Herb Fischer and Robert Reid interviewed for the Smoke Jumpers Oral History Project by Dan Hall in Missoula, Mt. 7/22/84

DH I would like to start the interview by having you introduce yourselves

RR I am Bob Reid and I trained in Missoula in 1957

HF I am Herb Fischer, same class and the same days

DH What made you decide to try smoke jumping

HF Well you are not going to believe this but I was a hot shot in Region 5 in California, I got helicoptered into a fire and landed about 3 miles from the fire. I'm going along and I got a pack on my back and carrying tools and I'm sweating, the bugs are biting, I'm out of breath and I'm chuggin' on up a hill, I'm lost and I come up on this clearing and the fire is on the other side and here comes a Twin Beech and these two guys pop out and they sail down, they pull off their jump gear and they are not even sweating! I thought I want one of those jobs were you only walk down hill.

RR Very similar for me. The first year I was in the Forest Service was in 1956. That year Ken Purcell and I had hitchhiked out from Georgia to jobs in Idaho. I was going to Riggins and he was going to Grangeville. When we got to Riggins we parted and didn't see each other all summer. When we got back together in the fall to hitch hike back to Georgia about the first thing that we spoke about was, hey, next summer let's come back next year and be smoke jumpers. During that summer both of us had gone to fires just like you had, Herb. We had hiked up 4 or 5 miles carrying packs and all of our gear up to the top of the ridge only to find some guys up there lounging around. They have already got a line around this fire and they are sipping on juice and they are waiting on us to arrive so they can leave. This is the way to fight a fire. Ken and I, when we got back to Georgia that winter, we filled out applications and put them in the same envelope and said that either they accept both of us or they don't accept us at all. We lucked out they took both of us.

DH How well do you remember your first training jump?

RR First training jump for me wasn't real memorable because everything happened just as it was supposed to. It was on the upper Sherman. The opening wasn't memorable, the landing, not much wind that day, landed real close to the spot in fact. Not close enough to win the jump pot but it was close. The body did the roll it was trained to do. Not much to remember. The second jump though was a real eye opener. The wind picked up and I didn't handle the chute
right. I hit and I hurt myself, not seriously but it made a believer out of me. I was never again... I was always was careful about landing after my second jump.

HF I was the last man out of the Ford, jumped the second half of a two man stick. I remember the thing really hit me. Guys were sitting in the airplane and turning back over their shoulders and saying "If I freeze, push me". I was the last guy and there wasn't anybody to push me. The only thing that I was worried about is that I would just kind of hesitate, just like you do on a high board, I would be slow in getting out. When the time came I was also concerned about hitting that little bitty step under the door on the Ford. Stomped down on it, stood up and as I recall I was actually standing on the step outside of the airplane, with my arms folded just like I was supposed to. I'm not really sure if I jumped or fell. I did hit the ground and I did sprain my ankle a little bit. Bob, wasn't that on the third of July.

RR I'm looking back through my letters, I have it recorded here. The seventh of July I'm saying is number three.

HF I think that was it, we had a couple or three days off between the first jump and the second. It would give you enough time to heal up. Gave you enough time to think about what you had done. I remember saying "Lord get me out of this one, I'll never try it again."

DH What about your first fire jump?

HF The first one was over on the Nez Perce with Chuck [inaudible], it was a two-man fire, it was almost anticlimatic. There was no wind... jumped down to a little saddle with a big snag burning. The only thing that happened that was a little unusual was putting out the fire. We had a power saw but we needed a cross cut because the snag was so big. We put out signals for a cross cut and they dropped us another power saw. They kept doing this repeatedly and we ended up with 3 power saws and no cross cut. Decided that if I ever wanted to go into the power saw business that I'd just go out in the woods and put out streamers for cross cut saws. Bob, were you on that jump? I think it was graduation jump where they put us down at The Seven Devils where they put us down on that mountain?

RR No. I didn't make a dry run until later. My first jump was out of a Ford. It was down in the Selway Bitterroot primitive area. Ford Trimotor... Bob Johnson was the pilot. On the way down he took us on a little diversionary route to see some views. We flew in El Capitan into the glacial cirque on one side of the mountain. As I recall we actually flew into the cirque and turned it up on wing tip and we did a 180 and came back out. That was more impressive than the fire jump I think. My first fire jump
was south of ____ [inaudible] two or three acres. I did hang up as I recall. The reproduction wasn't very high, we walked out about 4 miles and the truck wasn't waiting for us. I walked up to the lookout to call in and tell them where we were. We got into the Magruder district. I had a chance to see my old buddy from Riggins from the year before who had been the assistant ranger and he was the ranger then at Magruder. He was surprised to see me being a jumper, because the last time he had seen me I was just a brush piler at Riggins the year before.

DH Was that first jump everything that you thought it would be?

RR It was very much what I anticipated. It was the old ... I don't know, nowadays I look out there and I don't see any Trimotors sitting around, I don't think they are really smoke jumping now. You had to jump out of the Ford Trimotor for your first fire jump if it is going to be real.

HF And Bob Johnson had to be flying

DH What kind of reaction did you get from your family when you told them you were going to be smoke jumping?

HF My dad was all for it. My mother was a little concerned about it. My dad signed the form before my mother could talk him out of it. Once things got going they were pretty supportive.

RR For me, my father had died the year before. He died when I was a freshman in college. He had been a forester. He never worked out west. He worked for the TVA, the Tennessee Valley Authority, back in the 30's. We were kind of forestry oriented and my mom was all for my working for the Forest Service. She didn't know what smoke jumping really was. Didn't register with her at all what it was. But she was real supportive of anything that I wanted to do.

DH Did you ever see anybody make any mistakes in training that really struck you as being dumb?

[Herb and Bob are talking back and forth, inaudible.]

HF Do you remember Ralph? What jump was that? And his streamer, that wasn't dumb. He went down behind a ridge with a streamer and we didn't see anything else and he threw his reserve just before he went into the trees as I remember. He put one canopy over one tree and one canopy over another tree, broke off a couple of big pines. When we got over there to him, expecting to find him bounced and he was sitting on a big pile of brush with a sprained ankle.
I can't recall. We all made mistakes, that is a part of being a student. You just learn how to survive your mistakes, that is the main thing of training.

[Herb and Bob are talking back and forth, inaudible.]

Remember when [inaudible] hooked up in the door and got his static line wrapped around his arm?

I don't think that was a training jump. Who was it that got towed underneath the plane?

Mike McKennan [sp?]

That wasn't a training jump. I think it was a fire jump.

What happened there?

You might not get a record of this, but he got towed underneath the aircraft for 10 or 15 minutes. One of his web straps got hung up. Was that on a Twin Beech?

Yes that was a Twin Beech.

It hung up between the door and the step somehow. There were two pieces of metal that came together there. A piece of his web strap caught on that as he went out. So he hung under the aircraft and we couldn't pull him back in.

We were losing altitude, the pilot feathered the engine so that it wouldn't beat him against the side of the airplane. Because the engine was feathered the plane kept losing altitude, and they were too low to cut him lose. I forget who the pilot was but he was working it down the..

It was the guy with the withered arm, I think. As I recall, can't remember his name. But anyway, he got into a drainage that was going down and he managed to stabilize the altitude of the aircraft so as the terrain dropped away he got more altitude. And finally when they got it up to where they thought he would have enough they cut what was holding him and he came down. His chute deployed normally but he was 15 or 20 miles from where he was supposed to be.

And kind of beat to hell, too

That was really an experience. That was Mike McKennan, class of 1957.

Did either of you get hurt while jumping?
HF I busted my pelvis on Kelly Mountain.

DH How did that happen?

HF Well it's kind of a long story, we went up there and they had some guys on the ground already. They had a fire going on over the hill going along pretty badly. Over just where the Salmon River turns and heads north. We had a peck of service men, in fact Bob was on the jump too and he was astute enough to not get hurt. A lot of us weren't. We had from about 200 feet down, we had a hell of a wind. It must have been 40 knots. And from there on up it was calm. We had 16 guys in the Doug,[DC-3], and out of the 16 there was 5 guys that got busted up. I think I was a rookie, it was my fourth fire jump. I was number three out of the Doug, and ______[name is inaudible] was spotting and Connie Orr was the assistant spotter. In looking back on it, it was a typical dumb rookie mistake, I didn't understand the instructions and I didn't want to say repeat them again because I didn't want to look stupid. I figured I would just wing it and I would be OK. I guess what ______[inaudible] was telling the guys was that there was a lookout tower way upwind and he said to go on out and turn to that tower. You remember where that lookout tower was?

RR Yes, right there at the top of the ridge.

HF And he said to hold into that sucker and keep going. The guys that did that flew right back in and came in pretty good. But I got out and I didn't have any wind. I was coming down right over the spot and these two other guys were going way over the horizon. I thought, man are they ever going to get yelled at, they are going to be ten miles from the fire. Sure enough I hit that wind, they hit it and started going back into the spot. I started making knots downwind toward the river. I was looking down under my arm and I saw a whole bunch of stuff coming up, an old burn with a lot of down timber and rocks and stumps and stuff. I made another stupid mistake. I decided if I turned around I would be able to clear that and then I would be able to turn back and land. The first place I turned around with the wind, and added the speed of the chute to my overall speed. The second dumb thing was that if I had cleared it I would have been over in the river canyon. I plowed into this thing going warp 4 and kind of hit the... if the FAA medical people are hearing this I did not lose consciousness [laughter]... it got my attention pretty well. I got up from it, some of the guys helped me up. I staggered around on the fire for a while. My leg locked up on me and they took us in a chopper the next morning to Grangeville. The doctor I don't believe X-rayed it, he just said do you have anything hurt in there. So I bumbled around for a couple of weeks and I convinced myself that I should get back onto the jump list. They said I couldn't get back on the jump list unless I ran the obstacle course. So I went out and ran it
and when I finished I was kind of a basket case. They took me into the hospital and they x-rayed me, I had a little crack in my pelvis. So they laid me up in St. Pat’s for three weeks or something like that.

RR I was on that same fire and I'm looking at my jump record here. That was the 11th of August, 1957. It was my third fire jump. As I recall there were 54 jumpers total that went on that fire. We had them out of Grangeville, McCall, as well as Missoula. We had a regular orbit of aircraft up there for a while. The next morning they came over and jumped two more guys.

HF I think they, didn't they drop all of the Grangeville the next day. They dropped a Ford and a____[inaudible].

RR But the fire was already lined.

HF It was just perfectly calm and beautiful day.

RR You started this question about injuries. It was the one jump where I should have been injured. I never was injured in 43 jumps for the Forest Service. I certainly should have been on this one because I did everything stupid. I was very lucky. I had one of the old white chutes, most of the people were jumping with the candy stripes. They were relatively new then. We had some of the old white chutes, the white chutes seemed for some reason seemed to be slower in maneuvering. I managed to get mine turned down wind and could never get it to face back into the wind. I was weather vaned down[his chute was running with the wind]. I was going down slope at least 30-35 knots. It was a rocky slope, and when I hit I remember I rolled up. I hit so fast that my chute kind of stopped but I continued and rolled up into the parachute. Knocked the rope pocket on the side of my leg. My hard hat was inside my bird nest coil in the rope pocket, it was mashed shut so that I couldn't put it on my head. My camera was inside my hard hat and it never has worked right since that. My camera was injured on Kelly Mountain. It was a very memorable fire.

DH What would you say or how would you characterize the safety record of the smoke jumpers organization?

RR Amazingly good, incredible, considering what you were doing. Since then I have done a lot of military jumping in and you don't jump in the conditions that we did in the Forest Service when you are jumping in the military. You just don't do it. It's too unpredictable. You can't tell what you are going to get into, for having jumped into areas where you can't have somebody physically on the ground to make sure that the landing area is safe. To have the record that the Forest Service had it speaks very highly of luck. Or somebody looking out for us.
HF I think one thing, Bob has jumped a lot higher level in the military than I have, but to me the training we had, as an entry level qualifying jumper, the training we had in the Forest Service was just so far superior to what we had in the military.

RR I agree.

HF They really taught you how to jump. I think that was the secret to the good record.

RR They taught you how to jump in the Forest Service rather than teaching you basically that it was something to be afraid of. The military jumper was afraid to jump but a Forest Service jumper, his jumping is a technique to get to a fire economically, quickly, and the fear aspect is not over done like it is in the military.

DH Did you ever jump from other bases than Missoula?

RR Yes I did. Not as a home base, but I spent, in 1960, I started off in Silver City, spent the full season down there. At the end of that season this was when I had graduated from college and so I didn't have to get back for school. I went to Redding and ended up the season from there. I also had individual jumps from Cave Junction and McCall at different times.

DH Is there a rivalry between jumpers from other bases when they get together?

RR On a friendly basis, there is a certain comraderie that over rides all of it, but sure there is rivalry. Every base is the best, if they are from that base.

DH Are there any points of pride between the guys while out on the fire?

RR On the fire you can't distinguish where they are from, I don't think. It is all in the bar where the competition is. When you get out on the fire the competition doesn't exist and it's just a matter of professionalism.

HF I think it is more of a deal where everyone is a smoke jumper. We saw that an awful lot up here on fires where there were ground pounders on the fire. But the jumpers would just absolutely bust their butts to put in more line than the ground pounders.

RR There was that kind of rivalry between the jumpers and the non jumpers.

DH Were you ever based with these guys?
HF On project work mainly.

RR It was just very much like my feelings in 1956 before I came to the jumpers. I remember my attitude towards the jumpers, they were kind of like gods. You could see that on the part of the guys around the base. There was a certain respect for the smoke jumpers. Undeniably.

HF We got along with them quite well on project. I would say that if you ran into anything on the project, you occasionally get some of the old timers, they weren't antagonistic but they were possibly a little bit envious.

RR I think that is probably true. The younger guys maybe thought they could be jumpers sometime, and you didn't get the antagonism. But the older guys knew they would never be jumpers, and they thought we was upstarts. But also because most of us were college educated. I was talking to Ray Stannick(sp?) last night and he reminded me of a fire we went on down in out of Redding. We ran into a bunch of local loggers who were fighting the same fire we were on. Ray had been an old logger so he had certain, automatically had an understanding with them. He could talk in the terms they talked. They were conversing after we got a line around the fire and had a quit spot. Some how the subject came up that these guys that Ray was with, we had about a dozen jumpers on the fire, and he said out of these guys there are probably eight or ten college graduates, maybe a couple of them have masters degrees and the others are working on their college degrees. One of the loggers looked at him and said "My son wants to go to college, you guys aren't doing anything we don't do. He doesn't need to go to college to do this. I'm going to go home and I'm going to knock the shit out of him. I'm not going to spend money on him to go to college so he can fight fires." And he was dead serious, he couldn't see spending money to send this kid to college if all he was going to do was fight fires.

DH Were most of the guys that you jumped with at that time college students?

RR Most of them. There were several of them from around Missoula, but most of the guys who came from away were college students or they were college graduates. A lot of teachers who had the summer off

DH How did you feel about having to do project work?

HF Everybody would always rather stay in Missoula and wait for fires. Once you got out on the project I sort of enjoyed most of it

RR It took you away from the shit details around here. There
were a million things to do around here to keep you occupied, you couldn't be around Missoula and lay in your bunk all day. You had to be productive. There just wasn't that much stuff to be done.

HF Like one of the guys said, he was out at the depot yesterday, "I can't believe there is still dandelions on the lawn, I know I dug every one of them."

RR Digging dandelions with a spoon from the kitchen...I think everybody in our group can remember doing that.

HF We were talking this morning about when Bob McDonald would come around. One of the big games between the buck jumpers and the overhead was guys would hide out. I don't think anybody would have done it if it hadn't been a game. It is like Black Max says, "I consider myself a big game hunter and you are the big game." Try to find some place to store away.

RR Going on project, your question was about project work, project was something we didn't look forward to because we weren't going to be fire jumping and that was our primary job. You couldn't jump when you were on project but it was better than... if there was going to be no jumping... it was better to be out on project than to be around here trying to look busy.

HF They usually had something productive to do. Getting with the district people, that is some of my fondest memories.

DH Was there any project work you really dispised?

HF I think that what I really despised was that a lot of the district would call for jumpers and once you got there it was obvious that they really didn't have anything for you to do. They just thought it would be nice if they had some people around for a change. And they would put you doing the same kind of stuff you would be doing at the AFD.

RR I remember doing some brush piling as a...on project...in the rain, in miserable conditions when there was a lot of other things that I would have been doing.

HF We might have been on that together in 1959.

RR It was over in Idaho, can't remember where it was.

HF As far as project work goes I should probably tell him about the heart shaped garbage pit. Just because it was a stupid thing that just reverberated, I think, all the way up to the regional offices. We were out, Bill Murphy and...there were three of us but I can't think of his name...we were over on the Shear Guard station at Moose Creek district. There was an old guy over there
at the station that really didn't much like jumpers. He really didn't know what we were doing in there. He let us know he wasn't too happy with our work. We said 'gee, why not. We are getting up early, working late, putting in a good days work. You can't ask for much more than that.' He said 'ya. but you are just not putting your heart into it.' Our next project was to dig a garbage pit so we dug it heart shaped. For some reason that just pissed that guy off. He goes back to the AFD and tells them about it and they get all mad at us. The end result was we all three got back...Jim Higgins was the other guy...we all three came back in, jumped a fire, and had to go back in and do penance. We had to do our time in purgatory, just to prove that we were really good guys.

RR The heart shaped garbage pit is probably more famous than a lot of other things that deserve to be remembered. I have heard that story several times.

DH Did you have any trouble with planes while you were in the air?

RR Like a malfunction or mechanical difficulty? No I don't recall any.

DH Was that pretty rare?

RR I think that reflects very highly on the maintenance standards of Johnson's. Considering the old aircraft we were jumping, I can't recall having been delayed on take off from a mechanical problem.

HF I think the amazing thing, talking about the kind of aircrafts... I'm a pilot now and have been for a lot of years. To look back on the equipment that we were operating and that they didn't have any accidents is amazing. Just where do you come up with the parts for those Fords, you just machine them, make your own. Those guys just really did a fantastic job.

DH The Ford Trimotor, what was it like?

HF It was good for getting in and out of places. Even for smoke jumping it was slow, it took you some time getting places.

RR Slow getting some places, good for jumping but it took you an awful long time to get from here to the Bitterroot or anywhere. The aircraft they are using today are probably better although they are not nearly as glamorous.

DH Do you remember the largest fire you fought?

RR Skalkaho?
That was '59 or '57 wasn't it?

I think probably the one that is the most memorable is Kelly Mountain. Skalkaho was a big one, that was in the Bitterroot, in '60, but I don't remember how big it was. We had several big fires down in California. You don't really, when you are on the fire line you don't realize if it is over a hundred acres, you don't realize how big it is. It is just a big fire. It could be 5,000 acres or 10,000 acres and you don't know the difference.

Are you aware of how many men are out there?

No. I remember a big fire I was on. It was in Yellowstone. We went down and jumped on Yellowstone, July 22, 1960. I remember the big camps of ground pounders that we had to contend with. Standing in line to get food, that was the aspect that I remember most. A lot of people I didn't know were ahead of me in line getting chow and I didn't understand why.

Was there any part of the country that you liked jumping in more than any other?

I liked the Gila. The Gila was...we were more on our own out there. I like any of the primitive area. I especially like Moose Creek and the Magruder district because I spent a summer there when I wasn't jumping on fire fighting. It was kind of like going home.

I kind of like jumping into the Bob. [The Bob Marshall Wilderness] The country was so unusual there, and you got some real interesting walkouts.... some real long walkouts.

Did you ever have any real long packouts?

Not long packouts but had long walkouts. I had one that we measured out on maps after we got back just counting sections. It was 28 miles and it was in Moose Creek. It happened to be the one that resulted...there were two of us, Roland ___ [inaudible] and myself... I guess that was the second of August, 1959.... Isaac Lake... we jumped in and we were met by mosquitos before we even got to the ground. It was one of those little moose meadows that you hear about in Alaska with the bugs. We had to run into the smoke to get away from them. Then we walked out the twenty eight miles, we were supposed to have been picked up by a helicopter in route. They had showed us on a map where they would pick us up. When we got to that point there was no way for a helicopter to land. We waited around for an hour or so and there was no sign of the helicopter. We said we know where Moose Creek is and we will continue. We ended up walking until close to midnight to the Moose Creek ranch, woke them up and they gave us some food. We
hadn't brought enough food because we were not going to be gone very long. The next morning we walked over to the Moose Creek Ranger Station to wait for an aircraft to pick us up. That was the Ford that came in and crashed on landing and killed the jumpers and the Forest Service supervisor......

DH Herb, did you ever have any long walkouts?

HF Yes. On one of the fires that we had, and [it was] one of the most enjoyable things I've done in the Forest Service. [the fire was] Down past Pentagon mountain in the Bob we were going to go out to the Hungry Horse. They needed us pretty badly, so they started out a saddle string and we started walking at the same time. We met pretty close to 25 miles and rode out about another 20. That was about my longest. We started before daylight and ended up after dark. Flew back to Missoula the next day.

DH Let's go back to the accident there at Moose Creek, what happened?

RR It was almost noon by the time the aircraft came to pick us up. I think he had a couple of drops some place else. I remember we were laying on the, just kind of lounging on the ground outside the front door of the dispatch cabin. He came and circled over us to look at the wind sock I presume. He came over us, we watched him make a lazy circle, and he went back down the canyon to make a landing approach. We wasn't paying much attention to it until he was already on the strip and had touched down but was moving up pretty fast up the strip. I wasn't watching until I heard him, I heard the engine race. It turned out later, I found from talking to pilots later, he had realized he wasn't going to be able to stop with his brakes before he got to the end so he attempted to ground loop the aircraft. He had gunned the leftout board engine, it didn't ground loop. It didn't turn the aircraft on its longitudinal axis as he thought it would. It forced him into the trees at the end of the runway a little bit harder than he would have gone otherwise. Actually right at the end of the runway where he hit the trees there was a storage of 55 gallon drums of gasoline for helicopters I believe. Very bad place to put fuel, as I think about it now, because he ran right into it and it actually added to the flames. As soon as it hit there was a whump and the gas, there was a huge ball of fire. We weren't anticipating anything like this and I didn't see how anyone could come out of something like that. I knew there had to be people in there but I didn't think they could get out of it. Then after it kind of died down a little bit we could see these figures who were kind of flaming coming out of the left hand side of the aircraft. I was located on the left side of the aircraft. We ran down and did our best to get them back, to pull them out of the flames and get them to where it was safe. The two guys that... there were only 2 guys that I saw at that time... they were totally burned. Third degree. I couldn't recognize them...
had no idea who they were. Clothes had all been burned off except for the boots, logging boots, they had been wearing. It turned out that both of those guys were smoke jumpers and they both died within about forty five minutes... I suppose, while I was encouraging him to breathe. It was hopeless, it was really a... I didn't know what to do because his skin across his chest was tightening, getting all hard... because of the burns... charred. He couldn't expand his chest to breathe. I was trying to raise his body rhythmically, so that he could breath. He was feeling quite a bit of pain before he passed out and died... didn't talk very much. He wanted some Demerol, asked if any of us had any Demerol, he wanted something like that. After he had died, the other burned guy was across the wooden fence, it was like a paddock fence separating where I was and where this other guy was. I was talking with somebody there... the other guy heard my voice. Turned out that it was John Rolf,... the other jumper who was burned. He was still living and he called to me. We were very good friends. We had planned to hitch hike back home that fall together to the east coast. He was from New York and I was from Georgia. We were going to hitch back to the coast somewhere and then go our separate ways. As I say we were very good friends, we trained together in '57... he was probably the most thoughtfull man in our entire class. He arranged to have our class photo taken, and he was always thinking of other people. He continued to think of other people at that time. He called me over. He wanted to talk to me. He wanted to tell me what he wanted done with his belongings. He knew he was dying. He knew he could not survive, he never made a will apparently, so he told me all the little things that he had. I don't remember all the details now but I passed it along to the supervisors when I got back. But he specified this is to go to my sister... this is to go to my brother... he had a girl friend he was engaged to and had certain specifications for her. He did live long enough. They took him... the aircraft came in... and they took him to Grangeville, I think he lived something like 6 hours.

DH Was that a plane from Johnson's?

RR It was one of their Fords.

DH Do you remember who the pilot was?

RR I didn't know the pilot and I don't know who it was. Fred Brauer told me the other day who it was but I don't remember. There was a third guy killed in the crash. He was a Forest Service supervisor who died several days later in the hospital in Missoula, I think it was Missoula. Complications. I think, his body reacted to the antibiotics, he got infections in his burns. He died several days later.

DH How did the rest of the guys at the base react when this happened?
RR Everyone took it very hard. He was the first jumper from Missoula who died since Mann Gulch. It was almost 10 years to the day and we took it almost as an omen. Mann Gulch was in '49, don't remember the day, I think they told us this morning but I don't remember. I think it was in July and this was August 3, just a few days past 10 years since Mann Gulch.

HF I think too, that John was so well thought of in our class. And none of us knew Gary that well because he was a rookie. John was, well, for example he was saving up money, his parents were German emigrants and he was saving up money to send his parents back on a trip. I think there was an element though. I don't know quite know how to put it though... the people... they realized there were certain dangers to the job. It was the type of thing where you were sorry that it happened to the guy but you realized that we were all putting ourselves into a position where that kind of thing can happen. And if it happens, it happens. You know that those guys wouldn't want us to sit around and dwell over it.

End of Side A

SIDE B

DH We were talking about the plane accident. Did it ever into your minds that that could have been me and thought about getting out of the smoke jumpers?

RR No, that was something that we acknowledged could happen at any time. Just the fact that it did happen wouldn't cause someone to terminate his jumping. There are some more facts that which I would like to have recorded here today. There was a third smoke jumper on board the aircraft, Roland Stolesson. I don't know why he did what he did. He came out the aircraft through the door. The two jumpers who got killed came out a break in the wall in the left hand side and got tangled up in the control cables on their way out from under the aircraft wing. In the process the flaming gas fell down on them. The door of the aircraft was obstructed. From talking with Stolesson later I found out that there had been a tree fell across it. When the aircraft went into the trees it sheared off a live pine tree, the tip of which had fallen along side the aircraft. The flaming top of the tree was right along side the aircraft. As you know the aircraft don't have doors just an open door with a strap across it for safety. Stolesson elected to push that tree aside, that flaming tree. It turned out it wasn't very substantial. He could push it aside with his hands and then he went out through the door itself. If the other guys had done that they would have preceeded him out through the other side ....[inaudible]. That is what saved him, he went out
through the door. He got burned somewhat, second degree burns I think. He had scars for the rest of the season, a walking reminder of the accident.

DH Did they teach you any kind of medical training?

RR Oh yes. That is part of the smoke jumper training. In fact it is a good part of the training. Not only are we smoke jumpers, we are also rescue jumpers also. You have the occasional, in the back country, accident where somebody is injured and they send smoke jumpers in.

DH Did you make a lot of rescue jumps?

RR I would say that rescue jumps are about one in a hundred.

HF I never made one and I think he made one.

RR I made one rescue jump.

DH The saying that "smoke jumpers work hard and play hard," do you agree or disagree?

RR Absolutely. Even old smoke jumpers..

DH Do you think that your performance the night before ever affected your job the next morning?

HF I would like to say no but I am afraid on occasion... at the time I would have never admitted it. I really think that when the jump came as an absolute surprise that we were going on a fire, you had been up until three in the morning and nothing had happened for weeks, and the Doug[DC-3] is out there on the ramp with the props spinning and the lights are all on, you think "oh hell here we go." Yes it is pretty tough too... before when you are nineteen or twenty you can force yourself.

RR I don't think it materially reduced our ability to do our job. But it causes a lot... it wasn't nearly as much fun... out fighting a fire when you are in that condition

HF You had to push the throttle up to a hundred and ten percent to get anything done

RR There is one aspect, you are carrying more of a water load that you can use to extinguish the hot spots.

DH What would you do with your free time when you weren't doing project work or on fires?

RR Didn't want to get away to far. I can remember going up
to Glacier Park a time or two. But only when the conditions during the fire season, when the burning index was pretty low. Stay around pretty close to the base. I remember working hay with some of the ranchers across the highway from the depot to kind of keep occupied and to kind of augment the income. The money wasn't the reason we were smoke jumpers by the way. We didn't get paid all that much.

HF I think that what Bob was saying about going away was absolutely true. If there is anything in the world that can get people back... if they see one lightning flash at night...and all of the sudden the biggest traffic jam in Montana is right in front of the depot. Everybody is coming back. It was just the worst thing in the world to get aced on a jump. In fact I have heard of guys actually quitting because they felt they were unfairly treated on the jump list. They were put on the list in the wrong place and if that is the way it is going to be I am going to quit.

RR You hit on something there that I think is pretty significant. And that is the, I don't know if you can watch a lightning storm and not have an emotional involvement. I can't. Twenty five years after, every time I see lightning I think that is money in the cash register. We used to think that it meant fire and that meant overtime and that meant money in the pocket.

HF And also something that I don't think we would have admitted at the time, just that we were going to go jump on a fire.

RR That was the bottom line, a chance to get our fire jump.

HF Something else now, whenever I fly over the Andes or the Alps or any mountains in the world I am looking for a jump spot.

DH Most of the people who were jumping with you were college students, do you think that the things occuring on the college campuses had any affect on the jumpers?

RR Not in our time. We were jumping before any of the social awareness issues were popular.

HF We were both going to southeast universities....

RR Football was big, fraternities, sororities, the political activism was not there yet.

DH How did you feel when you heard that they were going to let women in the smoke jumpers organization?

RR I didn't hear it until I got back here. I didn't know that we had women jumpers until I got back here to the reunion.
HF I will have to say that I hoped they wouldn't change the requirements. If they could make the job requirements absolutely asexual and say OK, you do it, whatever you are, he or she do it exactly the same way leave the requirements the same. And we don't lower the requirements at all. Maybe lower the chin up bar for some one who is short can reach it. I hated to see, some of the things that I heard that they had slightly changed. This is just from the old service records, but I understand that women were given considerable more opportunity to pass the physical test than men were. Men were give one chance, either you pass it or you don't. Women had several shots at it. I guess that it's... sometimes you think the whole world is nuts, you know, Looney 6 - World 0. I hate to see this kind of thing happen. This is too important of an organization for this kind of thing. If indeed these women are indeed capable of coming in and doing the job, then great. But Bob and I were not given the slightest bit of a chance and nobody else was either.

DH Is it a pretty physically demanding job?

RR Absolutely, one of the most physical US government jobs that you can get. There is another aspect of hiring women. They are women. There is a certain morale here that I don't think that a lot of people are willing to recognize. You get a lot of fires, at least we used to, at that time were called two-man fires. I guess now they are two-person fire. You can have a man and a women go on a fire and everything will be totally professional, but to everyone who knows about it there is always that underlying curiosity about what went on. I am in the military now and we have recently done lot of research into women being given jobs which would take them into combat. In the military we have come to an agreement that to have them there in combat gives us more people to hold guns but the negative aspect of having women over there that the men are going to be concerned about. The men are inevitably going to be men and they are going to be concerned about their woman cohort, and they are going to be more concerned about seeing that she isn't hurt than doing their primary job which is fighting the enemy. And it is the same kind of thing in the smoke jumpers. I have three daughters, and I hope they never have a problem of fitting into the world of equality, but I think this is a place where equality is not recommended. It is a rambling answer to your question but...

HF Basically to summarize it, it is a "no bullshit" job. It is a serious job where you can get hurt. You can get your buddy hurt. It is no place for the political bullshit.

DH Did you ever run into a lot of political bullshit while you were in the jumpers organization?
RR No, not really. We perceived that those of us from the south, now Herb and I are from the south, we perceived a little bit of institutional prejudice because we were southerners. I wouldn't call it political bullshit but I think it... most of the overhead here is from the northwest, most from the Bitterroot valley, some from Missoula. Southerners, maybe rightly, seem to have gotten the reputation that we are kind of laid back.

HF Slow and dumb sort of.

RR We had some things with that. We had to more than prove ourselves.

HF You had to convince them of, you know, don't hurry we don't have enough time. Lets do it a little slower. Lets do it right the first time. And I think they did perceive us as being maybe a little slower working and slower thinking because we talked a little slower. I don't think it was as universal, just a few people.

RR Just a few people, we won't name names. We aren't talking about you Len Kraut[said sarcastically with lots of laughter]

DH How do you see the future of smoke jumpers?

RR After last night listening to the head of the Forest Service I am not sure. He kind of waffled that

HF Yes he did that a little bit, he said as far as I can see if nothing else happens...

RR I think he said that he thought we would have smoke jumpers doing our job a little bit differently. Maybe without parachutes. Until the end of the century. I don't know, when you lost the Ford Trimotor it was all down hill from there.

HF One thing they are getting into is some real expensive airplanes. Now what it costs to put a man on a fire, we could have been using helicopters on fires a long time ago to save on the cost factor. And now I forget what it costs for the Twin Otter is several million dollars. Real expensive to operate. The real helicopters are not like Blue Thunder,[reference to the high tech helicopter from Hollywood] they are very limited in what they can do.

RR Technology may do away with us. I tend to stick my head in the sand on this one. I think its a good opportunity for a young kid. I hate to see this, maybe he doesn't ever become a smoke jumper but just knowing that there was the opportunity he could have tried to become a jumper. It is sort of like wilderness area. Most of the people in the US have never been in a wilderness area, they have flown over it but they have never
been in it. People who support wilderness concept just because they know it is there, knowing that if they wanted to, same thing with the jumpers. Knowing that we have that kind of organization that if I really wanted to work hard enough I could possibly become a smoke jumper. If we ever lost that opportunity, its bigger than it appears.

HF I almost think the military continues to have their airborne for that very reason. I think that is part of the reason they do that. We had an airborne assault in Viet Nam, it was a total failure because the VC chose not to attend. This is the kind of thing, the days of blackening the skies with parachutes is over. I always kind of think they keep jumping for the morale factor.

DH How do you feel about guys who turn smoke jumping into a career?

HF Great!!

RR They make it tough on the young kid who wants to come in and do it for just a couple of summers because the slot is just not available. I noticed that it is very apparent now. This year they had 17 trainees and last year they had no trainees. That means there are a lot of young kids out there who would like to be smoke jumpers but don't have the opportunity. Probably they are more technically competent fire fighters, if you are looking at the job done, having the veteran jumpers is probably an increment better. For the purposes of meeting the national morale it is probably not so good.

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HF It is great training for guys who are majoring in forestry. Things that they are going to take through their careers in the Forest Service.

DH Do you feel that your experience as a smoke jumper helped you out later in life?

HF Unquestionably.

RR There is no doubt that it straightened me out. I had...I am personally a little bit unique... I had split in my... after my first year... I can say this openly now, I felt very strongly about this. I didn't quite complete my first year, I was invited to resign. I had some personality problem with certain of the squad leaders. One or two in particular. So I was invited to terminate and I wasn't going to be asked to come back the following year, and was not asked either. I had to go back to the forest to prove my mettle, which I did. I came back two subsequent years as a jumper. I think, though, that having that experience I realized that I couldn't just do whatever I wanted to. I had to finally face up to the fact that I was part of civilization and must act civilized. I haven't had any problems along that line since and I think that
it was probably instrumental in my growing up

HF I guess that one thing it did for me was I got to thinking about it enough and I decided that if I stayed in the plane instead of jumping out of them the pay was better and I could be up longer. I think this plus it took quite a bit of self discipline and it was ....[inaudible] a part of growing up in everybody's life. The neat part of it to me... almost all of the cliches that you hear in sports are the same type of thing. Personality building, it can build the type of person that one is in later life.

DH I think I have just about covered everything that I want to. Do you think I have missed anything or is there anything that you would like to add?

RR Do you want to talk about records, stuff like that. Personal things that we did that we think are unique in the annals of the jumpers.

DH Go right ahead.

RR In my career I made 43 jumps total. I made 22 jumps in my last year.

HF That same year I went to ROTC training camp over at Fairchild [Air Force Base] in Spokane and these guys here are jumping like crazy. I think I got in something like 5 or 6 jumps. Sitting over the listening to the radio about the sky full of parachutes.

RR I made two jumps in one day.

HF I did that once also.

RR I think I have the record for the smallest fire. Gary Kuyper and I, we were airborne over the Gila down in New Mex and we were looking for smoke that had been reported and we couldn't find it, flying over the area, and the spotters couldn't find it and a little cloud showed off to the side and a couple of lightning strikes hit so we started studying those to see where they hit. Sure enough we saw a tiny plume of smoke, got on the radio and reported it, got permission to jump it. By the time we got to that fire, it had hit a live tree and it was smoldering in the duff at the base of the tree out to about 6 inches radius in a semi-circle around the tree. The fire was burning a maximum of 6 inches from the bark of the tree and only half way around it. We mopped it up and measured it carefully for the fire report. We reported it as 4 square feet. I think that is generous.

HF I might have made the last fire jump out of Missoula in the Ford, I wish I had my jump records with me. We went very
early, four of us in the Ford.

RR    I wish we had some of the other guys from our class sitting here with us. We could have filled out a lot of this other stuff fro different aspects. I can't think of anything else that would be of interest to you.

HF    Me either

DH    Well thanks for the time.

End of interview