KT This is Kim Taylor interviewing Bob Parcell at University of Montana archives July 25, 1984 for the Smokejumper Oral History Project.

KT Can you give us a brief biographical sketch.

BP Yes, first of all I'm from Tucson, Arizona. I went through high school... to high school in Tucson, left there and went to school in Flagstaff, Arizona, and to a... in forestry. During those years that's when I got interested in smokejumping. And in 1971 is when I first arrived in Missoula to start my first year as a smokejumper.

KT And what are you doing now?

BP Right now I'm a Deputy Sheriff for Missoula County. I just took up the job approximately two years ago. I also jumped last season which was unusual, but I had been laid off because of budget considerations and was able to pick it back up again last November.

KT And you were laid off from the...?

BP From the county, county sheriff's office, and went back to jumping one more season, and it worked out kind of nice a way.

KT O.K. And how did you become interested in smokejumping?

BP I first saw smokejumpers when I worked for the Klamath National Forest, in California. During my first season... or; my first year in college... I had a high enough grade point average that they were looking for people to work around the country. The one student requisition that I chose and I was given and I had a choice from... I chose a requisition out of Klamath, worked on the Salmon River District of the Klamath National Forest. And doing so I fought a lot of fire that year, which was 1969. And I fought a lot of fire that year, and the next year in Washington state, which burned up basically in '70, 1970. Learned a lot about fire and in 1968 was the first time I saw smokejumpers in action. I figured that was a much better way of getting to the fire than... than I was doing at the time. So, ah, that's what got me interested.

KT And what was it that you were doing with the Forest Service?

BP I was on a... what's called the slash crew... At least they had them in those days, I'm not sure they still do. We would go around to the "High-lead" blocks where there's high-lead logging in real steep terrain. We would go into that into that country and put lines... fire lines basically around high-lead cut blocks where there's... big logging areas, and then prepare them for burning later on in the fall. We'd do this all summer long, that
made us a natural choice for a fire crew because we were used to building a fire line day in and day out. So that's where I got my experience basically, on a slash crew.

KT And did you just work for the Forest Service that one summer on the slash crew?

BP The two summers, yes, um, '68... ah, '69 and '70 worked.

KT O.K. and, ah, what did your training entail as a smokejumper?

BP OK, as a smokejumper in those days we had a new man camp which entailed, I believe it was a month of training. The first thing we went to was... I guess it was actually a week at new man camp. They took us out to an area outside of town here, had some meadows, and set us up in tents, and then put us through basically a boot camp. They'd run us in boots every morning, get us up, the dew was on the ground, we'd be hitting the deck doing push-ups, sit-ups, normal calisthenics, then we'd go for a mile run or whatever, come back, and learn how to climb trees. Show that we could use chain saws, ah, pulaskis, all the fire fighting equipment that we would have to use.

[INTERUPTION]

And also at that time we would have an all night line dig where we would be kept up all day from the time we got up and did the calisthenics, had breakfast, and so on, did our normal daily routine out in the woods and, ah... using tools and such. Then we would be kept up all night that night building line... building fire line through the woods using all the tools that we'd been using all day long. Basically it was to show our endurance, how well we performed under pressure. There would be people along the way acting, sort of like D.I.'s, putting pressure on, you know, to, "keep it up, keep it up." A little bit of shouting in your ear, just a little bit of pressure, more and more. It was more military in those days. That was the training that was given. And it... it showed the weak ones. The weak ones would slowly couldn't hack it, would... would slowly either drop out or break down, and that's the way they were able to cull out the ones that they didn't want. That plus the running and everything would show the ones that couldn't keep up. The ones that couldn't keep up were told that "we don't think that you're material for this, we'll try to get you other jobs." And, ah... that's what they would do. They would put them on... some of those people are... now are actually in the forest now hiring, or using smokejumpers.

KT What kind of wash out rate was there during training?

BP I believe it was close to, ah... ah, close to a half... half the people, 50%, in those days. If we'd have 60, 70 people training at any one time... I not sure that's the way... that's the figure that sticks in my mind... we'd have maybe half of
those... would, ah... would actually graduate and become jumpers and earn their wings. I've got a picture that shows the number of people so I could kind of count... I think it's between 35 and 40 people actually made it in my new man class in '71.

KT Now, ah, most of the people that were applying to be smokejumpers, did they have previous fire experience?

BP Most of them did. There was a few, and they were rare, the ones that were basically, ah... either from an organization that didn't have much fire fighting or had an in somewhere. They would know somebody that'd say, "Hey, Senator could get this gentleman in?" And he'd go, "Well sure, he's a big strapping farm boy and I'm sure he'd be happy to... you know, we could... we could get some kind of a deal for him." They would make a special, um... a special... I don't know what you'd call it... allowance, I guess, for his inability or training, in those days. Now training is even more imperative than it used to be. In those... those days it was the physical conditioning, the, ah... how well you could take it. Now it's... it's not the main criteria anymore. Also they would make... and even in those days they were trying to get minorities and bring them in because there just weren't any and there wasn't... I don't think it was a conscious thought, it wasn't, ah... there weren't as many of the minorities working in the field. So they weren't as used to coming in and doing what we were doing, so they would go out and constantly look for them, which they do more so now.

KT So did you work with some minorities?

BP Oh, yes. Going back to my pre-jumper days I worked with a lot of crews in Washington fires in 1970, when they had big burns in those days. A lot of fires in 1970 in Washington state. Lots of Indian crews. Crews from all over, Mexican crews from the border states. Even worked with convict crews out of California. That's one of the ways they would get their people out into the... of the penal system, they would put them out on to, work farms, basically. And those people would go up in the mountains with one liaison officer and may be one deputy, and then the deputy would stay in camp and the liaison officer from the Forest Service would take the rest of the people, all the rest of the cons, (they liked to be called cons), and they would like to, ah... they would just go up into the mountains and work with us. They'd have all the tools we did and if they wanted to get mean they could get mean but they didn't, they were happy to be there. So, ah... they worked right along side of us.

KT Was there ever... ever any problems or prejudices?

BP No, none, not with us. We were very happy to be there and we... we, ah, we think they were, too. And we kind of enjoyed them, they were kind of interesting, colorful company to be around so we kind of enjoyed them. We didn't, ah... we didn't associate too much to the point where we got on their mean side, but we... we learned a lot from them.
KT How about with the minority crews, was there ever any prejudices?

BP Oh, yes, but... there's not so much prejudices, but a lot of ancient rivalries would come out. If you'd get one Indian... Indian crew mad at another Indian crew because they're... they're from conflicting tribes and, ah, we had that all the time. So you had to be careful not to put, such as Hopi crew with a Navajo crew because they have animosities. Same with the Zuni's with somebody else. And it just goes on and on. There'd be those kind of conflicts arise but they were pretty easy to take care of.

KT Were there any minorities that were on the jumper crew?

BP At first there... when I first started there were very few, we had Mexican, ah... Mexican Americans. There were some Japanese Americans. At the time I knew of no black Americans. I think the blacks came in... oh, when I was in the service, which started after '74. I heard of a few that were in, but they were rare, mainly I guess because they just weren't as used to being in the woods and just weren't familiar with the, ah... what we did. Lately there's been a few more and so on. But mainly the Mexican Americans, Indians, ah... Japanese was kind of interesting; they came from the Nisay population which was brought into this country, ah, during the war... during World War II, and some of them stayed... some of them stuck. And they were imported from the coast and, kind of basically, just told you're going to go and that's the way is. They came, some of them stayed, and got the idea that they were going to farm, or whatever, and, ah... pretty industrious people. And their descendants were the ones we worked with. I remember a few.

KT Was there ever any problems on the jumper crew?

BP As far as lot... there's lots of personal problems between people but I never knew of any where there were any racial conflicts. There might have been, but I just didn't see them. We worked too close, in too close knit a group. Once we earned our wings that kind of made all the jumpers special to every jumper. I knew of none that that started because, "I didn't like the way you look." "I didn't like the way you act maybe, but not because I didn't like what your heritage was." Ah, a lot of personal problems, a lot of animosity built up that way, that would come crashing out sometimes, especially if there was a lot of alcohol involved. Other than that I never saw any.

KT Did you ever work with any women jumpers?

BP Yes, I have since coming back from the service. In 1974 I left for the service, after that jump season. I believe it was September 30 of 1974 I joined the Marine Corps, went in as a Marine Corps officer to train and such. After coming back from that I did work with women. Fact is I jumped with one of the first two women here in Missoula on her... I believe it was her
first fire jump, which is in Alaska. And she was able to keep up and there was no problem with her. We had a tr... what we considered to be trouble with some, because they weren't able to do they physical things that most males were able to do. That's going to be hashed out in time, I'm sure.

KT What kind of sentiments was going amongst the crew when women...?

BP There was... there was... there's more animosity there than I've seen in any other way... that there's... in any other aspect I guess. You get the whole gamut, it just comes right out of the American mainstream. Some people say, "Oh, it's great, no problem." And others say, ah, you know, "They ought to stay back and do what they... what they're meant to do". You know, and so you... you get the whole range. What really hits home a lot of times is when there's not supposed to be a quota... there's never supposed to be a quota... nobody will actually come out and say there is a quota. People don't mind there being allowances made to bring in certain people that have been left out in the past, as long as the truth is told all the way across the line. "This is what's being done and, ah, this is when it's going to stop, and we're going to call it ground zero, and we're going to go from here, everybody's equal now, and we're... we're happy taking... taking up for the problems of the past." The problem is that there are quotas... or there seem to have been quotas... to all of us, (all of the regular everyday jumpers), and yet none of the overhead would admit to it. "No, no, there's not jum... there's no quotas but we've got to get the women in, we've got to get this in, we've got to get that in." That would gall everybody, so that's the one... one of the big things since I've returned that's really... really been kind of a sore point.

KT So do you think that that built a lot of resentment against women?

BP Oh, there's more than should be, yes. But what negates that is the... having the women in there that can do the job. Once you work along side of them and get the idea that they can do it, that does away with the problem, I think. And in most cases it will, it's just a matter of getting used to the idea. I worked with women crews in the early '70's when... at that time they had all women crews, they didn't have a mixture at... at that time, and since then they've integrated and there's no... there seems to be no problem. Or at least there's no major problem, there's always a difference in having a co-ed crew as compared to a males or females only. But I worked with female crew and they... they were... they seemed to be fine; if they were slower in certain things, they were faster in others so they made up for it.

KT Well that's pretty interesting [laughs]. Um, get back to your training, what, ah, how did they train you for the jumps?

BP OK, for the jumps. Well we had at least, I believe it was, two weeks on what's called the units. It's a series... a set of
obstacles or apparatus that we could use to, ah, simulate jumping. One will be a tower which is sitting up at the... at the Missoula jump base here, and it just simulates a plane and you jump out of it and you get the feel the opening shock, and they call it the shock tower. That, plus the... you go to land, they have what they call the let... or the the rolls. It's a parachute landing fall, you practice that. It gives you... pull... you pull up on a cable and it lets you drop at a certain speed to a... to kind of, simulate a parachute landing, and you'll come in on that and have to roll a certain way. You'll roll the best you can without hurting yourself, and you get the idea of rolling every time. Then there's the let downs, if you hit a tree, this simulates letting yourself down out of a tree. Pull yourself up on it, or somebody pulls yourself up on this apparatus, and then you have a certain procedure to do to let yourself loose from your parachute. Tie in to the tree or your harness and let yourself down, basically like rappelling. And then there'll be climbing poles, when you have to go back up and get your gear out of the trees, or parachute or whatever. And they have the poles out there which are climbing poles and it teaches you... you just learn by doing it, how to put on spurs, put on climbing gear and climb back up and retrieve whatever you're supposed to retrieve. So those are the basic units that we had plus a... ah, for a new man year, we had the obstacle... obstacle course which, basically, like any obstacle course has a wall and a cable climb, or hand-over-hand climb, or a lot of running, and jumping, and rolling, and so on, around a course. And we basically did that only our new man year, but that's out there, too.

KT Was there any time during the training when you had doubts as to whether you wanted to finish or not?

BP Oh, no, the more I went into it I knew I would. It becomes a challenge right away and that's... that was good. You had no assurances you were going to make it and so the more things that were thrown at you, at least with me was... it was a real challenge to make it. And, by God, I wasn't going to be left out now, you know. And it seemed like a desirable thing to get your wings. It was the biggest thing at that time, was to get your jump wings.

KT What was the feelings in the plane right before the first training jump?

BP O.K. that was... that was a good one. I'll always remember that. I remember I was in the second load so we stood there and watched the first load, load up. And, you know, we... the more... the night before and it was little bit of hazing we... we were all kind of nervous and you've jumped other towers lots of times, and you got the idea but that one... you know, this is it before you actually step out into space. So we were kind of nervous and we go to sleep that night, and of course some of the "old men"... who they were we don't know... probably have some good guesses... they come slamming into the rooms there... (dormitory style rooms
with four of us sleeping in each room)... throw open the doors, in come the fire crackers -- flum, flum, flum, flum, flum, bam, bam, bam, bam -- smoke filling the room, they're burning holes in their blankets, and, you know, just everything else, and all we do is cover up and just think we're going to survive. Ah, little bit of hazing like that, a lot of moaning and groaning about "I don't want to do it", and "Oh", you know, "Not me, don't look at... I'm going to die... I'm too young to die.", moaning and groaning in the halls, you know, this kind of thing. So the next day we're really... we're really, ah... got the juices flowing for it. We watched the first load fly off, and they were going to jump over by McCauley Butte, here in Missoula. It's just kind of on the south end of the town, near Blue Mountain. That's where they did all the jumping I guess that first year anyway that I was here... not all of it but the first. There was a nice open field and we could get right to it with the trucks and buses, and such, and you couldn't hurt yourself too bad on that area. So we watched them fly off, and they must have jumped because they came back and it was empty. And then we loaded up. And the first... it's... it's a strange feeling, you know, you're going to jump and you're just sitting here, hearts in your throat and it's pounding away, and, ah, you're trying think, "Now what did they teach, what do I look at, what do I think about," you know, "what happens if this happens," and so on. You're going over and over the procedures, and I remember I was second man, I was... I was watching the guys in back when they said, "In the door." So O.K. I'm in the door. One guys in front of me and I'm in back of him looking basically at his pack... at his parachute. And the next thing I know is they slap him and all I do is follow him out the door, take the step into the right position, and out you go. And I had no time to think, once they slapped him it was just [snaps his fingers] reflex that you go. You've done it so many times that it wasn't anything. And I remember the sensations, I was looking out at... I believe it was the Mission Mountains, I don't know... some mountains in the distance. And I just kept my eye... focus on those as I was falling, or tried to, and I remember the shock and just the glorious recognition that I had a chute over me. It was a good feeling, and was in pretty good spirits the whole way down. Then I had fun. We were at 2000 feet, that's higher than we normally jump, so we had a little time to play around, and do our turns, and try it out, and that was fun. So it was a... it was quite a realization. We hit the ground and boy you're just... you're floating.

KT How did the landing go on your first jump?

BP Real good, it was easy... easy landing I hit and rolled just like I was taught, just amazing. Since then I've had some bad experiences landing, but, ah... that one went real good.

KT What are some of the bad experiences you had landing?

BP My first fire jump was in... near Lakeside, Oregon. We flew over shortly after I had completed training and had... I think I
had July 4th weekend off of 1971 which I... which I... went to Waterton Lakes in Glacier, and we had a little party up there, had a kind of good time just traveling in the wild country. And they flew us out up here and we went to Redmond, Oregon. And I remember getting on the plane, it was a DC-3, and they said, "OK, it's going to be a little ways, we're just... you know, just take it easy, get some sleep, whatever." So I was sleeping when somebody shoved me and said "Wake up, wake up, it's time." So we jumped up, and tried to wake up, and get the cobwebs out of my mind. And by that time they shoved you in the door, and said "OK we need"... however many there were, six or eight on the fire... I think it was six, and said, "Go." I had no idea where I was, if I was in California, Oregon, or Washington, and didn't know which way the plane was flying because I'd been sleeping and so had been just about everybody else. When it came turn and I jumped I tried for the spot and couldn't quite make it so I saw a little bit of an opening and went for it. It turned out to be an old logging road with a bunch of trees down across it, and I hit the logging road, but the problem is, there was a tree which had fallen over and still had the limbs on it; the limbs had held it up off the ground about, oh, four or five feet, and here are these spikes sticking out... stobes sticking out of the... of the trunk. So when I came down I saw that and I just figured it was over, I was going to impale myself on this, and my feet hit in between two stobes on the trunk, I slammed into that, fell over on my back onto the ground about four or five feet below, and that was my first introduction to a fire jump. So it... it kind of put the fear of the Lord into me at that time. I thought, "Oh, Lord, if these are all like this I don't know what I'm going to do." And they went easier after that, but that was my first fire jump.

KT Did you hurt yourself?

BP Not at that time, no. I had other experiences with getting hurt.

KT What was that first fire like?

BP First fire was... it was amazing because there was... a fairly small fire. A lightning strike. And we figured one lightning strike had hit fourteen trees in one little area, one general area, good sized trees, I believe they were Doug fir and Ponderosa pine. One lightning strike it come down, and somehow just bounced around between these trees because they were all peeled, you could see the bark was peeled and you could tell a fresh strike. They were within, oh... a fifty to, ah, fifty... around fifty feet, ah, circumference... area... and it was just stacked in there, and there was a strike and we counted fourteen trees hit by this thing. One piece of bark was blown off and it caught fire... I think it was the bark anyway... something had caught fire from all that intense heat, and started it burning in a small... oh, it might have been fifty feet... fifty feet around I guess, fifty feet circumference maybe... small fire. We got it out... I remember it was on kind of a ridge overlooking a
valley... I think it was in to the Lakeside area of Oregon. And that's what that was like.

KT  What was your most memorable fire?

BP  [laughs] That's fairly recently, that's probably the Wahoo fire in Idaho, two years ago, two seasons ago. I was the fire boss, I happened to be in a crew where there were a... they were all GS-6's. We were all the same rank, basically the same steps. So the first man in the door in that case becomes the fire boss, well I was the first man in the door just by the luck of the draw. So I... I jumped, got down, took my radio, went up on it. The problem had been that we weren't allowed to jump on the fire by the, ah... by the Forest. One of the... one of the gentlemen on the Forest wanted us to wait and thought that fire wasn't going to go anywhere, and he had the say so. He was Fire Management Officer, I guess, in the area... in Nez Perce there. Said, "No, don't jump that one." So we were circling it getting ready to jump and he said, "No, don't jump it, check out some more." So we did. When we did the other fires were too windy to jump on. They were just... we couldn't in to them. So we flew back to Moose Creek and waited there for, like, three hours. So we... we'd gone over at day-break and tried to jump the first one, which turned out to be the Wahoo fire then went... tried the other ones... and went over to Moose Creek, set down, waited till midday. Now the fire... it's getting hot, it's not humid, it's real dry, and they said "OK, go back and jump the first one," which was the Wahoo. So we went back to that one and it's starting to cook, it's really starting to burn. We got... jumped down it, and the, ah... you know, drainage to the west of the fire, and went up on it. I scouted it out, it was... Oh, I don't know... maybe a hundred acres at that time, started fighting, caught the head of it basically with the help of retardant planes... retardant planes, and some good work from our people. They jumped two more crews on it so we had a maximum crew of 20 people... 20 jumpers, 20 smokejumpers. We had Redmond jumpers and Missoula jumpers, I believe it was, and some had jumped out of... out of McCall, Idaho, but they were Redmond jumpers. And so we had three small crews... three small crews of six men, I believe it was, plus two overhead. And I continued to act as overhead on the fire but we got no help. We had no... we had no additional forces coming. And we kept asking, and asking, and asking, nothing came. So the situation looked bad after that. After that... that night, still had no help and no supplies. We had gotten I believe two... two cases of C rats and one five gallon container of water and that was all we had been resupplied with all day and night long. We figured they've got some... some, ah, crews in... organized crews coming in the next day, they didn't come. We fought it the rest of the day... we were... of that day. So we were in there one night... two nights... or two days and one night. And it's getting into the... to the end on the second day to where about 5:00 or 1600 or so. And we still had the top fairly controlled but we were so spread out, so thin we couldn't... once it get a run at us it something that rolled down the hill and started something blazing and it'd come
back up at us. We'd just have to abandon ship and leave everything and then come back and get it later when we could. We'd come back up, knock it down again, and... but we had three small crews spread out totally miles, it seemed apart. And we... nothing we could do about it, totally encompassing the fire. So, ah, finally I told them that we had thunderheads coming in from the east and the winds were going to change, it was just a real mess coming up. Finally we were given word that, "OK, we decided not to fight this fire, it's in the wilderness area. We're going to let it go, so pull yourselves off." OK so we said, "That's it, stop working." One crew went down to get the gear out of the bottom, and we started getting everything set up on the top... helispot on top of the fire. Another crew was way down on the bottom and they were going to try and come back up and help get the gear. And just then the wind changed from going... going toward the east, now it came out of the east where the thunderheads were building. Blew heavy in that direction, fire jumped the drainage and blew up that side. So now, the people in the bottom were in... in basically, a chimney. Or they were in a... in a drainage which the bottom was burning. And then the wind it just naturally pulled... pushes it up, and it's just like coming up a chimney. So we watched that fire, it was about as high as I've ever seen, since southern California, just blaze in a few seconds went from the bottom of the drainage to the top of the ridge just encompassing everything, flames a hundred, a hundred and fifty feet tall, shooting above the trees. And just [whew], whoofed it all the way up. People on the bottom asked them if they could get out. They said "No, we can't make it up in time, if it goes on our side"... there... they'd be caught in the middle of all that slash, and all the woods in between us. So they said they were going to their... their fire shelters. So they put on their fire shelters and dug an area around it and they were going to stay there and hold it, if they could. And luckily the fire when it took that part of the ridge... whatever, it was getting dark. The helicopters had dropped off one of their men and was trying to find him in the dark and smoke and he wasn't able get anybody out, so he finally found the man he had dropped off, got him out of the way of the fire. And those people down there just rode it out. The fire burned up to the edge of the meadow and then quit so they were real lucky. So they didn't.... And that was about the most memorable. We had already taken our... our troops back into the, ah... into the center of the fire and were going to hold it there and then wait it out. And that was... that was about the most memorable one we almost got a lot of the crew burned up, but it was just a... it was a real mess when it turned out. But it turned out OK I... it turned out after that the fire took off and I think it burned 3000 acres or something like that... between 1000 and 3000 acres. And we had it at about... at 300 or whatever.

KT  Wow.

BP  So it just... it went.
KT  Wow. What were those guys feeling like when they were crawling underneath their fire shelters?

BP  They were a little bit spooked. It's, ah... it's not a good feeling to have to sit there and watch something comes towards you that... that's that awesome, but, ah, they did... they were going to do it that's all... that's the only chance they had at that time. Luckily it didn't burn as hot as we thought it might up there. If the wind had kept up, if it... had it been earlier in the day, it might have whoofed right over them and they'd had to survive underneath the shelters. As it was they didn't have to so they're [laughs]... they're happy about that, too.

KT  [PAUSE], Did you ever do any project work detail between fires?

BP  Yes, all kinds, everything you can think of. We planted trees. I worked, also out at Plains. Was farmed out there as a member of that Plains crew, as such I was still considered a Missoula jumper, come back from Plains, Montana and work at Missoula, or jump out of Missoula. But they would farm us out there and we were to be used by that forest or that... the Plains District as they wanted. So we served as a slash crew, we would, ah... plant trees. We'd go out and cut up slash on the ground in order to... to prepare the area for seeding or for planting again... or for burning. We'd build... build fire lines around cut blocks, we'd go out and collect cones. Just about everything in the world. We... in hunting season we acted as... as gate guards, we'd go up and check gates to see if they'd been broken into and people driving where they're not supposed to. We built lookouts. We helped out around the Station, building... building things around the Station. We built trails. Just about everything there was to do we just about done.

KT  How did the jumpers feel about project work?

BP  Usually they liked it if it was interesting work. Most of them they'd rather do that than sitting around the station, or sitting around Missoula. In the old days it was picking dandelions. We'd go out on the lawn with a butter knife and try to get the dandelions out of the lawn... out of the thing. Now it's... it's "Beautifying the Mall Project" which you'll probably hear about. The Mall Project was a, you know, a horrendous thing where a lot of rock was hauled and a lot of landscaping, and such, and that was the big pet project and it's... lately it's taken up time [for] jumpers in Missoula, while they're at Missoula. So they'd just as soon get out and do something else in the woods.

KT  How did the smokejumpers get along with the District people?

BP  Usually they got along very well. Once in awhile they'd get themselves in trouble. They'd have, maybe, too wild a parties or too wild of people on the crew and... and there'd be, ah, repercussions from that. It was usually from off hours things
that kind of lapped over in the on hours, or just individuals going a little bit too wild and that causes problems, and we'd get a bad reputation. But other than that usually they got along very well, especially in Plains. A lot of the jumpers are from Plains, or decided to stay there and they actually live in the area, and they like it.

KT Well did there seem to be any kind of rivalry between the District crews and the jumper crews?

BP Sometimes there were, ah, the jumpers were looked upon sometimes as prima donnas, they were the ones who get paid more for doing the same work it looked like. Of course we had the experience and we had done it for a long time, where some of these other crews they were... maybe they'd done it for a long time, too, but they weren't as well trained, or whatever, and they didn't get paid as much. And here they... they thought they were getting the short end of the stick, I would imagine. And there was some... if... if a jumper's picked over a District person they wonder why, you know, why don't you pick us, you know, we're... we're your own instead of choosing some of those outsiders to do, whatever the good deal, was. So there was a little bit of animosity... animosity that way, but it happened... it all happened once the federal cutbacks... money and such started happening. Well people got pinched then... then there's always problems between the workers, who's going to get what good deal.

KT How did the smokejumpers view themselves?

BP View themselves... in what respect?

KT Like you had said that they were, kind of, viewed as prima donnas, how did the smokejumpers actually view themselves?

BP I think they considered themselves to be the premier fire fighting outfits in the country. Obviously the best are chosen to be jumpers and so everything builds up to that. That's the epitome of smoke... of fire fighting... of wild land fire fighting, you know, ah, that... you can't get any better. We're supposed to be the airborne shock troops, you know, of the Forest Service, so therefore we're the first in, and usually the first out so we can, you know, we don't... to do more jumping and more initial attack. So, yeah, we thought of ourselves as special. We were elite I'm sure. If they don't... if they don't say they do I think down deep they do, they have to in order to have that pride.

KT Was there pretty good morale among the jumper crew?

BP Yes, yes, even with all the... the (excuse the vernacular) bitching, there was lots of, ah... there was lots of pride there you could tell. They were proud that they were jumpers, that they are jumpers and so on. It shows through all the... the... the comments such as, "Well someday I'm going to go out and get a
"real job", by God." you know. That's always, "I'm going to get a "real job", because this isn't a real job." Three to six months a year just isn't real. Go out... travel around the world that doesn't make... yeah, we're going to go back and get a "real job", and tell these people what they can do with their positions." But, ah, that seems to be the consensus I think down deep they're real proud of it.

KT Well what do you think about the idea of the professional jumper?

BP I think... I think we have been professional jumpers for some years, it's just now they're trying to recognize that fact. In the past, jumpers were never... I don't think the whole system was designed to be what it's used for now. It was never designed to support somebody for a whole year as a profession. It was a three month job, basically, to be done by somebody as a part-time job in the summer time. Maybe a teacher, a student especially, to get them started, and that's the way it was used. When I first started the age... the median, or mean age, of everybody was real low. I was 21 and I was about the middle of the group, there was some 20 year olds, maybe a 19 year old... I'm not sure... 20 years old. The "old men" in the outfit were like 25. I remember we were just looking up to these people like, "God, they're still jumping at that age." And now, if you go back, I think the mean or median age some... whatever it would be... around 28, 29, going toward 30. So some of these people that got started when I did, stayed with it and like myself included we came back and wanted to do it as a living. All of a sudden, well if we're going to stay on then that didn't allow as many other people to come in, jump for a little while, and then get out and do what they were going to do as a "real job." They... we wanted this. So we stayed on from year to year trying to eek out a living and draw it out as long as possible with some early work before the jump season. Some late work after the jump season. And then have three or four months off and we could, you know, go out and just make it on whatever we could do. Maybe travel if we didn't have any other responsibilities, or odd jobs, or maybe get another job. But we'd always come back to jumping come the spring time. And we liked it when we could start as early as possible. Well, with the cutbacks and federal spending, which I think is necessary but, you know, it's going to hurt somebody, everybody had to bite the bullet, and that was us. And with that, they started to get very particular about we're only to give you what you... the three months that you...we have to give you... were called the 6 and 20 position, six pay periods on and 20 off. Well that's not a very good deal. That's three months on and nine months off out of the year. If that's the case you can't live on three months pay even if it's real good pay, you know, for long anyway. So we start looking around. That's one reason I'm in the position I'm in as a deputy sheriff now. There's just very few positions out there that are going to go year round. And if we're talking, ah, professional smokejumper, well, somebody's going to have to come up with some bucks to allow them to keep these professional people around
doing professional things, or I don't know where they're going with the whole system. It just isn't designed to support what the people want it to support.

KT With this change in the median age do you think there was a change in the general feelings within the smokejumping unit, did you notice any changes?

BP Some, yes. When I was a younger jumper it was more gung ho. I don't know about that... less... maybe less sarcastic, maybe we were more in awe of everything, maybe you can do more with a younger person, and they'll let you get away with it. You have some people around now that have some life experiences to fall back on and all of a sudden they're going, "Whoa," you know, "you're stepping on my toes when you're doing this and making me do this, you're not giving me what I expect to get as my just rewards." Whereas in the old days everything was a benny, you know. Most of us... one of our first few jobs out in the real world, and, "Sure step on our toes a little bit we don't care we're doing what we like to do and this is fun". Whereas now, "Hey, I'm trying to make a living and support my children and my wife and my whatever and, ah, I'm not being allowed to do so, and you're taking all the good deals and making them bad deals." You know, the per diem problem that they've had, people interpreting different rules and administrative procedures differently. Every time you had a change of administration or change in personnel officer they'll say, "Wait a minute we're not going to give you guys this good deal any more we're going to flip flop and say 'no more of this'." And now they're doing in with travel, you know, if you've heard they aren't going to pay you during travel any more. If you're traveling on overtime they're not going to pay you overtime, well that's... that was... that was unheard of [laughs] when, ah... that was just... we figured that's our just rewards. If we're out there stuck off on Timbuktu in Alaska somewhere, and we are a lot of times, we're not going to get paid because we're traveling. We're not traveling of our own volition we're traveling because they're, you know. There's all kinds of problems like that. They've had what they call lock ups, where they've put people inside an armory boundary like, I guess it was Phoenix or somewhere, they'll take an armory with fence and say "all you people inside." Somebody walks in dutifully, they lock the gates and say, "Nobody gets out, but nobody gets paid, you're on standby. You're not prisoners but you can't go anywhere." We're going "ta, da, ta, now wait a minute this doesn't make sense, ah, I think we've got a problem here." So... so they've had lots of problems like this. They can do it I understand, and I don't know how they can get away with it, but in our... most... most jumpers opinion if we're going to be held somewhere and told, "Wait a minute we don't want you to go anywhere, we want you to stay here just in case there is a fire." Then you ought to get paid. That makes sense, but that's not justified by a lot of administrations. Sometimes that's... that's looked upon as, "No wait a minute we're not... we're not making you work you just have to just stay here for awhile and stay in this area and, ah, we're not going to let you go nowhere but we're not going to pay
you, obviously that's too much money to waste on that sort of thing and..." That... that gets everybody's neck bowed; we kind of, "Wait a minute." So we've hashed that out around... I don't know if it's ever going to be, ah, ever going to be solved [laughs].

KT That's pretty interesting. When you were working with the jumpers in the early '70's, what kind of feelings about Viet Nam did the guys have?

BP Well, about the whole gamut I'd say. I was pretty right wing, I still am. And we had people that were totally flower children, just hated the whole idea, and they were just into the... the environmental, ah... anti this, what... just everything that you can think of. There were people that were hippy types just thought that was the most horrendous thing to be over there. And then there were people like me who, ah, thought it was... it was... you had to put your foot down somewhere and had to stop the problem. You had to... you had to face the challenge somewhere, and this was as good as any. A lot of them had been there. Even at that time there were people that came back. Some of them had been wounded, some of them had been in the C.I.A., some of them had been in every branch of the service. And that was one reason, even though I was jumping at the time, I knew I still had to go in the service to... in a little... kind of, ah... I'd always planned to, but because I'd got this good deal jumping and... and been chosen I had waited until '74, well by that time Viet Nam was winding down; so I got in but it was... it was too late for Viet Nam. And so I did my bit, I guess, and got out after five years. But I'd do it again. I think everybody should but.... As far as that we had a lot of people who... who were draft dodger type of people and we had a lot of people who were, ah, very militant as far as let's go fight them now. The whole range... it was just... we were... we came from all America basically and we had all their views [laughs].

KT What were the crew bosses like?

BP Well at one time they were more God-like; they were more like D.I.'s. When I first came in they struck fear in your heart. And then somewhere along the line in the... within the last ten years, I guess, it's been more "I want to be accepted by you guys, ah, I want to work alongside of you and I don't want to have to give any orders, you understand we have to do this, don't you?" You know this kind of thing, that's what I've seen anyway. People go more for... it seems like it's going... it's slanting more toward, "I want to be popular with you guys because I want to go out and drink with you, and we're drinking buddies and by God I don't want to have to tell you what to do." Where in the old days, "I don't care what you think of me, by God, this is what you're going to do." And so that seems to be the slant. That's just my personal opinion of how it's going [laughs]. They were to be respected at least in the old days and I still respect most of them. There seems to be a lot of politics in how you get there. Ah, I know I've put... I've put in for different
positions before and it gets kind of a personal thing where you're going, "Wait a minute, this guys chosen, look at his qualifications and here's mine." And add them up and they just don't add, you know. Mine seem to be top heavy and his are light, but he was chosen. Well, you know, there you go. So you don't know... you just don't know where the... where you... where it's... where it's coming from. That's another one of my decisions... or reasons for my decision to become a deputy sheriff. Once I got the offer I figured I might. So that's the only reason... I still miss jumping, you know, kind of a long forty mil... it's only been one season... about a half a season. So, ah, I don't know the, ah... there is... there has been a change, and I think it's... it's just following the mold of the rest of society, and maybe it'll be a swingback... I think there will be a swingback to more demanding type people in those positions.

KT What did the guys do on their off time?

BP Oh, boy, on their off time. Well, there was always the partying. Lot of booze, lot of booze. They had a lot of hiking sometimes. I know as I've said before in... we first graduated from the new man camp took a group of us and went up to Waterton Lakes and Glacier and traveled in there awhile and just had a good time looking around the country. Now they... I know they've got people that raft a lot, raft the rivers. They have people that are involved in... in sport jumping. Some of them... fact is one... one or two of them are on national teams. Oh, what else... lot of runners, lot of runners keep up their running. That's about the extent of what I really know about the pastimes. A lot of partying, now that's what they try to be a big deal on, but I've always shunned it. I've been more of a loner But then a lot of them... I never got into mainstream partying. I went to the things and so I said, "Yeah, this is nice, and that's OK, but I'm going to go and do whatever I want to do alone."

KT Do you think that alcohol affected their performance?

BP I think it... do I? Yeah, I think it probably did. There's lots of people who jumped with hangovers and they did their jobs but you wonder if they couldn't have done it better not being hammered. And I'm sure a lot of people jumped when they were still a little bit high, I wonder about that. I didn't like it; I don't know what you can do about it. It's like you're telling them not to do something on their off hours, yet it's... I know it's going to affect them on their on hours... in their on duty hours. But I don't know if there is a solution.

[END OF SIDE ONE]

[BEGIN SIDE B]

KT Can you tell us about some of the distinct characters on your crew?
Oh, yes, well I can think of so many of them all the way back. I guess starting back when I... when I first got going we had legends in their own time. We had people that... that even were jumping at that time that we still tell stories about. And even though they're still around we act like... we venerate them as if they were dead. And one of them was Bernie Hildey, he was a legend. He did some things that would probably get him in jail now if he, ah, if... if he told about it, you know, [laughs]... in that context. But nothing real bad or criminal but things that were really interesting. He was quite a drinker at that time and most of his exploits dealt with drinking. There was a famous fight they had in the Heidelhaus which I don't know if anybody else has told about. I was not there but these things were told to us and we kind of made myths about... out of them. We had smokejumper legends. This one in the Heidelhaus was where one of the boys, ah... I guess I'll just leave him nameless at the time because I probably can't remember all their names... but this number one gentleman was known as a real... a real fighter and... and nobody... he never wanted anybody to get the best of him. Never wanted anybody to be able to get one up on him. So they were sitting in the Heidelhaus and in that time it was a real beer drinking place and you go in and have a real hurrah of a time. And, ah, they were sitting there and had just come back in from fires and happened that everybody'd gotten back together at the same time and there's a big crew of them went down to the Heidelhaus. And they were sitting there in that Bavarian type of atmosphere, and drinking, and singing, and swinging their mugs. And one guy... another guy looks up and he sees the beam up there, it was a big wooden beam, and he says, "Ah" He jumps up from the table, jumps up and starts pushing... you know, doing the pull-ups... one, two, three, four, five, six. Well, they all... everybody kind of says,"Oh, that's neat." And they look at this first guy and you know he doesn't like to be out done. They look at him. Pretty soon all of a sudden he makes one leap... flying leap, he jumps up and he's standing up on top of the beam, he reaches and he tests the, ah... the, ah... chandelier that's there. Reaches out and grabs that chandelier, starts to swing across the room. Well when he did the chandelier's not designed to carry that much weight, it came crashing down into the tables, beer, mugs, people flying, and it was a great big hurrah. The police are on the way. He got out the back door, they caught about three or four of the other jumpers before they could get away. So anyway the restitution was paid and it was a, you know, a big mess. That was one of our big... of our... of our things at one time. They also had the, ah, I think it was the Lake Chelan fire in Washington in 1970. I was not a jumper, I heard about it. Big, big fight on the buses, they were driving along and it was... everybody wanted to go home. The jumpers had been there for awhile and they... they'd been on this bad deal fire and it was just... morale was down. They'd been bussed up to this thing and told, "We're going to mop up and just do all this... this work." Which no jumper likes to do. And they said "OK, now we're going to take you home." Everybody's, "all right we're going home." They took them into
town and whatever, got them ready to go home. Changed the... their mind, changed the orders and said, "Going to go back on the fire line after all." Morale plummets again, everybody gets drunk, they stop in route and get booze, and everybody's hammered. They're on these two different buses; well one bus is worse than the other. Meanwhile on this bus as they're traveling back to the fire, fights break out. People are relieving themselves out the back door, out the windows. I mean, it is one mess. Just so happens that day that when they arrive back toward the camp... and I mean it's a big mess on this thing... there are [laughs] the big wigs from... from Headquarters, ah... Forest Service back in D.C. had come out... were Forest and all these... all the Head Brass are there. And they're sitting there lining out... along the lake shore, what they're going to do, and it's in this real nice section where they have condominiums or... or lake resorts, you know, just kind of a nice place. This is where they've chosen for the fire camps... kind of, whatever. And it was pretty nice country, you know, they want to keep your decorum up because there's too many people around there that aren't... aren't Forest Service related and you want to make sure... anyway keep... to keep the way they... the public views the Forest Service... keep up the image. Up pulls these buses. Here comes this one, the doors fly open and people spill out, and they're totally zonked. I mean they're gone. And people are out half dressed, and they're fighting, and guys are punching on the way out the door. People are barfing, they're... you know, it's just a real mess as they tumble out. And one guy looks out and they see these two girls laying on this... like a wharf or a floating dock type thing out there. "Hey, look at this," [claps his hands] off come the clothes, everything, and they go flying into the... into the water, and they scare these girls half to death... I mean here are these, you know, naked or half naked jumpers, and they're all floundering out there in a drunken stupor as this... as these women are trying to get in the boat and get away see. So here all this is viewed by the... by the big... big wigs. And of course, you know, heads were going to roll, and it was a big, big mess. And, of course, that was one of the famous debacles until a couple of years ago when they had the Alaska one, where they had the commercial airlines flight which came back from Alaska on the same day that they had the smokejumper going away party up there. They knew we were terminating from Alaska. Alaska was getting wet, and we were being sent home. I wasn't there but I sure got the second hand word and everybody did. The legend goes that they were told, "Here we go party", you know, they have a big old party, everybody gets smacked, and then say, "Oh, we're going to go home, Missoula jumpers get ready, you're going home right now, we're going to go on a commercial airlines." Well everybody's drunk so they... they actually physically had to carry one guy onto the plane, you know, one got under his arms, one his legs, and they carry this guy onto the plane. Meanwhile mamma, and kids, and papa, and everybody, they're all standing in the... in the, ah... in the airport. And here come this... these ruffians in the door, and all this beards and this, you know, well God awful language and, and, ah, they're just... they're grabbing up their kids and getting them out of
the way of the hoard. And here they come, and the la... "Get out of my, blah, blah, blah," and cussing and moaning, and groaning, and, you know, just the whole bit in a drunken mess. So they get on board the plane and it continues the whole way back, I guess it was Northwest was the... was the airlines. Well the head of the Forest Service got a letter or a phone call from the, ah, the Northwest President saying, "No Forest Service crews will ever ride on my planes again." And they had gotten letters from doctors and lawyers and everybody else in Fairbanks and Anchorage or wherever saying, "This crowd of ruffians that was allowed onto the plane and into the airport, and what a bunch of... and blah, blah, blah, blah." So this was a big thing and heads rolled, you know, they fired people and they gave letters to people and [laughs] and it was.... But that will go down as a legend, too, see. It was... it's a way grin... or kind of behind your back, you know, smile... smile about it and say, "Yeah, we had a good time that time." But they... it was kind of a faux pas. There were lots of other ones... lots... lots of Bitterrooters that were known for some hellatious things that they'd do. They were... was an ex-Marine I can think of, ah, ah... can't even think of names right now... but in any case there were lots of people that very well known or still are. McIver... McIver's the ex-Marine, he'd lost part of his hand, he'd been shot in the leg... or hit in the leg... he'd hit in the head and had a steel plate in the head. He was known for crushing beer cans on his head, on his aluminum plate. And, ah... yeah, he was quite a... he was... he was getting burned over all the time, he'd get caught alone in a fire somewhere and he'd get... for some reason he'd get scorched, you know [laughs]. He had bad luck. And, ah, he was a famous individual; very soft spoken, spoke with a southern drawl, you know, "My name is Rob McIvah" [laughs] like that. And, ah, let's see Bernie Hildey, ah... there was just a whole bunch... I can't even hardly approach all the names... but, ah...

KT  Was there a crew clown?

BP  Good grief! There was a lot of crew clowns. We had one named Powley on my... on my new man class, that was... the ones I just talked about before weren't in my new man class, they were older men that we kind of made into heros. Powley was kind of the clown... ah, I don't know what's happened to him lately, I've lost track. But he jumped for a couple of years and was... was just... just had a good time the whole time. Pitts was another gentleman, I think he's a dentist over in Billings. I met him in the smokejumper reunion here just a little while ago. Good grief, I remember Morgan, Morgan was a good one. He wasn't in my class either, he was older than me. He was the "old man". We thought, he was approaching 30, and we thought, "Oh, man what is this old guy doing." But he'd run along backwards as we're running forwards running our courses he'd be running backwards saying, "What's the matter with you guys, can't you keep up." And we were young, we were like 21 year old... years old... he's approaching 30 and he's just in real good shape. And now I think he's a stunt man working down in Hollywood. He actually doubled
KT What kind of reactions did you get from your friends and family when you decided to be a smokejumper?

BP Oh, most of them didn't know what a smokejumper was. They said, "What now are you going to do? You're going to jump out of planes into fires." That's the first thing they'd say. "You're going to jump into forest fires?" "No, I don't jump into them, you... you jump... you jump near them and then you go fight them and put them out." "Well why would you want to do that?" You know they just can't understand that. In the southwest they might know them more now but in those days very few people knew what a smokejumper was. They do have smokejumpers stationed in Silver City but that's in New Mexico, in the southern part of New Mexico, and a few people would know, but very few outside of that one little region. And they... they'd hardly ever used them in Arizona... I think they've used them more now, or they have in recent years. But at that time very, very few were ever used in Arizona. And that's where I was from. So most of my people didn't know anything about it and, ah, they still... that's still the way they see... you go back east of the... probably east of the plains they have no idea what you're talking about. "Smoke jumper, now what is that, I don't under... you know, why would you want to jump over things like that?" And, ah, so it's... it's always interesting talking to them.

KT Have you ever been hurt on a fire?

BP Yes a few times. The... probably the worst time was called the Vann Creek fire and it was on the, ah... it was in Idaho, I think it was in August... August 22 I believe it was... of '73. And in any case, August 22 of '73, the Vann Creek fire, I'd jumped on it as a two manner with Gary Lyons out of Greenville, Idaho. We had fought, I believe it was this fire, and then gone down to help two other gentlemen that were on... I think they were a district crew... that were on another fire, down below ours. There were little fires everywhere, all along on the ridges, and this one was... just happened to be below ours. We went down and help them, we got it just about under control and had it lined, and we sat down, took a break and figure out our time. And you never sit down below a fire because things roll out of fires. So I didn't know at the time that I was really sitting down below it, but there was a finger of fire that just went above me, just a little bit. And I was sitting down below that, down the hill a ways. And unbeknownst to me a log had burned away, and behind the log a bunch of rocks had rolled down hill and was piled up there behind it. Well that log burned away and as one rock decided to come down at that time I was sitting there with my back up... facing uphill and Gary was on my left. I remember we were sitting there figuring our time, or whatever and the next thing I saw, heard, I noticed, or felt, was Gary
jumping up and saying "a rock!" When he did I started to jump straight up and just as I did something hit me. I never saw the rock; he said it was... was approaching a basketball size... I don't know. It was a pretty good sized rock, would do you in. The thing hit the back of my Bullard helmet... and I guess I ought to sell Bullard helmets... and dented it in, it drove it into my... my scalp and into my skull a little bit, and... but it saved me from the... most the damage... and put me out. And I was down. And the next thing I remember was I woke up and I hear... there was a plane flying and I saw a retardant bomber, a TBM, coming in on another fire on the other ridge and I was watching him flying by and dropping his load. And I'm kind of, really in a daze, and I look around, and they're scurrying around, and Gary's going up and building a... building a... a helispot to get me out because at that time I guess when I'd been in a daze or unconscious, or whatever, I'd talked about my neck being broken, being hit so hard or whatever it would have snapped your neck, or could have. So I... I guess I told them, "Yeah, my neck's broken" or whatever. So he was, "Oh, boy"... I said, "Now you've got a real good deal." So he went up and got that... got the helispot built, they brought in a doctor, I think he was 75 years old at that time if he was a day, he totters down the mountain to me, and he gets down there, kind of old and crotchety, and he just can't hardly bend over, and "What's the problem." And Gary says, "Well, we think his neck's broken, you know, we're worried about his neck." You know, and I was... they were trying to make sure that I didn't move my head and everything so I didn't hurt myself. He says, "Oh, is that right," and he reaches down and he takes my head in both hands and he goes whoof, whoof, whoof, just twists it one way and twist it back the other way and says, "No, he's OK" [laughs] So... so, ah, by that time I'd, you know... it caused a little bit of pain but it... luckily it wasn't... it wasn't anything damaged to where it would have snapped my spinal cord. So they still treated me as if I was pretty bad off. My neck was sore and I was in a little bit of pain. So they put me on a stretcher, took me to the helispot, and took me... flew me out to I think it was... oh... oh, down on the Snake River. And then I had to ride an ambulance up Whitebird Hill, and anybody that knows Whitebird Hill, used to be the most switch-backed highway in the U.S. And it was one switch-back after another, after another, and if I wasn't sick or hurt before I got on that ambulance, I was really sick when I got out of that ambulance. Finally made it into Grangeville and they made me into a little monk by shaving part of my head up here and stitching up the... the wound, and other than that it was OK. And I took about a week and within a week I was back on a fire. I still had the plastic and the stitches I think in it, but it was... it was healed up enough to where I went jumping in another week I was back on another fire. It worked out pretty good all because of a helmet.

KT Oh. Have you ever had any other injuries?

BP Nothing... nothing serious. I've hit a root hole one time
and it damaged my foot. I... tree had uprooted and fallen over and when I... when I parachuted down everything looks normal, when I get down low I see it's a big hole like a big... almost like an excavation where this tree is uprooted, all the nice soil's been taken away and there's nothing but rock exposed. So I hit right in the middle of that and just crunched. I think I hurt my elbow, my knee, and everything else, and it... that stays sore for awhile but that's just normal jumping injuries. I can't think of any other one... really other bad ones that I had. I was pretty lucky as far as that goes.

KT What... about what is the injury rate for a smokejumpers?

BP Oh, I'm not sure. Most of them will end up with, at least, one or two good injuries. There's... there's only been I think three deaths associated with actual jumping since 1939... I believe that's still the amount. There's no... couldn't be very... very many more than that. Ah, now as far as fires there's been more that died on fires and because of the fire themselves and... in that action. Far as the jumping, we've had some broken backs. I was on... I've helped carry out a couple of broken backs. Legs, arms, dislocated shoulders and knees, that sort of thing is real common, lots of them have... you'll see stitches in their shoulders or stitches in their knees where they ruined knees and have to do something... or ruin their shoulders and they have to do something to it. So I would say probably, ah, 50% have some kind of an injury. Maybe most have a smaller type injury probably. But 50% have a pretty good, major injury by the time they get out say of all their years jumping. If they don't then they're real lucky. I don't know the exact... that would be my guess.

KT Did you ever have any problems in a let down?

BP In a let down... no problems as such. I've been... I've slipped out of a tree before with with a para... with a chute. I think it was in Idaho. I hit a tree, started to make a let down, hadn't got all the way through it yet, and I felt my chute start to give way, and the branches and everything starts to let go, and it's not hung up good enough, and then there you go. You don't have a chute over you that's catching air, you don't have your let yet, there's nothing to tie into, you just go down, and you're just hoping for the best. And I remember hitting extra hard and waiting for the pain but... I... it was just I think maybe enough of the chute snagged the tree on the way down or whatever but it... it broke my fall enough to where I wasn't hurt. But it's a... it's a... it's not a good feeling to know that you have nothing under and nothing on top of you and you're just going to [claps his hands], you know, you're just a piece of baggage going to hit the deck [laughs].

KT So how did you get off most of your fires?

BP Most of my fires were walking out. I did a lot of jumping on the Nez Perce National Forest, just across the border in
Idaho, a lot in the wilderness area, jumping out of, ah, Grangeville, that's their main jump area. And all of... all of those we just about walk; you had to walk five, six, seven miles, ten miles, even twenty miles, thirty, whatever, to get out. And you either went to a helispot and dropped your packs off, you made your weighted gear, and then walked out the rest of the way, or you wait there and get a helicopter out from that area. But it just depends on what their pleasure was. A lot of time nowadays they don't like to take helicopters in there, they'll bring a mule string in, and take out your gear later, you just leave it, cover it up, and you walk out to the nearest road. It's a... and that's usually on... at the edge of the boundary or of the wilderness. So that's normally the way I'm used to and accustomed to coming out.

KT Did you have any memorable walk outs?

BP Oh, good grief yes! Yeah, I had one in I think it was '80. Fact is I... my initial year coming back that was just... just a killer, it was, ah... uphill. I remember I think it was on the Red... Red River District... I think it was of the Nez Perce. It was uphill in slash that was down about knee high. That stuff was... was just... just off the ground and stacked up to about knee height and you had to step over every step and you were carrying about 130 pounds of gear. We had worked on the fire, oh, one... let's see jumped one afternoon, all that night, the next day and then started to walk out that next day, and then just kept walking. We walked uphill and it was five miles over this slash, continually, continually. When the slash stopped there was rock slides, then you had to be... precarious position and not falling down a rock slide, you don't just roll you bang yourself up bad. So five miles uphill in that kind of terrain, and then put our gear down and walk out another fifteen. That was a real memorable type walk. I've walked out of Bob Marshall twice within three days I think. We jumped in, did the... worked on the fire, took our gear out to the trail, walked out... I think it was a 32 manner... walked out. Next two days went... flew back in and jumped where... almost right near my last fire again with a two manner, and then walked out again. So that was pretty memorial... memorable [laughs] type of fire too.

KT What was your favorite experience as a smokejumper?

BP Favorite experience... hum, probably going to Alaska was always high up there and that was always a thrill. The first time I got to go to Alaska was kind of fun. And that was in... I think that was '72 I think. I've been back one, two, three, four, about five years I think it was... four, five years... I've gone back four or five seasons. It's a different type of country, it's flat, you can't walk anywhere, most of it's flat, trees are all small, the whole area's a jump area, you think you're going to kill yourself... kill yourself... and it's... you hit the ground and it's like hitting a six... six foot sponge it's so spongy and, you know, easy jumping. But you can not fire there in a normal... normal way. So I guess I really enjoyed Alaska.
What were the pilots like?

Oh, two different types of them. There was the... the regular jump pilots. Pretty exper... pretty good people, they're experienced, most of them are real good and you could... you could count on them. Then there's the retarded pilots, and, ah, we call them retarded pilots because nobody else would do such a thing except retarded people. And diving those big birds out of the sky, coming down right on top of the trees in order to dump a load of retardant, just doesn't make any sense. We got retarded by in Grangeville one guy's kid came in one day and... and says... says, "Daddy I'm really glad you treat those pilots so nice." "Why... what's... why... why's that honey, you know, what do you mean treat them so nice?" Says, "Well, you guys don't make fun of them, you know, you know, those retarded pilots." And he'd heard retarded all the time and here's this retarded pilot. He thought it was nice we didn't make fun of those retarded pilots. And so that kind of caught on. We always kind of respected them. We, ah... lot of us had jumped on or been there when they picked up the pieces of these people too, these guys who made one mistake, too low and that's it and they pay for it. They'll catch a tree and [claps his hands] and just auger in... what they call, auger in [claps his hands]... and splatter. And when they splatter there's not much left, usually. So that's kind of... kind of hard like when they lost a... a good pilot named Whitey, down here in the... on the, ah... oh, down in the Nez Perce, going... flying in toward Moose Creek, where they lost, I think it was, 12 or 13 people, must have about '79 I think it was. I wasn't here, I was in Okinawa but I heard about it and I was worried because I thought it was a load of jumpers, but it turned out to be a load of District people that they were taking in to familiarize them. And I think one... a kid and his dog survived and the rest of them... the rest of them didn't. That was a... he was a good pilot. I knew him from when I jumped before, in the early '70's. But he just... he couldn't pull it out... he lost one engine and he feathered the other... er, he had feathered one engine because of the oil... well, I guess he had a problem in the oil. And the other one quit. And in any case, he had problems with both engines, had to go in, and he just couldn't make it to a nice stretch. There's no nice stretch in that area, it's all rugged. So he took it in the best he could, but he broke up pretty bad.

Were there any other plane wrecks?

Well, let's see... involving me... we lost engines before, and takeoff. We had an engine go out when we were flying on the Salmon River. We didn't know it at the time how bad it was, one engine was only performing about, like, 40%, and the other engine went out completely. And it was in a Twin Otter, but luckily a Twin Otter is a nice bird and it got us out there and we didn't get hurt. But it could have been bad. There's been other [laughs] memorial... memorable type incidences, where planes have just about gone down or gone down. Trimotor going down into Moose
Creek where a blade came through... a propeller blade broke off, came through the fuselage. Just came right straight through the body of the plane. Some jumpers were sitting in there as it goes flying through, missed them. There was a Twin Beech... Twin Beech is a... I used to jump out of them when I first started. Twin Beeches and DC-3's were the mainstays at that time, and the Twin Otter had taken over since. I don't think the Twin Otter is as... as good, but it's newer, and it costs more but it doesn't... it doesn't carry the payload that you get for the money, like a DC-3. The Twin Beech... Twin Beech was good except that when... it fell out of the sky like a rock. It had a glide ratio, they said, approaching that of a rock. So when one engine went you were going to go down and you were going to go down fast. So McIver, the ex-marine I was telling you about, said he was on a plane one time when that happened, one of the... the engines quit he says, and most of the jumpers... you're always supposed to wait until you look at the, ah... your spotter and the spotter is the "God" on the plane. He tells you OK what to do next. He's up there talking to the pilot, the pilot says, "Yeah, you better have them jump just in case. Just jump." He turned around and tell everybody to jump and the last guy was just going out the door, you see. And said they... they scattered people all over the forest. Just everywhere, you know, they weren't... she went... didn't slow it down or anything. He was trying to keep up the speed and keep it flying, and people were scattered in hell, and gone. Most of them didn't have their helmets. He didn't have his helmet on... McIver didn't when he went out the door... lost his helmet. I guess they spent the rest of the night just trying to find where everybody was. They'd buddy up in two or three man groups and then they'd find somebody else. It was pretty interesting. As far as any other plane I've been... I've been on rescue jumps where we went in and found people in little Cessna's and got them out... carried them out. That was in, ah... out at Dixie, in Idaho. Can't think of really anymore at this time.

KT What was your favorite plane to jump on?

BP DC-3, you could stand up like a man. [laughs] You didn't have to crouch down and be all uncomfortable. You stood there like a man in an open door, and it was... yet it was enough... it was comforting because you had to sit... it was a small enough door you could catch both sides with your hands and you could balance... hold on. If you jumped out of things like the Caribou, or C-130's, or whatever, when you jumping, or you're the first in the door you're standing there your... your feet are on the edge of nowhere... I mean your feet are right there in front of God and everybody, and there's nothing to hold on to. And some of the shorter guys in, like a Caribou, they had a... they had a bar up on top where you could reach up on the door and... and... when it's a rear exit type plane and you're facing backwards and here's this huge door and you couldn't reach the sides at all... just a monstrous thing, and there's a bar up there. If you're tall enough you can grab and hold it and steady yourself. But usually most of them weren't tall enough, see, to
reach up grab this thing, so you're swaying there. And some people if you hit a... hit a bump in the air, you know... or hit a air pocket and you'd fiffit that's... you'd be out and you're gone... and you.... So that's kind of spooky. But DC-3 is my favorite.

KT [laughs] Well, what do you think smokejumping has given you that you can refer back to for the rest of your life?

BP Oh, self confidence I guess. Individual freedom. Little bit of that. Kind of, self reliance I guess. Everything we did and still do is... was on our own basically once you got out the door, all those brass be damned, now you're on your own, you know. You're out there and usually you're in smaller groups and you had to get along with the people that you were with, buddy up and work for a common cause which is, kind of, fun. You got to see country that nobody ever saw before. In a lot of cases most likely even Indians didn't go there; there's no reason to go up there. Most of them virgin areas... some of them isn't... or aren't... isn't, or whatever, but the, ah... a lot of the areas are still wilderness and even the miners didn't make it in there in certain areas. So you... it was neat seeing places and going places that people weren't, or haven't, been. It was like virgin territory. If there's still... I don't know American explorers there's hardly any places left to explore anymore in the U.S., especially the continental U.S., but if there are places that haven't been touched we probably touched them, which was kind of neat to think, you know, that you did.

KT Do you think you'll jump again?

BP Yeah, my goal now is to become the oldest smokejumper. We have... we have a guy that's probably what... 55? Middle 50's now... he started when he was like 47, no less. So if I can... I'll see how long he jumps and then once I get done with whatever I do with the rest of my career, whatever career I choose, when I grow up, then I'll go back to jumping probably. See if... if I can still hack it. But I think I can.

KT Are there any other smokejumper stories?

BP Oh, yeah, there's tons of them. How about the one with the, ah... with the Wolf Lake fire is a good one. We had a guy we used to call Milo Minderbinder in, ah... after a char... was it Catch 22, was that it? In Grangeville. His name was Woolworth. Anyway he... he jumped on a fire north of here in the Missions named Wolf Lake... got down there. I just got this all second hand so if I mess it up, I'm sorry. But in any case what I understand was that they jumped... he and another guy jumped on this fire, and he got down there found out it was a campfire that had gotten out of control. And then these... these two couples... couple, a guy and a gal and a guy and a gal... and they had been there, you know, having fun in the lake and everything and let this fire go and they were really happy when they found out that these people weren't going to report them and
weren't going to, you know, charge them for all the money, you
know, it cost to put out this fire, and all this. So they were
more than grateful. Well this one girl was even more grateful,
she... she went skinny dipping. Now I don't know how this all
got started and what exactly transpired, but nobody believed them
when they came... came back and said, "Hey, we knew that... this
gal... we had these gals up there and they were nude," and blah,
blah, blah, blah... telling this big horrendous story and... and,
ah, you... "Right, sure," you know. "No, no really it did, it
happened." "Come on," you know, "We weren't born yesterday."
They got their pictures back from the developers. By God, they
had pictures of the girls [laughs and claps his hands]. And they
were... they had on a parachute harness sometimes and nothing
else, they'd have on a helmet and a parachute harness, and
nothing else. And they were nice looking gals and they were out
in the water... half... you know in knee deep water or
whatever... and that was it God and... God and glory, and all
that. And so we went, "Gee whiz, you're telling the truth." So
that was all fine and good, you know. They had had a good time
there on the lake with these girls and these guys and all that,
and, ah, fine. And then they had built a raft of all things and
put their gear on it and then, I guess, paddled and pushed it
across the lake to get to the side where they'd have a better
trail to get out on, which was kind of neat. Then that was
about... that would have been the end of it. They came back and
they shot off their mouths and everybody said, "Nah, I don't
believe you." And then they convinced them and fine. Oh, great.
They put these things up on a... on the board out at the... out
at the jump base, you know, they were both married guys. So they
put these up on the board and they had all these pictures and
everything, the Wolf Creek fire, you know, the Wolf Lake fire.
And wouldn't you know it, a... I think a U.P.I. guy, United Press
International or Associated Press... somebody in the news
organization, just happened to be passing through and just
checked out the bulletin board, and here's this thing about the
Wolf Lake fire. He puts it on the national news. [laughs] You
know, a little side light for human, ah... you know, whatever...
consumption. This is a in... a human interest story about the
jumpers jumping in on a nudist camp and all this, you know,
really made it good. The wives got a hold of that, boy, it was
just... it was close I understand... they really had to do some
talking to get out of this one. So that was a real good story.
And they... I've seen those pictures, so it's, ah... it's the
truth [laughs], which was interesting. Oh, any other stories.
Had a good story happen to me in, ah... in Humboldt... the
Humboldt State Forest... or Humboldt National... National Forest
in northern Nevada. We didn't jump there, we went there on a big
crew action, we'd have a fifty man crew to go down. Remember we
were hiking through this God-forsaken country. It's just hot, it
was... there were dead deer... more dead deer there... that
were... that were burned by the fire, they couldn't get away from
the fire it went so fast it actually caught the deer. First time
I'd seen wildlife actually destroyed by fire. Lots of deer...
... thirty or fifty head... I don't know... they were just... just
everywhere dead. And then the fish were floating to the str...
the top of the stream, and it was really amazing to see them. And I guess the ash killed the... it polluted the stream, or... the oxygen... couldn't get oxygen in to it... anyway they'd all died and floated to the surface and were on the banks. We were walking across this big basin like thing, one big lone pine tree down in the bottom of it. We were just a long, long single line of guys just sneaking a way up... down through that and up the other side and walking... going... destination, I don't know. And all of a sudden we heard this rumbling, kind of a boom, boom, boom. "What in the world is that," you know, looked up, and there's a monstrous boulder, and I mean the boulder is as big as a house, it's a big thing, and the thing had broken loose... now why, you know, things roll in the mountains and things fall but you're not usually around to watch them, you know, usually it happens when nobody's there, you know, and... and but this time we're there and we're right in the middle of the way it's coming see... we're in the middle of this bowl [claps his hands] and here's this thing coming. And I remember all I could see is everybody goes for that tree, it's a great big Ponderosa pine. It must be six to eight foot across, you know, in diameter, big old wolf tree... what we called a wolf tree. And everybody went behind it. Well here you got all these guys going whoosh. And there's a straight line behind that tree and they're all looking uphill behind that tree going like this. And that big boulder just keeps coming, boom, boom, and rolling and rumbling, and rolling and it hits smack on that tree. I mean if that tree would have gone it would have just taken out... taken out the whole line of the guys. And they're all sitting there going, "Oh, God," you know, and nobody wants to take the chance of going to either because if they do they know they're going to get rolled over, see. So they're all in this thing... just boom and the whole tree just kind of shakes and quivers and then it stops and it.... That was a... that was a real funny experience I thought at the time; it was great. We had a good laugh after that, but nobody laughed during the time it was going on, so... [laughs].

KT [laughs] What kind of feelings do you have about the organization today?

BP Oh, good feelings mostly... mostly good. It's too bad there's so much discontent and things. I think "well I know the jumpers are organizing their own... kind of into a... almost a union. They're trying to get more representation and trying to have some rights, and this kind of thing." It's too bad. I've never been into that... into that myself, I've kind of stayed on the periphery, I figure, if it comes down to where that necessary then it's time for me to leave. I'm not in it for that. I'm in it because I enjoy it and I like saying I was a jumper, and I'm proud to be a jumper. If it means that now we're going to get into a haggle like the A.F.L.C.I.O. does, well then I'll go somewhere else and haggle but I'm not going to sit around and watch my organization... I consider it to be mine, it belongs to me. I feel bad about it when that happens. Overall I have good feelings about it. I think it will... it will come around but
it's going to take some growing pains now to... to fix it up.

KT Are there any other comments that you would like to make?

BP No, ah, I can't think of any. Ah, this reunion was kind of a fun thing. I only went to one day of it but it was... it was interesting, it was. It was neat to see the old... the old faces... familiar faces... which was kind of a _deja vous_, type thing, throw you back 14 years or whatever it was. I guess that's about it.

KT Why I'd sure like to thank you for this interview.

BP Well, thank you.

[END OF TAPE]