says, "OK, going to let you out a little further than, you know, than we threw the streamers." So, "OK." So I went out and he carried us a little too far. So he carried us over the ridge, and I couldn't get back to the saddle, so I was looking for a place to land. There was nothing but trees and, you know. So I thought, "Well, I'll just tree up around here." So I picked a tree, and I hit it too high. And I hit it with my lower legs, which took a lot of weight off the chute. As soon as the weight is off the chute, it starts collapsing. So once that happened, I started falling through the tree. The chute had started collapsing, and then I was just free falling through the trees. And I couldn't see the ground yet because the branches hitting me in the face. So I just thought, "It's gotta catch!" You know, "All these lines, it's gotta catch." I always thought of Carl Brown as I was falling through, because he fell through the tree. He fell 100 feet and was severely injured, you know. But he was only out for a week... he was out for the rest of the season, but you know, we thought, "Boy, he might die, he was so bad." But I was thinking of him, you know... "Hey Carl, I know what you're feeling now!" And... I only fell about 30 or 40 feet, then I hit. And the branches cleared out and there was the ground, and just smack! I could still feel my fingers and my toes, so I just sat there and waited a little bit, checked it out, and, uh... I was OK, you know. Just... just my tailbone was about the worst part. So I spent the time on the
fire, then hiked over to another part of the fire. I was real stiff and still wondering if I had done any serious damage. And so I finished off those two fires with my partner, and then flew back to West Yellowstone. And what's really surprising is; you know, Larry Eisenman is Project Superintendent. He's... everybody's got a lot of respect for the guy, he's just... he's stern but he's fair, you know. And he just... you envy the guy because, he just, you wish you could be just like him. But, uh... he's been a lot of places, you know, done a lot. So he just... Boy, first thing you hear when you come to the Base is, "Larry Eisenman, watch out, man. He's a... he's tough, he's a killer." We were... you know, there's like a little bit... little bit of fear in there.

RG Right.

BJ So, I got to West Yellowstone... I was going to be flown out to Missoula, have everything x-rayed and taken care of. Make sure it wasn't serious. So, I was lying down on the floor... had a mattress down there, and just, you know, getting ready to hit the sack, and Larry comes over. "Are you sure you feel all right, Bob?" Just... he just took care of me like he was my mother, almost. Just, really... he really cares for the people that work for him, you know. He... it may not show, but when it really comes down to it, he's really for the guys. I was just, really shocked. He was putting a pillow under my legs and just... "Wow!" You know, "Thanks a lot Larry." I still always had that little bit of... boy, little bit of fear of him, you know. But that was the only time that was... really, I've... you know, everybody gets the scrapes. I had a shin that... I thought I broke by leg, you know, because I hurt it as I was going through a bush, and I got this extreme pain in my shin. Then I heard a snap and I was lying there, afraid to look up. I looked up, my foot was straight but there was a branch that had broken off. [It had] come down so hard on my shin that the chlorophyll from the leaves, and all that, it went through my suit, through my levis and my leg, you know. I just had a bad scar and bruise there for awhile. But other than that, just... normally you know, twigs and what not... jab yourself. Nothing serious, nothing real serious.

RG What kind of equipment did you carry on your body when you jumped?

BJ Carried a hard hat, uh... any food, canteens, you know. Whatever you wanted to carry. If you wanted to carry one canteen, that's what you carried. I carried about three canteens and some dehydrated food, plus the, you know, rope in our rope pocket and, uh... think that's about all I carried. [I] figured out when I hit the ground, just the weight without the chute, I think I weighed about 250 pounds. So it's, you know... that's why, [laughs], I learned to do rolls real good. Why they have... the little... some of the lighter guys [would say] "Boy, that was a pretty soft landing." And I... I rarely knew a soft landing. I just... I don't know why, maybe it was my chute
handling. Maybe I did something wrong, but I used to hit real hard. But it never... it never really bothered me that much. It's the packouts, I think, why my knees kind of... kind of the way they are today, is because of the packouts, you know. 100, 120 pounds on your back, stepping over logs, and just putting all that pressure on your knees with... I really don't know if the... the jumping had anything to do with it. I thought... I thought I got off my feet fairly fast. But there was a few times, you know, [I] hit so hard, like in New Mexico. I just hit hard, rolled... and I remember my feet hitting the ground and then I remember waking up, you know. I was out for just a split second but, just... I don't remember after my feet hitting, I just remember lying there and getting up. I just, "Whoa." Those are the... those are the times... once you hit the ground, everybody's just got a... and they're OK, everybody's got a big grin on their face. "Got another jump in. We're OK."

RG That's amazing. How was your equipment packed out?

BJ Well, our suits were... we kept our suits in our bins at the Base, and we got a fire call... throw everything out, and I would carry my backpack, which is foldable and all that, I would just put it on first and that way it fit real flush. And I put on my jacket on, I thought that'd probably give my a little more protection in the back too. But I never noticed, I felt it when I was wearing it, you know. Just put the jacket and pants on and everything. You go out... you jump. Then when you come off the fire you have to carry all the cargo they dropped to you. Sleeping bags, the extra food, the tools, the cross-cut saws. You carry all of them out in your... the pack. And they're designed to... you know. Everybody has their own way of packing. Put your reserve on the bottom, or put your reserve on the top. Just stuff your... your main chute just... just kind of, you know, like a sleeping bag in a stuff sack. Just stuff it around here and stuff it around there. Just cram it in. Once you get all of that, then you start cramming in all the stuff from the cargo chute... and all the cargo chutes and all that, and, uh... pretty soon you got this nice, big stuffed bag. And you kind of wonder how it all fits but it was well designed, and never had any problems. Got all that stuff in and packed out with it. It was, you know, packs they have now days [sic] are kind of flimsy to what they're using now, because I don't think I could pack any of that stuff in these new backpacking things and make it out.

RG So you would carry all that material to the nearest road, or you would carry it all the way out with you?

BJ It depends on the situation. If there's helicopters nearby, we'd carry it to the nearest spot where the helicopter can land. Or if there's a trail near by, to the the nearest trail where the horses can get in and pack it out for you. They like to, you know... they don't like to see you pack out any more than you have to, because it's, you know, basically it's hard on you. It's just kind of tough to... dangerous. You could sprain an
ankle carrying all that weight. So if you have to pack 30 miles, you'll pack it. But if you don't have to, they'll do everything they can to... you can drop the pack off and hike in and let the horses take it in, or, uh... just get a helicopter ride in. So... up in Alaska it's all helicopter rides. There's no packing out up there. I think that's why those BLM jumpers love it. [laughs] But here it's... the longest packout... I... Well, we had about a five mile packout. It was the longest packout I had. I had a hikeout of about 11 miles where we left our packs in a big meadow and a helicopter came and picked them up. We just hiked out, you know, 11 miles. But they do what they can to make sure you don't have to really kill yourself to get the pack out. Because they want to get you back on Base as soon as possible in case something breaks and they need more jumpers. And they don't want you injured, be off the jump list, but, uh... it was work, you know. Some of... some of the littler guys, too, that weigh just about as much as those packs... I mean, I was dying, you know, and I'm a little bit bigger than they are. Think of what these guys were doing, they were doing great! I should have been doing a heck of a lot better, [laughs], than what I was doing.

RG Uh, you mentioned that you would pack out cross-cut saws. Did you ever use chain saws?

BJ Very rarely. In fact, I can't remember ever using a chain saw because for one, they're too heavy to pack out, and, you know, you're out there in the woods you don't want to hear them anyway. Their gas, and smell, and you got to carry all that extra gas or dump it and it could get all over your shoe or your jump suit, or something. So it's mostly... for me it was all cross-cut work. Never, uh... I can't really remember. I remember, I think, one time on a big fire, they dropped a saw in but it, uh... the cargo chute failed and so it just became pieces. So they said, "Ah, forget it. We don't need it anyway." It's just... it was just more a nuisance than anything else, considering the work you had to do and compared to the pack out with that thing, it was better to just work a little harder and use a cross-cut saw.

RG What was the largest fire that you fought?

BJ Boy... let's see. As a jumper, a jump fire, I would guess about 240 acres, I think. Most of them... they could have been larger. I think 240 was about the biggest. I've been in... like, 10,000 acres pounding fire in Southern California, but 240 acres was the biggest. That was back up in the Ishawooa Wilderness I believe, east of West Yellowstone, and... it was interesting. It was real nice country. A couple of the squad leaders were out scouting [laughs] and they got, kind of, in a situation where the fire got around them, so they just had to wait it out until they could get through the fire, and they came out... big smiles, you know. Everybody was wondering what happened to them, but that... it wasn't any big deal, it was just, "Oops!" You know, "We're just... now we got to wait for this thing to blow by so we can
walk out." But it was a great fire. That's, uh... injured a couple guys on it. Paul Evenson dislocated his shoulder, and Jack Deeds messed up his ankles. But it was... that was one of those fires.... Oh! Larry Eisenman was spotting, and I just went, "Oh, no!" Because Larry's really... loves to spot. Really loves to get out there and go for it. So, we're sitting there in the plane, you know, jumping what they call two man sticks. (That's two men at a time.) And the plane goes around and throws two men out again. So... it was a big, big meadow, and Larry throws out a couple of guys. He goes, "Hook up three!" And we're going, "Three?!? [laughs] You mean three men at a time?" Because we're all ready... well, the guy that's first in the door usually has it easy. He just stands there and he goes. The guy that's second has to run up, gets situated and go. So the first guy usually has it easier, so... you know, we were fairly new still and going well, "I'm the first guy. OK. I've got it easy, I won't have to shuffle in the door to get out." And so he goes, "Hook up three." Big smile on his face. And we're going, "OK, you were one, now you're three and I'm... No, I'm three now... I'm two." And it was crazy, everybody was going, "How do you do this, you know, how do you do this?" So we... I ended up being three. And I ended up cramped up against the wall of the Doug there and just... I essentially just ran and leaped out. I don't... I think I went head first. I don't remember, you know. One guy was saying, "Well, how do you do this?" You know. "Well, when the first guy goes out, then you're the second guy. When the second guy goes out, then you're the third guy. But, you know, when the first guy goes out, then you consider yourself the first guy." And so, uh... I think Floyd Bethke was up there spotting too and they were just cracking up because we were... I don't know how many jumps we'd had, not too many. We were just stumbling and shuffling and bailing out. But we all got out OK. It was... it was pretty funny. It was a great jump.

RG What do you think his reasoning was behind sending three people out at a time instead of two?

BJ Well, it... we heard they'd done it before when the the spot is real big, and this spot was huge. I mean it was probably a couple football fields or... and just to make less passes that way. Clean these guys out and get them out of our hair basically. Get them on the fire line. That's what Larry was all about, you know. The job is to fight the fire and get those people down there because... his position was superintendent. He just wanted to make us look so good, which I thought we did. I thought we did a real good job and they... we always did. He just kept wanting... wanting better, so we just kept trying. It was good. He... he accomplished his job and we accomplished our end of the deal. He never... never felt bad... never felt we had to compete with any Hot Shot crews because we knew we could beat them. We knew we could dig more line than they could. I found out after I jumped five years that I had two vertebrae out in my back. I was wondering, "Boy I have a hard time digging line. It kills me. These other guys go and go. I dig line and my right leg is either in extreme pain or it's numb." And so I go, "Well
maybe it's just my back or something I just..." you know. So I just kept doing it... just wondered, "How come these guys don't get back aches?" You know. After I quit jumping I finally... digging line, I was on some other crew, and I was digging line. I said, "I can't take it anymore, I've got to find out what's wrong." It started getting worse, so I went to a doctor and [he] x-rayed and there was two vertebrae I had out. I'd had them out... they were out for six years. They were out when I started jumping, so it's not... they didn't, you know. I remember I hurt my back on a trampoline, I landed on the back of my neck. I felt things pop but thought, "Well, I'm OK now." But a few years later I was jumping and I still had that problem. They popped them back in and, you know... it's still hard on my back to dig line, but it sure isn't as hard as it used to be. I said, "Man, I'm the wimp of this crew, I'm slowing them down." So I felt pretty bad about that but... everybody... if one guy has got a bad day or something, or is not feeling that great, well, the other guys will help him out, so.... I noticed a lot of that in the jumpers, "Hey, we'll get you going here." So they... they'll dig a little harder or something like that. I think Larry Eisenman encouraged that kind of thing in the jumpers. You know, "Hey, you guys are the best!" and so we... we just didn't have to prove ourselves. We knew we could do the job, so that's why we didn't have to wear different colored... or the same colored hard hats, or walk in lines, and all that, you know. We did the job and that's what mattered. That was great.

RG What kind of living arrangements did you have while you were smokejumping?

BJ I stayed at the dorms out there, which is great. It's, uh... price was right. It was... get up real late, still make it to work. Get up ten minutes before you go to work. The cooking was great, the best. I mean... Jess was the cook, I can't remember his last name, but everybody there, they... I mean, it wasn't just any... buy the bacon in package. They cut their own steaks, their own bacon, their own chops, and all that. Had a lot of chicken fried steak, but other than that... generally it was real good and real handy. Dorms were just, you know, real nice dorms. In fact after they've, uh... refurbished them, they're fantastic now. I mean just... they really put a... the only place in the Forest Service where they actually put money into living quarters. I mean, it's not just a throw together thing and ten years later it's still the same thing, they haven't painted it yet, but they really did a good job and the cost was no object. Just do it right and, uh... it looks great out there now.

RG Were you ever stationed in another Base, other than the one here?

BJ No, always Missoula. I never wanted to be after I started going to these other Bases. Kind of back up the... you know, "Looser Koofer", or West Yellowstone, or Silver City, or Alaska, or something like. And that was always fun. But, uh... always
wanted to get back to Missoula. I always preferred Missoula. I don't know why, just... just so handy for me. [laughs] These other Bases, these guys had a different way of... they liked living this style and all this, and liked living in these... in some of these tourist towns like, West Yellowstone. I... boy! After a week in West Yellowstone I was ready to go. I couldn't handle that place. But, uh... I always... you always really liked Missoula and you know, I'd never jump McCall or Redding or any of those other places, I just... they got... I think they're better here. I think, safety wise and training wise, and... I'd probably get killed if any of these guys heard me talking like this, but I think Missoula is the best place. I know a few guys that I worked with in the winter time, that jumped in Redding. And they talk about it. I just have, you know, some... "Aah, none of those guys know what they're doin' up there." But uh... I'm sure the, you know, squad leaders and foremen were... everybody's pretty much the same, but to me, I just feel Missoula is the best place.

RG Right. What other states did you jump in when you were based in Missoula?

BJ Let's see. OK. Jumped in Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, Alaska, New Mexico and California. And that was about it. Never got to jump in Colorado or Utah. I was always hoping for those two states. Those are the only two states I haven't fought fire in the West. I was going for Colorado or Utah, and I never made it.

RG How, um....

[END OF SIDE A]

[SIDE B]

RG This is side two of an interview with Bob James and he was just telling me, uh... about the different places where he jumped and the length of the fire season when he was a jumper.

BJ Ok, so I guess the 27th of September was my last day here. So that's been the longest. They were short seasons but, you got a lot of work done. Some... the '75 season was horrible. I didn't get one fire jump that season. So I really... coming back home I... "Geez! I still don't know what it's like."

RG Right.

BJ But then things picked up and... '81... '77-'81 were great seasons. Got to go up to Alaska for a month, made nine jumps up there. And... '81 I don't remember how many jumps, but I just remember, busy. Every time you'd come back to the Base, after we made one jump, come back, nobody was here. "Where's everybody at?" "Oh, we called in guys from Redding and McCall, they're all out of fires. You guys, get a shower because you're going out again." So, after that, there was big buzz... there was su... sort of winding down a little bit, but we thought, "Well that's
it for us." We were flying back from one fire over in the Spotted Bear area, and we're looking down at another fire... "Oh, geez! Poor guys on that." Looked horrible, you know. Steep, rocky, "Those poor guys." And that was our fire the next day. [laughs] There was nobody down on it yet, we were the "poor guys". So we, uh... we jumped that one. We jumped with some Redding jumpers. And that's, kind of where I got kind of a... "Naah!" You know. That, some of the guys, I'm not saying Redding is, I'm just saying some of the people there were pretty weak. One guy was hurt. You know, he was claiming he was severely hurt... busted femur, and internal injuries, and neck, and all that. And boy... "This guy is really hurting." So we took care of him while the fire was getting away from us. We spent about four hours, or... I don't know how many hours, working on that guy. And it occurred to me, you know, I just... "Why is this guys blood pressure so well, if he's hurt so bad?" So anyway, we... they got him in the helicopter and flew him to the hospital and he walked out a half hour later. And I just, "Oh, geez!" And then later on that fire, two more jumpers, Redding jumpers, refused to go down, because they thought there were too many rocks rolling down, and this and that. So we lost... you know, out of all the guys, you know, jumped, that we lost three right there. And I just thought, "Man, this isn't right!" You know? So that's... that's probably not fair for me to judge that way, but I just thought maybe these are new guys that were just a little bit nervous about it, but uh... it just... it just bothered me about that. I remember at the end of it, started to rain on us. We didn't have our jackets or anything. We left them in our packs up on top, where we were camped out, and a helicopter came in and flew everything out. [laughs] They flew our packs out with it, I... "Ah, Geez!" So it started to rain and, myself and Paul Chamberlin, we just go, "Oh well. Nothing we can do about it now!" We just butted our heads up against a tree and just let it rain, just... you know, it was one of those things where you just finally realize that next week at this time you will probably be downtown going to a movie, or something, so just live with it, you know?

RG Yeah right.

BJ It takes awhile to get to that point where you're going "Oh, this is horrible." you know. And you complain and you moan. But then, when you get old and you've done it long enough, you begin to realize that next week it's going to be different, so just put up with it.

RG Right.

BJ It helps then, because then you just... "OK, we'll be here for another week, or so, but I'm not going to die here or anything, you know, so..."

RG How many of the people that you smokejumped with had been smokejumping for a number of seasons?
BJ  Let's see. There was 40 men in my new man crew, so there was probably about 60 others, approximately, that had jumped. But we really didn't know them that well, because they were the squad leaders that were always yelling at us, and all that, you know. And it... but it was... yeah, it was their job. I guess when they're taught to be squad leaders, it's... "OK. These new men, you've got to yell at them." You know, and it really... you know, they wouldn't holler and scream like the Marines, but they'd, you know... "OK, do this." Or, "Do push-ups." Or, "You're doing this wrong." Or something like that. The next year you come back and all these guys, all the "old men", were just buddies after that, you know. They never... never yelled again. Because you made it and you're through, so you're one of them. There were about 60 of those guys, jumpers and squad leaders and foremen, and they were all pretty good guys. It's just... it's amazing, because most of them... most of the fire crews I've been on, there's always been some kind of a [laughs] nerd that's usually in charge... or something. That's got a high position, so he makes everything hard on everybody because, you know, he... for some reason he was picked on when he was young, and so now he's getting back. He's got a position with authority so now he's getting back at everybody. Basically just a nerd. Here, it was never that way. There's a few guys that were different and you got along with them. You weren't real close to them, but you just said hi to them and all that, but you could tell they were... were kind of, "eeah", you know. Kind of bothers them sometime, but the foremen and squad leaders. Boy, they were great. There's not one that you'd say, "Man, that guy's a jerk!" As far as I was concerned they all... they all did a good job and never gave me a reason to whine.

RG  Right. Were very many of the people that you smokejumped with, also students?

BJ  Quite a few. I was a student and, uh.... Boy! I'm trying to remember all the guys that... you know, 100 plus. It seemed like a quarter of them were students, another quarter were some kind of professionals, another quarter were full-time drug addict smokejumpers. It's just... that's what jumping is, after so many years. You're an addict to it. And, uh... and the others were just the squad leaders with... you know, 13 and 13 appointments and all that so, it kind of balanced out. It would be really different to jump a fire with a guy that has a Ph.D. you know. Kind of wonder... well... this is unique about the job... it's really strange. I guess there was an astronaut that used to jump too. I think, Scott Russo. [sic.] I think I read somewhere he was a jumper out of Missoula, or something. [Bob is referring to Stuart A. Roosa, Apollo 14 crewmember, who was a smokejumper out of Cave Junction, OR. -- ed.] There's been a real barrel of different people here. You just reach in, pull out a lawyer. Reach in... there was a guy named Driscoll, was a Senator, John Driscoll, not a Senator but he had something to do in the, you know, political field here. [John Driscoll served in the state House, representing Ravalli county, 1973-'74.] And... just a really... mixture of people, which was always fun to deal with.
RG Were there any women smokejumpers when you jumped?

BJ The last year that I jumped, in '81, there was one. She trained in McCall. I was jumping up in Washington and... I met her there, and she seemed, you know... they do have a little problem with the packouts. I mean the rest of the job is just an academic... you know, just... that's the job. It's the packouts that make the difference. Um... and I hear, she had a little bit of a problem because, basically, she was smaller. And that's the whole difference right there, just... you know, you weigh 130 pounds, you're carrying 130 pounds is going to hurt. When you weigh 190 to 200 and you're carrying 130, it's just going to make a difference. So that's... that was a problem that, I think, most of them are having now. She's the only that I've ever met, I don't know if any of the others... but she wasn't, uh... people were asking her for interviews in, you know, news and things, and all this. She would politely turn them down that day, you know, "I don't want to make a big deal out of this." But she did the job, you know. Just, uh... part of the game. Just... gonna... you know, when you... females are going to jump they got to realize it's going to be tough, because they're going to be smaller. And that's the only reason. Physical difference. I don't know who's jumping or how many women are jumping now, but I think... I hear there's about 4 or 5 out of Missoula. That was my last year. It's kind of like... I was going while they were coming in. It was kind of, you know, kind of unique.

RG Are there any other transitions within the smokejumper organization that you have any strong feelings about?

BJ I hear and see changes in it, you know. Other than the parachutes and all this, and they're not flying the DC-3s out of Missoula or... all that. It's, uh... my last year I jumped... when I jumped in '75, there was really... everybody was gung-ho and ah, you know. Then '81, some of the newer guys, I guess it's a new generation, they just didn't have... they had the espirit de corp, but it wasn't as strong as we used to have. I see a trend towards becoming more individuals instead of a group together. So it's... it's turned more that way, I think. Which is... I kind of don't like to see it. Just... it's not like it really used to be. And, you know, you can tell. These guys that jumped in the '40s, they can definitely tell it's not like it used to be, because those guys were really a tight bunch.

RG Right.

BJ As the years go by it's less tight. It's just, uh... say this guy will jump and they go home, but when we were... you train... you know, 40 guys that would train, and boy, we were so close, you know, we were afraid to turn loose. It was really... really a good group. It's just, you know, just a new generation, things are changing.

RG Are there any stories or experiences that you feel had
particularly strong impact on your life as a smokejumper?

BJ Just, just making it. Just getting through the program and doing it several... several years. That was... you know, every jump was a high point. It was a different... different goal, and it just... it, it has... You do get enlightened, you know. Like I say, it's just been the highlight of my life and probably always will be because I don't think I'll ever do anything as... feel as good about as what I've done here. I think about it every day. Some people... when we get some of our... some of the old jumpers back in California we get together. One of the guys on the crew that I'm with, you know, we talk about it, because he was a Redding jumper. And we start talking, the other guys would, "Oh these guys are talking jump stories again." But, you know, he and I are the closest guys on the crew so we just... we all have the same feeling. Just... that's, when we did it, that was just the greatest. Because normally, it's something... not too many people know what a smokejumper is and there's not a whole lot of them. I mean, essentially 400 or, so many, a year jump and plus all the older guys. But it's... it's just a, like unique club. Like the astronauts or something. They're... they're kind of unique. And we all feel fairly unique, you know. We probably bore everybody by talking about it but we just....

RG Not at all.

BJ It's something, you know, something that you just feel good about. It does change your life. I'll be buying tee-shirts for the rest of my life, trying to get to these reunions every ten years, or whenever they have them so... so it's great.

RG One of the questions that I wanted to ask you about, concerning being at the base here in Missoula was... is if you did any kind of "on Base" work, or project work while you were not jumping?

BJ Oh yeah. There was more work to do at the Base than I do now. I mean, I work on a helicopter crew, and they just haven't got any... or they got all this busy work that, essentially, there's busy work to do out there, but you worked eight hours. I mean, sometimes you kind of sluff around and take another half and hour on your P.T., or something, but you either worked as a load master packing chutes, mowing lawns, putting up fence posts, or something. You know, testing hose, working in the warehouse. There was always something to be done. There was no loafing. That's what made it... that's what I thought was pretty outstanding of the foremen and the squad leaders. To get 100 people or, however many... to have them, give them a job, have them doing something. Heck, where I work now, there's five people on a day, and they have a hard time keeping us busy, so... There was always something to do out there. A lot of guys would sew, pack chutes, or just design things. And the other guys, "Well, I want to work..." you know, " I want to mow the lawns." Just... be outside, and driving old tractors around. As a new man we worked in the warehouse a lot, and that was pretty
horrible, but that's the way it goes, you know. As a new man you've got to do those things, but there's always... yeah, there was always an eight hour day.

RG Were you payed by the day?

BJ Yeah, mmm mmm, yeah. We just worked our eight hours and then... you know, and our overtime or hazard pay, or whatever, on the fires. So it was... oh, it was a job. And if you didn't jump at all, all summer long, well then, that's the way it goes. You still have eight hours to put in, and you do the job... and if you're messing around and not doing your job, just don't let Larry Eisenman, or Larry Nelson, or Larry Fite catch you [laughs] because that's not the thing to do. But everybody did their job and did it real well.

RG Right. Well, I guess this is the end of this interview with Bob James and I'd just like to thank you for sharing your experiences as a smokejumper.

BJ OK. Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]