
RG This is an interview with Charles Viviano on July 22nd 1984 during the smokejumper reunion in Missoula, Montana. The interviewer is Renee Gouaux. I'd like to first ask Charles what attracted you to smokejumping?

CV I was in the Airborne in paratroops. I went in in 1948 for a three year hitch in the regular Army and when I was a couple of years in there, the Korean War broke out and what I joined the Army was for a little excitement. When the war broke out, most airborne troops weren't sent to Korea. I ended up in the 82nd airborne, which was on what they call general reserve. They sent one regiment of paratroopers over there, but most of them never served in Korea. And then they extended me for a year to boot. All of the fellas in the regular Army were extended when the Chinese came into the war in 19... about December 1950. The Chinese came into the war. So everybody in the regular Army was extended a year, so I would have had four years, anyhow. And even then I didn't get anywhere. So I was still a little... looking for some type of excitement. And then I got out, the truce talks were still going on, the war was... they was gonna terminate it, but nobody knew when, but they... it was winding down. And I served in the Army with a captain that had supposedly been in the smokejumpers and he was... he had told me about it. So before I even got out of the army, I applied. I was at Fort Benning, Georgia. I wrote a letter to the Forest Service. And I was... I didn't get on, but I got out of the Army and worked in New York for about a year. I didn't like New York and I... anyhow, the following year I applied again... I wrote to them, but I knew by then that I had to put my application in early so I had it in by about February or March, and they accepted me. I never could figure out why they did, because almost everybody had previous fire fighting experience and I didn't. I'd been in the Airborne but I... I worked in New York City for a fire alarm company and I... the only thing I could figure is I don't know how they applied any value to that, but evidently they did, because when I went up to Missoula I was the only guy that didn't have any previous fire fighting experience. So... and I did... I did want to go out West anyhow, so when this come up it was a really good opportunity for me to leave the East Coast and go out West, so I really jumped on it.

RG What years were you a smokejumper?

CV '53 and '54.

RG How old were you when you served?

CV I was twenty... I was twenty-three. I think I came out here in May, I was twenty-three, in that same month in '53.

RG How did you like being... coming out to Missoula?
CV Oh, I loved it. It was a... it was out at the old Nine Mile camp and that was what I expected a forestry camp to look like. We were way up in the mountains like that. I remember there was still snow on the ground, the air was pretty brisk in May. It was really nice. I really enjoyed it. They said it's great. We had a couple women cooks out there that could really... I thought it was great. And the training... I went into the Army before and the airborne units and all they were a lot harder on you physically and a lot more harassment. The Forest Service... and they were like a piece of cake. It was pretty thorough training, but none of the... none of the tricking that goes into the Army... Army schools and stuff like that.

RG How many people were up at Nine Mile when you were there?

CV If I can remember... there was... we went on the early crew. I think they changed... I think they trained two classes, one in May and one in June, and I got on the May class. And I don't know, it seems to me there must have been around fifty, I.... We had some... I know we had twelve Special Forces fellows that were training with us, too, from the Army. And I knew one guy, I had served in the Army with for one year, so it was really kind of a coincidence to see him all the way out there. And a couple of the other guys I knew just a little bit. One was a first sergeant in the cot next to me, and another guy I went through the parachute school at Fort Benning, Georgia with. So it was pretty unusual to find them out here, 1,000 miles from back East.

RG Right. How did your parents feel about your wanting to become a smokejumper and move West.

CV Well, I was pretty restless. I think they... I think that was the lesser of two evils. I think at the time I was really debating about going back in the Army [INAUDIBLE]. They never interfered... said too much. I got out of the Army and within a month I got [INAUDIBLE] pretty restless. So they never said too much about it. I had thought about going to college here. I'd taken the Eastern Seaboard Exams and the day I left to fly to Missoula, I was trying to settle down a little bit so I applied to a bunch of schools. I narrowed it down to Villanova and Georgia Tech. I took the exams the day I left, and when I got out to Montana, I think it was down in Yellowstone, I got returned... I got the letters from them saying I was accepted to both schools. But I wanted the school of engineering and my mathematics was a little bitch. They told me I should take a refresher course. I ended up... what I did after... I liked it out West so much that my boss, Tom Milligan, he told me to take a day off and go down to Bozeman and check on their school of engineering, which I did. And I found out if I wanted to go to school in the fall at Montana State here, I could make up my mathematics with my regular courses. And I started out at the school of engineering in Bozeman and just stayed out there.

RG What kind of training did you have out at the Nine Mile camp?
CV If I remember right, it was about a month's training. And I think in the morning, it seems to me, we had fire fighting instruction, and first aid and things like that. In the afternoon I think it was parachute training. We used to train in the different aspects of parachuting and stuff. But it wasn't difficult, I mean, it wasn't that hard. It was... like I say, it was kind of an easy atmosphere compared to what I've been used to. It was thorough enough, I don't mean to downplay it, but it was a pretty nice environment. Most of the guys were pretty good, they were easy to get along. It was a really a very pleasant experience all the way around.

RG Did you feel like you were well prepared for your first jump?

CV Oh, yeah. Like I say, I jumped in the Army.

RG Right.

CV And we jumped out of much faster planes, most of the time with much heavier equipment. You carried a rifle and everything on it. And I had... I made some jumps in the Army where I actually had two bags and after standing in the door, I couldn't even walk. I just kind of fall out of there, so I had quite a load of equipment. So the way you jumped in the Forest Service was a snap. I mean, the landing were harder, a lot of times you go into the trees, but as far as the actual jumping and all that, [INAUDIBLE]. Mostly because you carried all that combat equipment.

[INTERUPTION]

RG What was your first fire jump like?

CV You know, I... that was on that questionnaire, and I really can't remember. I... it wasn't... evidently it didn't really impress me that much. I looked in my records, I do have a map with the dates and places where I jumped, and I put it on that questionnaire, I was saying. And I did look that up, but I jumped and evidently, according to the map, it was kind of a small walk out. It was in Yellowstone and it wasn't a long walk and evidently it wasn't a very memorable fire. I can't remember a heck of a lot about it. The second jump I had was the most memorable one. I really had a hell of a time with that one.

RG What... tell me about that.

CV Well, we were jumping... they... we had... Yellowstone had an old 1929 or '28 Fokker... single engine Fokker--Superuniversal is what it was. And it had real thick wings like a Trimotor Ford, but a lot of lift in the mountains, so it was slow. And we were on this fire... Mount Dome fire in Yellowstone. I think it was in August, I think, but anyhow we got over the fire, it was pretty heavy winds, but we only had one drift chute. We normally
dropped at least three to check the wind. And we found out after we go to the place where we was gonna jump we only had one drift chute. So what happened... and then to top it off, I had a... we usually had two jump suits, you know, pants and my other one was coming off a fire... out from another fire, and the one I had didn't have a tie-down on the pocket. Had a rope to get out of tree, so rather than just leave it, I just kind of tied it loosely around my leg. I just thought, "Well, that was better to do." I shouldn't have done it. What happened is after we found out we only had one drift chute the pilot... the pilot circled around and I remember Tom Milligan was the spotter and he figured he could get me in this field we were trying to get in on. And that the... where we were gonna go, the field was about the base of this mountain. It was like a saddle and it was like a chimney where the wind was whipping up the side of that mountain. Well, he figured he could get me in below that. Well, when I jumped he didn't compensate enough and I started falling... the original drift chute went up this, like a chimney and it went over the saddle of these mountains... it was two mountains like that, and disappeared. Well, he didn't compensate enough. I started going the same way the drift chute was. And where the chimney and saddle was it was a lot of rock and stunted trees. And when I left the plane that rope... when I opened... when the parachute opened that rope went out of my pocket, so I had this fifty foot rope or so hanging below my leg... tied to my leg. And there's no way I could steer that chute. It was... I just... it was just like watching a movie. I was just kept thinking... I'll never forget, I kept thinking, "Now how in the Hell is this gonna end?" There's no way that I could control that thing. And anyhow, as luck would have it, the wind blew me into a tree, and my feet were dangling I think just inches from the ground. It's one of the few times that I honestly thought somebody was looking out for me. I still do, I really do, there was so few trees up in there. And it took us quite a while to get that chute out of there. The wind wrapped it almost right around that tree. And, luckily, I didn't snag anything with that rope hanging beneath me. If it hung up on a rock or something, I'm sure I would have lost a leg. But we were up there for several days and then normally the Park Service they sent pack animals to bring our gear out, well, they couldn't get... it was too steep for pack animals, so we had to pack everything out. And my partner was Frank Polutnik he was a... he jumped one or two years ahead of me, too, so there was two of us up there. And the fire wasn't all that bad, we... lightning strike, of course, they all were, but by the time we got everything... got ready to get out of there, we put everything and packed it on our back. It was about a 100... 125 pound pack, and we did get it out of there. But I remember my boots were so ripped up from the rocks and stuff, when I got back I had to send... the Park Service sent them into Gardiner to be resoled and reheeled. They were just chewed them up that bad. And it was a hell of a time we had.

RG So the first year that you jumped, you were based in Missoula, is that correct?
CV

I trained in Missoula and we had a base in Yellowstone... West Yellowstone. There was five of us and a pilot. We had a little cabin inside the Park. So now I think they got a crew of about sixteen, but then it was just five of us. And the boss, Tom Milligan, he didn't jump that much, so there was just... just the two pair. You know, they wouldn't send out a guy alone, because it was always a pair. So it was pretty much a common... we was real busy, very active season, so we were just on the go a lot. And I ended up in the hospital at the end of the season there. I had a... trouble with my stomach or something. I spent five... about five or seven days in the hospital at the end of the season.

RG

Do you think that was some type of result from smokejumping?

CV

Yeah, I really do. A guy's kidney at this reunion that I... I was going with my wife and they said, "Well, too much drinking beer, and going out when you're in town." But I really think it had something to do... we just were at... going at a hell of a pace. We really weren't... as far as getting rest and we didn't eat right, I don't think. We were eating kind of irregular. And we were going pretty much. I had to sleep sitting up... sitting up, I remember that. They pumped my stomach out, or something. And I had to sleep, for about a week, had the hospital bed cranked up. I remember my stomach was pushing on my lungs. I don't know whether it was food poisoning... I'm not sure what type... I can't remember. If I did know, I've forgotten.

RG

Did you just jump on fires that were in... within the Park boundaries?

CV

Yeah, that was the set-up then. I think now it's more they... we jumped on one fire outside the Park. Hell's Roaring Creek I think it was. I think it was north of the Park, around... somewhere around Jardine, Montana. But they relieved us real early on that fire for... and it was funny because we were... everybody that worked in Yellowstone, the waitresses and the telephone operators, we always had a... they had a party down there, a Christmas Party, in August. And I remember that was the day that they had the Christmas Party, and I... I jumped with a guy named Heinicke... Don Heinicke and we were on that fire for a very short time when we got relieved by some forestry people. But the ranger wanted us to take up a couple horses into be shod in Jardine. And I didn't... and we said sure, we'd take them in, but we didn't... I didn't think it was that long a ride. And the guys says, the Ranger says, "If you wait around for a packer or a guide," he says, "he'll show you the way in." Well, we were in a hurry to get back, so we started out. Luckily that guide overtook us, because we would have sure as hell gotten lost. So we didn't get out of there about... until about 10:00 that night, and we jumped, I don't know, early in the morning. I guess we got relieved on that fire, probably ten in the morning. And it was a wild... it really was one hell of a wild ride. And so that was the only time we jumped out of the Park. All the other ones were inside the Park. When we first went down there, they had a
big fire in the Park, and I think we rigged chutes and dropped in supplies, and tools, and food, bedding... bed rolls, too, I remember for about... I think for almost two weeks. We were talking about that, I think it was like a White... White Lake Fire, or something like that. But I remember, I learned to rig parachutes in the Army, so I rigged the... I rigged the Carter chutes down there where we were packing that stuff in. And they'd send them back as soon as they could, but they were landing in trees, and they'd come back with big holes in them and stuff like that. So, eventually we were just pressed for time, so I would just straighten the lines out and would just stuff them in the bags, holes and everything. And I asked the pilot, I said, "How're they doing?" He said, "Oh, they open fine." So that's all I worried about. But we were real busy on that, going... it seemed to me, it lasted a couple weeks.

RG  How did you... how did you get stationed in West Yellowstone? Did you request to be?

CV  Yeah. Yeah, I originally... I was gonna rig chutes and I was kind of going with a girl in town there, and I thought I'd stick around Missoula. And... but I was... so I learned... I had learned to rig in the Army a little bit, so I was gonna rig chutes up there. And I did it for about a week. They hadn't sent the Yellowstone crew down yet, and my buddy, Art Flick, was gonna go. And rigging parachutes was kind of boring, and after a week of that, I figured, "Well, no girls worth this." [LAUGH] So anyhow, Art... Art, he asked me, he said, "Well, we they got one vacancy for Yellowstone." And so I went over to Tom Milligan, he was the guy that was running it, and asked him if I could go, and he said,"Yeah. OK, go down there." Art was a... we didn't know each other until we come out here, but he was a pretty good friend. In fact, I got hurt in training when I was... we were behind in training in Missoula, there at Nine Mile and I remember I jumped, I think it was a Saturday, I believe. Or we had to make up a jump on a Saturday on account of weather, if I remember right. I landed OK, but one of the other guys landed in a tree and we were trying to get his chute out. I started up the tree and I slipped and fell and turned my ankle. Sprained it bad, real bad. And... but Art, he... he'd been kind of a jock at the Navel Academy for a while and he told me to take my boot off and stick it in the stream over there, which I did. And then he told me to lace the boot up tight and keep walking on it, which I did. It seems to me we went to town and he had me walking up and down the street and stuff like that. He doesn't remember, I was telling him about it. I think we went to a dance that night, though. And, by gosh, that next morning that thing was black and blue but I could walk on it fine, so. And he says I drank some booze the next day, but I'm not so... I can't remember that. But anyhow, I got through it. I got finished up and I didn't lose... I didn't lose the job or whatever. Another friend of ours got... did the same thing and he started using crutches and he was out of the project. They dropped him. It's funny, because he went on to be quite a parachutist. He was in... he had a parachute company that... in California, he did all that jumping for movies
and stuff like that. He was a stunt man and a script writer, and so he was... he ended up... he did all the jumping for a series called Ripcord that was on television for quite a while. I still keep in touch with him, we're still real good friends. He's a retired brigadier general in the Colorado Air National Guard. Interesting guy, he'd been in Mexico and jumped down there and stuff, too, after the smokejumpers, even though he didn't finish up training here.

RG He was dropped because he was injured?

CV Yeah, because he sprained his ankle. He went on crutches and I think he could have done the same thing I did if, you know, if a somebody like Art had prodded him. I really do, he was a big tough guy as the other guy, he would have done it.

RG Were you ever injured again while you were a smokejumper?

CV I hurt that ankle, and then I told you I was in the hospital. And one other time we were... you know, everybody would help each other out when we make these training jumps. And there was another guy, his chute was in the tree, and I climbed up there to saw the limb off, and I didn't know how much tension... the guys were pulling on it, you know, I didn't realize how much tension there was. When I finally cut the limb it snapped up... I still the scars under my chin. They had to take me to town for stitches, but it really didn't... it wasn't a disabling wound, or anything like that. But they put, I don't know, half a dozen stitches right under my jaw. That's the only time I got hurt.

RG How was working in Yellowstone different from what you know about working on other smokejumper bases?

CV Well, one of the reasons I went to Yellowstone, Art and I were talking about it, I thought they paid time and a half and the Forest Service didn't, but we were talking about that at the reunion and they paid some kind of... it wasn't time and a half, but it was some... it was more money, but it wasn't the straight time and a half. That was the year... everybody in Missoula got paid a little less than we did in Yellowstone. But then again, we had to kind of fend for ourselves down in Yellowstone. We cooked for ourselves and all this kind of stuff. We were pretty much on our own. We had our little cabin there, we shared half a cabin the other half had some Rangers... some Rangers had it. And we were... nobody... there was nobody to tinker with us. They just left us alone. And the Park Service Rangers, they treated us fine, but they didn't really... they didn't... they weren't around us that much. So we were really pretty independent. It was really a pretty good hit for the few guys that were down there.

RG Did you make very many rescue jumps there?

CV No. No, I don't think we... no, I was never on any rescue
jumps. Well, I take that back. Art... I didn't rescue... I didn't make a rescue jump, Art broke one of his feet, I think he landed in a tree... a snag, and they had to get him out that night. And we went in the next morning, they wouldn't leave one man alone in there. So we went in the next morning, but by that time the fire was out, so we didn't do anything. And they got Art out that night on a boat, they took him across Yellowstone Lake, and so I didn't even see him.

RG Did you have any kind of project work in Yellowstone, or where you just jumping all the time?

CV Well, like I say, most of the... we were so self-sufficient down there, most of our project work, especially in '53, was... everything we did was pretty much just to keep operational. You know, I mean that stuff that was just pertinent to what... fighting fire. We just... we didn't... we weren't out on projects. The second year we did a little bit. It wasn't that active a season down here, '54. And I remember cutting... this was... I always had to laugh at this one, they... I guess it was a conservation type of thing, but we had to cut fire wood for the Rangers here. And they wouldn't... they wouldn't use all that downed timber in there. They'd truck it from outside the Park, although that place it littered with it. And we had to cut it with a chain saw. And I always got a laugh out of that. It was all over the place, you know, downed timber inside the Park, but they wouldn't tinker with it. But we did everything. Like I say, we rigged our own chutes and we did a lot of the stuff that in Missoula they had riggers and whatever. So, we were a pretty close-knit bunch. I've kept in touch with most of those guys for years. We know where each other pretty much are. We don't correspond that much, but....

RG What kind of planes, or plane did you use?

CV We had a twenty... 1928 or '29 Fokker Superuniversal. It was owned by Bowler Air Service our of Orofino, Idaho. And we had a... the initial pilot was Abe Bowler, B-O-W-L-E-R, I guess. He's dead now, and then his... one of his pilots come down later in the season and the following year I think he flew just down there himself, and his name was Jerry Wilson. He was out of Orofino, Idaho. He's got his own air service now, and, in fact, he's flying down at Olympics down there, got twelve helicopters... or ten helicopters down for the Olympics. And he's very successful man, he's got his own bank and everything else. He's done very well. When we knew him, he was just a pilot.

RG Would those pilots be stationed in West Yellowstone? They stayed down there?

CV Yeah, they stayed... they stayed right in the cabin with us. That's why I say we were pretty close down there. We all... we all palled around pretty much. So we had one pilot, and Tom Milligan, the foreman, and then the... or squad leader, I guess
you'd call him, and then the four of us guys that were really doing most of the jumping. Yeah, just the six of us in the cabin there.

RG Who would work as a spotter?

CV Milligan would. Tom Milligan, he did a... he's the only one that did that. And when we supplied those... that big fire, he did all the dropping and stuff. We just rigged... packed and rigged, and he did all the flying, he got in on all that.

RG Did you get most of your supplies then from Missoula?

CV Yeah, well, some of it we did. Everything pertaining to parachuting we did... our parachutes and everything. And I remember when we set up house down there in the cabin, we went in to Mammoth and Park Headquarters and checked out stuff that they had available. Beds, and mattresses, and all that kind of stuff. The house keeping utensils the Park Service had. They sent us up pretty much with that. And then we, of course we brought our own food and things like that. Or we ate in town, sometimes we'd just eat in town. It was kind of a hap-hazard type of thing.

RG Were the fire management policies in West Yellowstone different for the fire management policies in the rest of the state?

CV Shoot, I don't know. That's hard for me to comment, because I started down in West Yellowstone and the... like I say, we were kind of on the fringes of management. We... they'd phone us or... most of the time if they wanted something, they'd do it by phone. We... I very seldom saw the head Rangers down there. I think Scot... a guy named Scotty Chapman was the chief Ranger down there, and it seemed like he was real supportive of us, but I don't remember very much... I never seen him very often. He wouldn't come over... us... the cabin, or anything like that. Tom probably dealt with him on the phone on occasion with the Park Headquarters, but we never saw very much of them. But they treated us good. I can't complain about that.

RG At the time that you smokejumped were there any let-burn policies in the Park?

CV No. Uh-uh, [INAUDIBLE] happened. Yeah, in fact, I think it was standard policy anyhow, but once you thought you had it out, you had to spent an extra twenty four hours to make sure it was out. So when you went into the mountains like that, you had to spent, supposedly, an additional day to make sure it was out. But I think that was standard over here in Missoula, too.

RG Do you think that more fires were man related in Yellowstone Park than in other places?

CV Well, we never got any man started fires. They were all lightning fires. They had plenty of ground crew people down
there, they'd come in by horseback. In fact, one fire, we were
gonna get out in the afternoon, and for some reason we couldn't
get out. They started a crew in by horseback that day, and we
jumped the following day in the morning and we beat them in
there. I mean, we were on that fire before they, and we even had
a full nights sleep, and they'd been in the saddle all night, and
we still beat them on the fire. [LAUGH] So, it was a good edge.
Yeah, they... I think they figured we more than cut our weight,
as far as saving timber and stuff like that. So they... and I
think we did, I think we got in awful fast a lot of times.

RG Did you see very much wildlife in Yellowstone while you were
jumping?

CV Oh, yeah. I really... that's one of the things I enjoyed.
I think there was a lot more in those days than there are now.
Even when... even when we were in the camp... in the Park there,
you could drive around a long those roads, they weren't as wide
as they are now, and a lot of times you could see bear on the
road, it was pretty common. And inside the Park I remember one
of the first fires I was on, I heard some scratching. I was
sleeping under a tree on the way out and I kind of look up, and
there was a buffalo, about... oh, about twenty five yards away
from me. I'd never seen one before, and I remember I jumped out
of the sleeping bag and... but he was as scared of me as I was of
him. And then I realized that after you've been around a while,
they're harmless. And anyhow, I can remember... I remember the
pilot kind of herding them with the airplane on time, too, which
is kind of, probably, a no-no, but I can remember about 100
buffalo, or fifty, or whatever it was, he had them running in a
stampede and he circled them... he had them in a circled, you
know, with that plane, you know. It was really funny, just like
at stampede you see in the old wild west. Some kind of a moose
got in there with it, too. That moose was stampeding with the
buffalo. [LAUGH] But there were... I've seem a lot of stuff
there. There was geysers in there, too, where you wouldn't think
most people... people weren't into backpacking like they are now.
I don't remember seeing anybody in the back country there. I
remember when we use to... some of the guys liked to fish and
they'd take these rods in, you know, their packs... a folding rod
or whatever and they'd fish back there, and they'd catch all
sorts of trout and stuff. In fact I was on a fire, we were
talking about the reunion, I... my eyes were really pretty good
then, but they're not now, but I can remember circling over a
meadow to jump on a fire, I saw a buffalo skull down there, I
thought that what it was. I was about... it was about 1,000 feet
below. And after we jumped, I told the guy I was with, "I'm
gonna walk down the meadow and see if that is a buffalo skull."
And I did, and it was. And I brought it back, but it was kind of
wormy so I took some pictures of it and left it there. It was
a... it was a really neat experience. It was beautiful back in
some of those places.

RG Amazing. When you were a smokejumper, what did you do in
the other seasons of the year? 
CV  Well, I... I started school in Bozeman. After the... after... in the Fall of '53, I started up school at Bozeman and I went to school up there, and went '53, and '54, and '55 officially, until I left. I had... I married a girl in Yellowstone I met up there. She was telephone operator. They had a seasonal office, they opened it just for the Summer. One of the fellows I trained with, he knew her just a little bit and he told me to look her up and I did. We dated and eventually got married. And anyhow, when I went to college, I had a little girl and my wife was pregnant again, I went to California and I ended up... ended up staying down there. I didn't want to, but the job prospects were much better, and I eventually stayed there. I got on the county fire department, which I still am... L.A. [Los Angeles] County Fire Department.

RG  Would you say that some of the skills that you acquired as a smokejumper have helped you at all in your work?

CV  Yeah... oh, yeah. That... like I say, when I went on the fire department, one of the reasons I got on is because I'd been a smokejumper, which was very unusual that guys had that kind of fire fighting experience. So when I took my interview, it was a big help to get the job. That was a big part of it. So I can... I can relate that to smokejumping. I use to tell a lot of people, "You know, I got a degree and everything (I eventually graduated from a school down in California) but that parachute—that piece of nylon and webbing—that has more of an impact on my life than all most anything I did." Because parachuting in the Army led me to the Forest Service; the Forest Service led me to the Fire Department; and I met my wife in West Yellowstone, so that made a big impact on my life.

RG  What was the biggest fire that you remember fighting?

CV  Oh, most of them were two man fires, that's all. We got on them pretty early, and they were all lightning strikes, and we got them pretty good. They had bigger fires, of course, in the forests but most of them were... you know, they had a lot of people... they'd fly in Indians or whatever when they had some really big stuff in the Park. We didn't really get in on the big stuff. But we got, you know, we got the small ones fast enough to keep them from getting very big.

RG  Have there been any changes that you're aware of in the smokejumper organization that you feel particularly strong about?

CV  Well, I trained at Nine Mile and I remember one of the questions there on that questionnaire was about changes, and I remember I worked the last year at Nine Mile and the first year at the new base out here, and I remember at the time I thought it was, like, one was real kind of a forestry type of place, and the other one look like a military installation. I notice they kind of doctored it up since the last time I was up here, they put a little wood on the outside and made it a little more... but it
looked pretty austere when we first out there. Reminded me of another military post or something. It's nicer now, it's dolled up a little bit more. But I could see the changes coming. You couldn't... when you move from a place like that all the bureaucracy and all the rest of that stuff, that goes right with it, so.... But they was a nice, loose outfit out at Nine Mile. I mean, everybody... it was a little more informal, and then I think once they start having the secretaries and the offices and everything, everything comes with it. You know, paper work, etcetera, you could just see what was coming.

RG How do you feel about women smokejumpers?

CV Well, you know, I'm a captain on the County Fire Department down there and I really got mixed emotions about it. One of the fellows I jumped with, my partner, he's a retired captain of the Montana Highway Patrol and we were talking about that last night, about some of the pros and cons of working with women and I... my job, on the County Fire Department, we live together twenty four hours, you know. We sleep together and that's normal, I've been doing it for twenty five years. And I really got mixed emotions about it. What bothers me not so much whether they can or can not do the job, it's the... it's the man/woman angle. It's really... there's really some problems. I don't know how you'd ever iron them out. I'll give you an example: we got... we got our first woman in the L.A. County Fire Department here about a year or so ago. And they really kind of coddled her along, I think. In fact, I know chief... that... that was instrumental in getting... her getting on, but they... he was telling me there's so much pressure from woman's groups down there to get women on the Fire Department, that he says they... it was a relief to get one on, because they... so I think...

RG Took some heat off of him.

CV Yeah. That's right. And... but to give you an example of some of the problems (this may not be smokejumping, but it's similar, you know) but anyhow, I was talking to some of the guys that worked with her on a fire. It was a house fire and the fire was out and they were stripping the roof... stripping the shingles off the roof, and some captain--not her captain, but some other captain--says, "Come on down, Cindy and take a break."

Well, there was two other fellows up there with her, see. He didn't say, "Come on... all three of you come down." Well, if the other... when Cindy started down the ladder, those two guys dropped their tools and they come down, too, you know, so that's the kind of things you got to get squared away. And one of the firemen I was working with, he was dating a campus cop, they work across the street from the university and they had a female patrol officer over there, and she started dating one of my firemen. And hell, she was coming in there trying to arrange his schedule so he could be off so she could date him, or she would stop in anytime she wanted to. When she first started stopping around, she was just like another police officer having another cup of coffee, and you wouldn't see her. But then she started
dating the guy and she just popping in there three of four times a day like it was a... so those are the kind of problems that makes it hard for a supervisor to handle.

RG Right. You don't feel that women wouldn't have any problem dealing with the physical demands so much?

CV I don't know. I... I... probably not. I don't know, there's... there's probably a number of them that could do it, I suppose. I notice they already had... er, have one or more and I guess she does the job, I guess. Yeah, but I don't know. It's just the man/woman thing. I worry more about that than I do about anything else. I noticed on the way up here... I was listening to the radio, the Coast Guard's got a problem there with... some Coast Guard cutter had a... commanding officer had two... had a male and a female officer[s] had an affair going and when he blew the whistle on that, and then the woman blows the whistle that there's pornography all over the ship. And I thought, "Oh, God!" You know, I mean, just one thing leads to another, see. So that's the kind of thing. It's just problems like that, you know, makes it hard for the supervisor. Physically they might be able to do it... a lot of them. I don't think all of them can. And that's why I say we have a pretty good physical... or did on the County Fire Department down there. In all the years, we've only got one, so... we're running exams right now and I suspect they might have some more. But they're really trying to... L.A. City got's a special program, they opened about a $500,000.00 gymnasium just so they could try. They got these women that are trying to get one, and if show enough promise, they'll send them to the gym to try to build up their upper body strength. And to me, you know, if they're gonna do it for women, do it for the men, too. Hey, I'll give you an example: another one that our pro... job had is... the last exam we did have, the women put so much heat on the guys--the Department--that they finally... what they did is allow the women to take the physical agility time... test as many times as they wanted, if they flunked it, they could decide to come back. Well, when they decide to do that, they had to do it for the men, too, and we got guys on that were taking that physical agility test three, and four, and five times. They weren't... they just weren't the right material, and they still could let them go back and back and back. And the women were the ones that started that. Now this time I see they're not gonna do it. They flat told women no way they're gonna do it. [LAUGH] Yeah, so. But anyhow, that's just some of the problems.

RG Right. When you were smokejumping in Yellowstone, how was your equipment packed out?

CV We had a little... well, first of all, that field isn't there anymore. They built a big air terminal down there... you know, an airport. We had a little field out of town there, and we had a big wooden building there. We had a little room in there where we stocked all our parachute gear and we had our own packing table down there. That building is gone, too. They
demolished her, but it was really pretty primitive. But... so we
every morning we'd get up and drive through town, a mile or two,
and go to the airport. And everything was under lock there. And
that's where everything was. Didn't take much to keep us going,
just the five of us.

RG But once that material was dropped down to you on a fire,
would you pack it out yourselves, or packhorses?

CV Oh, well... Yeah. Most of the time the packers would come
in and bring it out. If we were on a fire, they normally would
start a day later. We'd go in one day and they might start
packing a day later, or so. And then we would... most of the
time they would meet us on the trail. They'd give us saddle
horses and they'd go in and pick our gear up, and we'd come
out separately. We'd ride out together, my partner and I, and
then they would come out with the pack animals and bring our gear
out. Sometimes we'd have a walkout.

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

CV You mean a jump suit?

RG Well, what.... Right. What was the equipment you had on
you? On yourself... when you jumped?

CV Well, we just had that canvas jumpsuit that they had, and a
football helmet with a baseball mask. Gloves, and we all bought
our own logger boots. We had different... various types of
boots. And then of course, the rope in the pocket. And I think
now they carry that kit pack with them. But where everything...
our personal gear was on the fire pack. I remember I had a cheap
camera but the... I took a lot of pictures back there, and
eventually the pilot dropped the equipment too low and my pack,
and camera, broke. I mean it... dropped that bundle too low and
it smashed my camera.

RG What kind of parachute did you use?

CV Well, they were... they had that Derry slot, but basically
they were the same type we had in the Army. They're 28 foot
diameter chutes. What they call a Derry slot. They had slots in
the rear ca... the panels there, and made them quite a bit more
steerable than the Army chutes, but they were essentially the
same chute. We had that quick release box, too, that the...
eventually... or I guess, originally, the Germans had invented
that. They'd used it in World War II and the British adapted it.
And then the Americans latched on to it. But I noticed now,
they've gone back to the old snaps again. That was what the
Americans... or the Air crewmen, and all, had the snaps with
the... I think that quick release box was a German, and
subsequently a British, and the Americans had it.

RG How exactly does that operate?
CV Well, it had a disk on it, and if you rotated it... first you had to pull the fork out. There was a fork to keep you from depressing it. But once you rotated it, pulled the safety fork out, and then all you had to do is slap your chest and all your straps would fall off. Except the one it was hooked on to. It was hooked on to one strap, and the three other ones would just fall off so you could get out of it. You could get out of a parachute real quick, which was OK, and that's why the Army liked it. Different military liked it because once you got on the ground, you wanted to get out of it and get going. The Forest Service, I guess... after a while, I think what the Forest Service become a little concerned maybe safety wise. I think eventually they discarded it. It was pretty neat though. It was pretty handy.

RG Now, was that a... just for the reserve chute, or was that for your main chute?

CV No that was your main chute, yeah. Your main... your reserve chute was a couple of... had a couple of "D" rings on a chute and you hooked it onto your snap... snaps on your parachute harness. That was a... that hasn't changed. They're using the same method, I'm sure.

RG Did you ever have to use your reserve chute?

CV No. I never used it.

RG Did you ever have any parachute malfunctions?

CV Yeah, one time I did. I... well it wasn't really a bad one. I jumped on a fire, and I don't know whether I had a bad exit, or whatever, but my... my chute was tangled behind me. I couldn't control it until I slowly unwound. Meanwhile I drifted quite a ways from where I was gonna try to land. I was gonna land on a piece of... little clearing was shaped like a pork chop. And I remember by the time I unwound, I was over the timber. Then I started slipping like the devil to get in there, and to clear the trees, I remember, I had to pick my feet up. And I picked my feet but I just managed to get in it. Just slipped right into the... into the tail end of that "pork chop". Kind of challenging, I guess. But other than that I never really had any... any life threatening malfunctions or anything like that.

RG Did jumping in an area like Yellowstone Park, that has mud pots, and geysers, and other obstacles, present challenges to you that you remember as being especially exciting?

CV No. I think it was a... it was scenic. There was a lot to see in Yellowstone, so everytime we went in there I always thought it was kind of a... kind of a picturesque place. I mean, I really enjoyed it. It was really quite a place. And like I say, there was... there was... I can never remember any backpackers, or anything like that. They would never have gone back there, that I ever saw. So, it was a really enjoyable
RG  This is side two of an interview with Charles Viviano on July 22, 1984. I wanted to ask, Charles, what was the toughest fire he remembers fighting in his career as a smokejumper.

CV  I think that was that one on Mount Dome, as far as jumping in and all. That was by far the toughest... the most memorable. The other ones I don't remember much about, but I sure remember that one. Yeah. In fact, I was hunting around Jackson in 1980, my nephew flew down to Jackson and meet me, and we flew over Yellowstone. I was trying to look for the Mount Doan. I couldn't quite figure it out, but I remember that one. That was a son-of-a...

RG  When you were jumping, were you nervous about the parachute opening or not opening, very much of the time?

CV  No, I never worried about that. Like I say, I went through school at Fort Benning, and they were... the funny thing about the Army, they stressed the danger constantly, and the Forest Service didn't. I mean, in the Army you were always conscious of "this was dangerous," or "that was dangerous." In the Army that was normal, but the Forest Service really seemed to underplay the danger. I mean, it just... it wasn't that they weren't unaware of it, but they just didn't pound it in your head all the time like the Army did. The Army was always constantly doing stuff like that. And then the Army paid you hazardous duty pay for that, and all this kind of stuff, so they would... whether it was hazardous or not. I mean, it was always a... always a big factor in the military. And we lost more men in the military, too. We had guys killed.

RG  There were people killed as a result of jumping... parachuting?

CV  You mean in the Army, or...?

RG  In the Army, yeah.

CV  Yeah. Oh, yeah. Yeah, in fact the first day I was gonna make a parachute jump in the Army, I was down in Fort Benning there all suited up and all of a sudden they come along with an order, "Take your chutes off," and everything. We marched back to barracks and we found out that a guy'd been killed that day, so they cancelled the rest of the jumps for a day. So... and they were killed under different circumstances than the Forest Service. I mean, some of them were drug to death, and I remember I was jumping down in Texas and a couple of them were killed by... we didn't have the heavy padding that the Forest Service had. And so when we hit the ground... I remember we had some
guys drug to death, another guy strangled on his lines on his parachute, and things like that.

RG What kind of padding did you have in your smokejumper suit that the Forest Service supplied you?

CV They were canvas suits in those days. I think they're nylon now, but they were big felt pads underneath. Sewed in on your elbows, and shoulders, and things like that. And it was adequate, it seemed to do fine.

RG So you feel that the Forest Service and the smokejumper organization conducts a pretty safe operation for the smokejumpers?

CV Oh, yeah. Sure. I think they're... they're well aware of it. The fact is... like I say, this might be just my personal viewpoint, but they didn't hammer it away like the Army, but I'm certainly sure they're aware of it. Like I mentioned, the quick release box and things like that. They seemed to be very... it's just that they didn't hammer it away at you like they did in the Army.

RG Did you ever make any water jumps?

CV No. I never. Never had occasion to get near the water.

RG Did you ever work as a spotter or a pilot during...?

CV No. Uh-uh.

RG You just jumped.

CV Yeah. I learned to fly a little bit down in... when I went to California, but I never did any.

RG Uh-huh. When you were jumping in Yellowstone, did you have radio contact with the main base or the pilot?

CV No. No, we just had those orange pannels. You just laid those out to signal for more water, or food, or whatever. That's the only communications we had. And sometimes a pilot would drop a message in a streamer or something like that, but there was no real radio contact or anything like that. But it didn't seem to make... be that much of a problem.

RG Uh-huh. Were your instructions or procedures for putting out fires any different because you were working in a National Park than they would have been if you were working someplace else?

CV I don't think so. I think they're pretty much the same.

RG Did you use chain saws?
CV  Nah, we used a cross-cut saw... two man saw, and what they did they... if they saw you needed it or you... what they do, they had it tied to a plank or something with a streamer on it. They would fly low and they would drop it. We used it on different occasions. The same with hooks or climbers, if you... if they saw the tree was in... your chute was in a tree, they would fly low and drop you a set of climbers and hooks so you could climb up the tree and get your chute out. It was marked with a big streamer so you didn't have any trouble finding it.

RG  Do you feel that the... that the smokejumper organization in West Yellowstone is a successful operation? Does it serve it's purpose effectively?

CV  Oh, yeah. Yeah, I know they expanded it now. The last I heard, they were about sixteen guys down there, but they jump outside the Park. But I think they do... I thought it was very adequate down there. I know that the Park Service officials seem to really go out of their way to work hand and hand with us. I'm sure they're saving a lot of time and money. Yeah, I'm sure of that.

RG  OK. [PAUSE] So, how many people were stationed in Yellowstone in 1953 and then how many were there in '54?

CV  There were both... there was five both times, yeah.

RG  Five both times.

CV  Yeah. One pilot, one squad leader, and four... four guys that were jumping.

RG  Did you have very... did you... you didn't go any other place during the fire season?

CV  No. You mean jump anywhere?

RG  Right.

CV  Yeah, we just jumped in the Park, basically. Except for that one time we jumped out of the Park, and they relieved us real fast. That was the only time.

RG  [PAUSE] Well, are there any other stories, or thoughts, or experiences that you have had as a smokejumper that you would like to talk about?

CV  Yeah. Yeah, one of them that I always got a laugh out of, I forgot to tell you when we were training in Missoula we use to have a bear come down around the mess hall around twilight... er, it was still light. She'd come down with her cub. And I'll never forget, the guys decided they'd try to catch her and the cub, or whatever. But anyhow, they got a trap at the remount depot up here, a big culvert with a grate on it, and they tried to bait her in there. Well, they didn't get either one, but the
cub went up the tree and the sow took off, which really surprised me. But one of the fellows decided to go up there after the cub. And the cub, when the guy got up about six feet or so, the little cub urinated all over him, you know. [LAUGHTER] So that... he come down and the... eventually the cub come down the tree maybe a half an hour later and wandered off. I'll never forget that, because there was about thirty of us watching all of this, you know. It was really a... really a riot.

RG Did you have any problems with bears in Yellowstone?

CV No. I don't... I don't remember any problems with the... well, we did. When the cabin we were at... it wasn't on a fire, but the cabin we had one that was coming down around dusk, too, and was raiding the garbage cans. And I remember we got permission... the Ranger living close by had a child and they were afraid about that, so they got permission to shoot it. And Art Flick was the one that shot it. He borrowed a rifle from somebody and Art was on... he broke his feet, and he had it on cast... he had casts on both feet, and he shot that thing with a rifle. And he didn't get it the first shot, but I guess he hobbled around and shot it again and eventually killed it. But that's the only bear I remember... any kind of problem and that was right in camp.

RG Did he break his feet working?

CV He he landed in a snag on a fire. I guess it... I think he'll probably tell you, you're gonna tape him, too, but his chute hung up and I guess he tried to brace himself as he swung into the snag. And I think he told me he broke one... one foot or something in the other one... broke some other bones in the other one... broke an ankle or something in one and some bones in the other one. And he was able to lower himself out, and they got a boat in and took him out that night across Yellowstone Lake.

RG Was anyone else ever injured when you were jumping with... in West Yellowstone?

CV No, I don't remember anybody. Art was the only one that was really hurt bad. In fact, he tried to come back the next year and they wouldn't... they wouldn't take him because of his previous injury of a year before. I think he ended up working in Alaska that year... '54.

RG Do you remember very many people getting washed out of training camp because of injuries?

CV Nah. There's one... one good friend of mine, he sprained his ankle. I think I mentioned it, he's... he washed up. I don't remember anybody else particularly having any problems. Of course that's a long time, not to say there wasn't, but I just don't remember.
RG Were most of the people when you were smokejumping, students?

CV Yeah. In fact, I commented that, and so did the pilot. When I went to Yellowstone the pilot... I was twenty three and I think Art was twenty three or four and the pilot had dealt with smokejumpers a little bit, and the commented that we were older than most. So I think at that period of time there were a lot of them that were nineteen... twenty, I guess, I don't know. But I remember him commenting. I notice now that most of those guys are late twenties... early thirties. In fact, I met a guy this morning at the motel I was staying with, he was working out at Missoula, the base here. And he said... I think the ran... they took on fifteen applicants this year, and only got about six or eight new men, or something like that. I guess they don't have much of a turn-over anymore.

RG When you were a smokejumper, were you able to meet very many people from other parts of the country? You were from New York and...

CV Oh, you mean the jump... the guys that were jumping?

RG Right.

CV Yeah. Oh, yeah. I was from New Jersey and Art was from New York. I stayed out in Montana after I finished and I was surprised, because I don't think at that time there were that many Easterners staying out here. Because I remember running across people would ask me how come I was out in Montana. I guess it was pretty remoter in those days, or whatever. I don't know. But the people out here were always pretty nice. I really like the Westerners out here. There... you know, I was stationed down South and those Southerners always let you know you were a foreigner, but the Montanans and everything, hell, they accepted you pretty much the way you were.

RG Were there also a variety of occupations that people did in other seasons of the year?

CV Well, most of them were young, they were students. Art and I were... Art had been in Naval Academy, and I had already done a hitch in the Army and I worked in New York, so it doesn't seem to me that... the ones I met in training, a lot of them were... they were just students or whatever. A lot of them were forestry students. But it didn't seem to me that there were... there wasn't that many guys that had been... that worked, I guess. I don't know [INAUDIBLE].

RG Were there any smokejumpers that had also been airborne... when you were training?

CV I think there was one. I think there was one other guy, I didn't know him that well, but I think he was... had been in the airborne. There wasn't that many of them, I guess.
RG When you were still with the Army? Is that correct?

CV Yeah.

RG Did very many people talk about wanting to use their parachuting skills in some fashion, like being a smokejumper?

CV No. I that's... like that's about the only thing I had going for me when I got out of the Army. I didn't learn any skills. It was an infantry regiment so... and I'm really sorry about that, I didn't learn... if anybody's going into the service now he's recommended to go into the Air Force... Navy, learn something technical. But I'd been in the National Guard and stuff as a kid. I wanted to be a soldier, anyhow. But I'd been even those... sixteen I joined the National Guard and I spent about twenty months in the Guard and I went right there to the regular Army. And... but you don't learn anything, you know, there was nothing. So what... I guess I kind of capitalized on what little experience I had, because that parachute, like I say, it made the... made a hell of a difference in my life.

RG Right. Well, I'd like to thank Charles for sharing his experiences as a smokejumper with me today. This is the end of this tape.

[END OF INTERVIEW]