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RG This is an interview with Bob Whaley at his office at Shearson American Express in Missoula, Montana on June 27th, 1984. The interviewer is Renee Gouaux.

[INTERRUPTION]

RG ... interviewer is Renee Gouaux.

[INTERRUPTION]

RG OK, I'd like to first ask you what attracted you to smokejumping?

RW I was born and raised in Missoula, first of all. So naturally there were a lot of friends who... who were jumpers and also as a kid I use to go out to old Hale Field out there where the high school is now and watch the planes take off and land and I guess I was just kind of brought up in the smokejumper environment and always wanted to be one. Some kids wanted to be firemen, some kids wanted to be policemen, I wanted to be a smokejumper. [laugh]

RG That's great. What did your family think of this?

RW My father was encouraging. He always was... he was the sort of person who said, "You be and do whatever you want to do." And my mother worked for the Forest Service at the time and she was not at all pleased with the prospect of having me jumping out of airplanes. And I think I accused her of this, from time to time, of keeping me out of the jumpers for three seasons that I had applied and she said, yes, she talked to the personnel director, but it was not... I know that she didn't have any impact on the ultimate decision. Whether or not I was hired because I didn't have the qualifications. I didn't have the trail and crew fire fighting experience one really needed. So...

RG Was she anxious about your jumping when you did become a smokejumper?

RW Yes. Uh-huh.

RG OK. How old were you when you started smokejumping?

RW I think I was twenty... twenty or twenty-one. In that range, say twenty.

RG How many years did you jump?

RW Three seasons.

RG What did you do in the other seasons of the year when you weren't jumping?
Smokejumping was a vehicle that got me back to school. So the other seasons, when I wasn't jumping... er, you mean what was I doing the rest of the year?

Right.

I was a student in college and had the typical other jobs that college kids had: I was a janitor, I washed dishes, that sort of thing.

What kind of pay did you get when you first started smokejumping?

Gosh, I can't recall. I think it was about $1.95 an hour, or $2.10 an hour, or something like that. It wasn't... it wasn't a lot but... in a decent fire season you got quite a bit of overtime and made enough to go back to school.

Compared to some of your other classmates, was smokejumping considered a pretty lucrative summer job?

Well, it... I don't... we never really talked about finances that much. I mean, people got the jobs that they could land for the summer and you were lucky to have a job for the most part. I don't know that the topic every really came up. It was something I liked to do, I wanted to do it, and it was enough to get me back to school financially, so I really have a hard time answering that question.

What kind of training did you have before you started to smokejump?

You mean what type of training program did the smokejumpers have?

Yeah.

Or what did I have as far as physical background before I went into the program? I...

What kind of training did the smokejumper program have?

Oh. Excellent. Absolutely excellent. As evidenced by the fact that they never lost a jumper as a result of the actual physical jumping. They lost them on fires... that Mann Gulch Fire, I think was '49 or '48. But they really made sure that you were in excellent condition before you ever jumped.

Do you remember very much about the training?

Uh-huh. We had calisthenics in the morning, we'd go out and do, probably, thirty minutes of calisthenics. And then we'd run the obstacle course, do that several times a day, and the obstacle course was pretty tough. It was a challenge. And they
ran us, as well. We'd run probably a mile in the morning after the calisthenics. Then they'd go through the let down training, where they hang you and you practice going through your let down procedures. It was simulating hanging up in a tree, which we did frequently on our jumps. And then, or course, the tower training was extensive. The lower tower and then you'd proceed up to the upper tower training, primarily for, I would say, positioning for departing the aircraft... the different types of aircraft that they had, which is the Travelaire, the DC-3, those types of aircraft.

RG Where did you train?

RW Right here in Missoula.

RG In Missoula?

RW Uh-huh.

RG Prior to becoming a smokejumper, or to getting your job as a smokejumper, I should say, had you worked for the Forest Service?

RW Yes. That was supposed to be a prerequisite and most people did have to work for the Forest Service, because you did have to have recommendations from the district rangers where you had worked. I worked on the Missoula District here and cleared trail, worked on bridges, fought fires, did that sort of thing in order to pay my dues so I could become a jumper.

RG How many seasons did you do that?

RW I had one year out at the Aerial Fire Depot working in the warehouse and driving trucks up to fires, thinking that would qualify me. And then when I found out that it didn't, the next year I worked for the Missoula District Ranger station. Got my ticket punched and then applied for the jumpers, and was accepted the next year. So I actually had two years with the Forest Service.

RG So most of the people, you could say, were smokejumpers when you jumped had worked for the Forest Service before?

RW I'd say probably 98% of them had.

RG Would you say that most of the people who were smokejumpers when you were a smokejumper were students?

RW I would say that, again, about 95% were students. Some were veterans who had come out of the Korean War and were working in the local area probably trying to get a job in between doing something that was gonna be their primary profession or whatever they... it's kind of difficult to quantify what people did after they... after they came out of the service, but a lot of them would be going to school and would be jumping in the summertime. And some of those that came out of the service found the jumpers
as a good place, because maybe they have some parachuting experience, but they found it a good place to get a job and work for three or four or five months. And then hopefully stay on until perhaps December, if they could, and then they would lay off for maybe three or four months, become a ski bum or a ski instructor someplace. And then come back in the early part of the spring and go down to New Mexico and maybe fight the fire season down there, which is a springtime fire season and come back up. There were a few of those people that did that, and they kind of made it, I guess, a career. But I'd say that probably 90% of the guys that I'm referring to were students who probably had three or four years, at the most, of jumping before they went on with their careers, whatever it happened to be.

RG Do you remember your first jump?

RW Yes. Vividly.

RG What was it like? Describe it for me, if you can.

RW They would take us in... obviously, we had about sixty in our class, first of all, and I had, as I mentioned before, watched the jumpers load up for years, always wanting to be one of them. And we were... I think I was probably in the third or fourth load to go out. And we were seated out there along the wall, because you have a lot of jump equipment. You got your parachute on, and your reserve, your main chute, your let down ropes and all that stuff. And Fred Brauer, who was the head of the jumpers at the time, out there, would walk around, he had a wry grin on his face looking down at the expressions on our faces. And he came over to me, and realized how long I had wanted to get into the jumpers and he said, "Well, do you think you still want to go out there and do that crazy thing?" And I told him... I said, "It would take more than anybody around here to keep me out of that airplane." And he just kind of laughed and walked off. And then you in a somewhat of a... kind of a daze. You're really on a high because you're doing something, obviously, you've never done before. But you got a lot of other guys that were in the same boat, so you have a lot of company. And to say there wasn't some hesitation or some second thoughts about it would be crazy, because everybody has that, no matter what you're doing here. Yet, your desire to do it is far stronger, and you just go out. And you're so well trained when you get into the door, it's almost wrote. There's just no problem. The second jump was probably a little hairier than the first jump, because you realized what to expect from the opening shock, which you can only simulate on the towers. It's never the same, because you have the prop wash coming off the aircraft that gives it an added dimension of excitement, I guess, from the point of view of opening shock, because your position is very important. So I do remember the first jump. I enjoyed it very much.

RG After making numerous jumps, did you find that you were able to focus in on the kind of territory that you were jumping over,
or other things?

RW Oh, yeah. Yeah. As a matter of fact, I loved flying. I could never get enough of flying in. I just absolutely loved it. And I was always watching the pilots, and watching the instrumentation up there just to kind of see what the altimeter was doing and the air speed indicators and things like that. Not really knowing what I was looking at the time, but always sort of interested in it. And I'm looking out, trying to determine where I was in relation to Missoula or Salmon, Idaho, or some other place. And trying to kind of get a feel for location and watching the terrain underneath the aircraft, I enjoyed that. So I was along kind of for the ride, too, I mean, I liked the flying.

RG Great. What was it like to jump on your first fire?

RW Quite a bit different than the training jumps. Although the training jumps were very well designed to simulate what you would actually experience in the real jumps. There's no way you can really approximate the terrain that you're required to jump in on a routine basis. And we flew over this one fire probably three or four times before the jump master and the squad leader decided on a place to jump, a lot of snags and rather treacherous terrain. They finally decided on this open bowl. It was a hillside, fairly steep and that's where we all went out. There were six of us on that fire. And you were supposed to, when you're landing on a hill, kind of aim downhill... land on the downhill side, but heading downhill so you'll hit and you'll roll, rather than going into the hill, because it's... you'll it much harder if you're going into the hill. I ended up going into the hill, and you're not supposed to do it. Fortunately it was real soft crushed granite and it wasn't... there was no problem, but I didn't end up executing my landing the way I had been trained to, or the way I desired to do it. Sometimes you don't have much choice.

RG Where was this fire?

RW It was down in the Bitterroot-Selway Wilderness area, not too far from the old Wolfenbarger Wilderness Ranch, which is, I don't know, I'm just guessing, but I'd say forty miles... thirty miles to the west of Darby [Montana] back in that country.

RG How far into the fire season was this jump?

RW It was a July jump.

RG July jump?

RW Yep. The fire season doesn't usually kick off until about July. It's still fairly wet in July. A few hot days like this, we could have some fires starting.

RG Right. Can you describe for me the kind of equipment that
you carried on you when you jumped?

RW We just had what we call our personal gear bags. And the personal gear bag I carried toilet articles: a toothbrush, toothpaste; a jacket... a warm jacket, because often times it turned real cold at night, extra pair of socks, extra pair of scivies, not much else, really, just things to take care of you for five, or six days, or eight days, or however long you going to be out there. We had our own knives... hunting... not necessarily hunting knife, but kind of a fold up-type of knife that was pretty good sized you'd use for a lot of different things. But then, of course, you've got all this other equipment that's dropped behind you that serves the purpose of... pulaskis, and shovels, cross cut saws, things of that nature. So my personal bag really didn't contain that much. You didn't have that much room in it, first of all, so you couldn't take a lot.

RG How much did your parachute kit weigh?

RW I think that when we added up all of the weight from the jumpsuit, the parachute, your main chute, your reserve chute, the bag that you carried that you stuffed all this stuff into after the jumps, it was probably about seventy pounds... sixty pounds... sixty... seventy pounds.

RG When you were jumping, did you have to carry these parachute kits out, or where they packed out by someone else?

RW The technique that they used was to... you wanted to get your chutes, you gear as close to a trail as possible so that the packers could come in and pack it out. This wasn't always easy to do. One fire that I was on over at a place called... the best I can remember it, was down by Moose Creek ranger station in Idaho. There was a lookout about two mile away called Bear Wallow. We jumped on that fire and... it was a two man fire and it rained on us practically from the time we landed. It started raining, and we saw a light in the lookout up there, so we thought, "Man, we can just boogie out of here, because the fire's... the fire was out." We did have to spend that night on that fire because we did have to make sure that it was completely out. And it continued to rain, and the chutes got wet, and we were about, I'd say, a mile and a half down the hillside from the top of the ridge where to trail was leading to the lookout. We had to pack the next day all that gear out to the trail, and it took us eight hours... eight and a half hours to go a mile and a half up through that... it was like snow brush, buck brush and about a 45 degree slope. We were just... I still have a scar on my back... my lower part of my back from where the klack frame, which is the most uncomfortable pack frame you can imagine, was eating into my back from all the weight. The weight of the gear that we had was probably about 110... 115 pounds because everything was soaked with water. And we finally got up there and got the stuff to where we thought that the packer could get at it adequately with the stock. But I had to go down to that stuff, because he never would have gotten down there. And marked
it with our red marking panels, which we carry, and made it out
to the lookout and found that the lookout had been closed and the
guy left. So we had to break into the lookout, to spend that
night, and the next day it turned nice and went out to Moose
Creek, which was about a twenty mile hike, which we made in one
day, without the gear. [laugh] I might as well add that, "Without
the gear."

RG [laugh] OK.

RW But it, to get back to the original question, the weight of
the gear and so forth, it varies depending upon the weather
conditions and how much... how far you had to pack it and so
forth. But the packer, he would get most of that for us.

RG What were the klack frame packs made out of?

RW Out of wood. Just wood. Non contoured to your body or
anything else, just a plain old rectangular shaped frame with a
couple straps on it and you just tie everything onto the darn
thing. And it was very, very uncomfortable.

RG Did you ever use chain saws?

RW No. We didn't know what a chain saw was. All we did was we
used crosscut saws for our fire fighting.

RG What about water pumps? Did you ever have an occasion to
use a water pump?

RW I [inaudible] that on the questionnaire here, again, the
first fire I was ever on, Bill [inaudible] was the squad leader,
and it happened that on this one fire, there was a steam running
through the middle of the... it was about a four acre fire that
we had. We got it out in about two days and then mopped up.
Well, during the mop up process Joe put out a signal to the
spotter plane would fly over every day to drop us a pumper unit.
And we were also on a main trail, so we didn't have to pack this
stuff out hardly at all, I mean, we just took it off the fire,
put it next to the trail, marked it, and left. But he dropped...
they guy dropped a pump for us, we mopped up with the hose and
the pump. I told Joe, I said, "Joe, this is just a piece of
cake. "Man, I don't know why everybody makes a big thing about
fighting fire." He said... he said, "Don't get too cocky there,
Bob," he says, "I've been jumping quite a while," he says, "it's
not very often you get water this close that you can use to mop
up with." I says, "Ah, come on, on my first fire you're telling
me that?" He says, "Well," he says, "talk to me in a couple
years and tell me about it." That was the first and last time
that I had the luxury of water... of using the pump system to mop
up. So I did use it once, [laughter] that was it.

RG That was great. How did Bob signal to the spotter to bring
the water pump?
RW We have ground... air to ground... er, ground to air signals and it's just a simple... just lay out your panel and it mean: pump, food, jumpers OK, and we need medical help assistance. They're routine, I guess international, survival codes, which the jumpers have modified a little bit to their own uses.

RG Did you use wind streamer crepe paper for that?

RW Yeah, right. Yeah, crepe paper.

RG Can you describe for me the sequence of events, as you remember it, from the time you would touch the ground through actually putting the fire out?

RW The first thing you did was to get out of your chutes. Whether you're hung up in a tree or whatever, you got to the ground safely. One of the biggest mistakes a person could make would be to make the assumption that even if he was only hanging up six or seven feet that he could just pop out of his chute and drop to the ground and not use the procedures that he had been trained to use. Quite a few people had hurt themselves by doing that, spraining ankles and so forth, because they're fairly heavy in these jump suits. Heavier than you would be if you were just, say, jumping six feet dressed in normal street clothes. So the important thing was to get safely to the ground, get out of your chutes if you can... extricate yourself from your situation, whether you've been hung up or whatever. Leave your gear, leave your chutes, go over and get the cargo... the cargo chute would be dropped fairly close to where you were. They obviously not want to drop it right over you in case it augured in and caused some injuries there, so they drop it off to the side a little bit. And you go and extract whatever you needed from the cargo kit they sent, and then you'd just start hot spotting the fire. The parts of the fire that were burning the hottest and looked like they could cause you the most trouble, you went right into and would start throwing dirt on it, cutting away fuel, separating the fuel from the fire itself, and trying to just get control of it. Once you felt that you had control, then you'd start digging your fire line, and, again, separating the fuel from fire. And this would oftentimes take you about two or three days to get it completely surrounded and under control. A lot of the times there would be little that you could do if it was taking off. You'd stand back and let her go, and then just figure out another way you were gonna attack it. That would oftentimes be at night time when it cooled down, and the winds died down on you, you'd go up and try to get yourself situated where you could, again, separate the fuel from fire in case it blew up again the next day. Constantly keeping in mind that these embers travel beyond your fire line, and you always want to make sure that you have someone watching for other fires starting somewhere else behind you, because a good sized fire can pick up a burning ember the size of a man's arm and carry it a quarter or a half mile because of the heat rising up. And you want to make sure that you don't get trapped, or you get into a situation where by you think you're safe but all of a sudden there's
another fire behind you and you have no place to go. I never heard of that happening. It never happened to me, but it was something that you had to be aware of.

RG Right. I guess the men in the Mann Gulch fire...

RW That could have happened. I'm not really sure what the scenario was there and how that developed. But I think it just blew up when the winds shifted and came back on them and they tried to out run it. Man certainly can't out run a fire if a deer or elk can't.

RG Right. Were you ever hung up in a tree?

RW Yeah, we routinely got hung up. It was not unusual. As a matter of fact, it was far preferable to hang up than to go into some of the terrain that you'd be landing in if you didn't hang up. Our suits were very well structured for hanging up in a tree, there was no problem at all. They had the... the webbing that went from the outside of your legs to the inseam and then ended up about six inches below your crotch, so even if you happened to straddle a big limb you wouldn't get hurt, which was a pretty secure feeling. Even though your not suppose to straddle, you're suppose to have your feet together when you're landing in the trees to keep yourself from tipping over and so forth. Sometimes it's inevitable, you still going to fall over them.

RG Were you ever injured while jumping?

RW The only time I was ever injured... well, I came down upside down on a fire in California on time in a manzanita tree and just cut my wrist a little bit... just a little bit of a scar there. Nothing serious. And then on a fire in Glacier Park, I was landing in a meadow, and there was an elk under me grazing. And we jumped in pairs. The first guy out landed up the clearing, probably, oh, 200 yards or so beyond where we were. And the spotter knew there were a lot of rocks up there so the winds had come up a little bit and so the spotter said, "I'm going to take you down a little bit further." So they dropped us out a little bit further down this clearing. And there was an elk in the lower part, and I didn't spot him until I was about 500 feet above him. And then I started clicking my heels together like this and yelling, and he didn't know where I was coming from... where the sound was coming from and I had my spot pretty well picked out by that time because your descending fairly rapidly and he starts right for it. I could just see myself straddling this elk and running around the meadow. I knew it wouldn't happen, but I was afraid that it might. And so I... instead of concentrating on making a good landing, I was watching the elk and not watching what I should have been doing and I landed harder than I should have. Sprained my ankle a little bit, but it wasn't bad. But that's was the only time I ever came close to injuring myself. And the elk was gone... I mean, he was no factor at all. I didn't... I wasn't sure [inaudible].
RG [laugh] That would be a pretty major distraction.

RW I just read that in this questionnaire that you had and one of the questions here was... let's see if I can find it. Oh, yeah, I guess it's in paragraph seven-one: "This is the greatest smokejumper story ever told, and that's no bull. Comments in paragraph five could apply."

RG OK.

RW All right?

RG Great. Good. I'm glad we've got that. How many people did you most often jump with?

RW The majority of the fires I went on were two man fires. I'd say that I had more two man fires than any other type of fire.

RG What kind of living arrangements did you have when you were a smokejumper?

RW Barracks-type... dormitory?

RG Uh-huh.

RW They had have an excellent dormitory out here. I lived at home because I went away to school and I wanted to be at home in the Summertime as much as possible. So I stayed at home, but the barracks that they had out there, or dormitory, was really excellent. I think they had two men or four men to a room, but it was very adequate.

RG Right. OK. Do you remember how many jumps you made your first year?

RW Yes. I think I had six fire jumps my first year, which is pretty good. I thought they were all gonna be... all seasons were gonna be like that, and they weren't. I think I ended up with maybe eleven fire jumps or twelve fire jumps all together. Which isn't as many as I wanted, but my first year was a pretty... pretty good year.

RG How long were... er, how long was the longest jump that you ever made?

RW You mean the time on the ground, or the distance to reach the ground?

RG Right, the time on the ground. Yeah. I'm sorry. That was unclear. The time that you spent fighting a fire, how long was it?

RW Oh, boy... probably four days. Yeah, about four days. Normally if you get the fires when they're small, you get them
out in and you're out in two or three days at the most. I'd say four days was probably the most.

RG What kind of on base activities were you involved with when you weren't fighting fires?

RW Well, that's probably the only drawback to the jumpers that I can think of, because they had what they call project work. The guys would go out on project until the fire season started, and then once the fire season started they'd try to keep you busy back around the base. Painting curbs, watering trees, trimming trees, planting trees, mowing grass, trimming grass, some of the guys were lucky and got to work over with the borate bombers, putting borate together for the fire retardant... aerial fire retardant.

RG Why do you say "lucky?"

RW Well, because they got to work around the aircraft, the airplanes, and go out and re... put stuff in the tanks and something that I always wanted to do. The TBMs and all these neat old World War II-types of aircraft. That would have been neat. My last year I rigged... was a parachute rigger. I wanted to do that just because I wanted to learn how to pack parachutes. And that kept you busy, so that was better than driving a truck around, watering trees, and doing stuff that was really busy work type of stuff.

RG Was there some type of a seniority system as to who got what kind of work to do and...?

RW No, not really. The only seniority that was in evidence out there was after your... about your fourth year, they would look at you as being a prospective squad leader, which means that you were capable of taking out four man fires, or six man fires. You'd be the leader on those... those types of fires, making the decisions that have to be made. Also being a spotter, dropping the guys, which would have been a good job. That would have been a lot of fun to do.

RG Were you ever a spotter?

RW No. I never was.

RG You mentioned that you packed some parachutes. What kind of a parachute did you use?

RW It was called the... we called it a Derry parachute... Derry slots, tails. Just the typical... typical chute that they had. The only variation they had on that was, they had a thirty-two footer and a twenty-eight footer. The thirty-two footer, the bigger guys got. I think you had to be 180 pounds before you got the big one. Everybody else got the twenty-eight footers. Every once and a while we'd give one of the little guys a thirty-two footer just to see how long it would take him to come down. That
was on training jumps.

RG Huh. Can you describe for me how it operated? Or how you operated it?

RW Oh, boy... of course you have your risers, with lines leading up to the main canopy. There were, I think, three tails in the back that, when the chute was opened, gave it forward momentum. You had slots... two... a slot on either side with your main guideline that you pull down. You pulled it down on the side that you wanted to turn to. In other words, if you wanted to turn to the right, you pulled down the one on the right, and what that did was to close the slot on the right, which meant that the air pushing out the one on the left would push you around. Kind of like aeriolons on an airplane, the same principle. So, that would be your turn capability. And some, obviously, forward momentum provided by the little tails in the back that would spilled the air out of the back of the canopy and provide forward momentum. That's it. Pretty simple, and that's about the way it was.

RG And you had a harness to go around your body?

RW Yeah, but we just held on for dear life [inaudible] [laugh]
No, we had a very extensive harness system that we hooked into with safety snaps and everything. And, of course, we had our reserve chutes on our chest.

RG Did any of that equipment change during the time that you jumped?

RW Not while I jumped, but I'm sure it's more sophisticated now. I'd like to go out and take a look at it and check it out. I'd like to go jump again.

RGYeah. Probably aren't too many klack frame packs.

RW Oh, no. They got rid of those. They got much better frames now.

RG What kind of project work did you do besides on base activities?

RW The... my second year I was not about to stick around and water the trees anymore. So I volunteered to go out on project and we did have... I was sent to a place called Fish Lake, Idaho, which was just a beautiful lake up there in the mountains of the Bitterroot-Selway. Our job was to string an electric line... wire around an airstrip up there because a lot of private planes could fly in there and use the strip and they'd go fishing out there on the lake. Well, a number of planes had crashed because moose had wondered out on the runway during their landing sequence and the planes crashed off the side, there'd been people killed up there even because of it. It was the type of runway, I mentioned that in my questionnaire here, also. You made your
approach over the lake on your landing... made your landing on the runway, a little dirt strip. But you couldn't take a wave off and go around because you were committed to your landing, first of all, because of the mountains that were like in front of you... like a big bowl in front. So you landed in one direction and you took off in the same direction that you came in, which sometimes was not, as I mentioned, too conducive to longevity in aviation, because you're often times either landing down wind or taking off down wind. So you've got to be awfully careful. Sometimes you have to wait all day long before the winds were sufficient to provide the lift adequate to get you up in the air and out of the area. The... we were there, for probably, a week to ten days. We linked up with a group from the ranger station that came up there to assist us also. And we strung the wire and layed the batteries and all that down there, and got the fence posts in and all that sort of thing. Excellent work, just loved it. Moose came by the cabin every day. There must have been... at any one time, I would say, we saw, I think, thirteen moose out in the lake at one time. There out there grazing or with their heads under water going after that [inaudible].

RG Did you ever see a plane land on that airstrip while you were there?

RW No, just the one that came to picked us up when we went out.

RG Were you ever involved in any other project work or...?

RW No, that was primarily it... that was it. Like I say, I spent my time in town here. My project work was out there screwing around with the air drone there, you know, just busy work. It was all stuff that had to be done. We had a lot of visitors out there and I have to say that the facility always looked excellent. It was a real good image for the Forest Service and the jumpers in particular. I think it was costly because they were paying us quit a bit while we were out there waiting for fires, but the ground always looked very, very nice.

RG Did most of your contemporaries enjoy project work?

RW I think they loved it. Yeah, not that type of project. When you say project work you're talking about going out with the districts and haying, or doing trail work, or bridge maintenance, or whatever was required out there on the district. I think the really enjoyed it.

RG Did you have any time off during the smokejumping season?

RW No. Once you started, you went right through it.

RG Any days off during the week, or did you work...?

RW Oh, yeah, you'd have Saturdays and Sundays off, generally speaking. When the... if you had a big fire bust then you... the way it worked, you see, you'd come back and you'd go on the
bottom of the list after you came back from the jump, and then you'd work your way back to the top of the list again. Well, on a real fire season, you could be on the top of the list again in two or three days. And when you were within so many numbers of the... from the top, you had to make sure that you were available for a phone call, so you didn't go anywhere that they couldn't reach you. And if it happened that it was a Saturday or Sunday, that was great, because that's what would be called you overtime. And that's what got you back to school sometimes.

RG On the weekends that you did have off, did you often spend that time with other smokejumpers?

RW Yes. We'd go out and harass the natives. [laugh] Go to Seeley Lake and [inaudible] bar up there and water ski and swim. Typical types of things that guys that are nineteen or twenty or twenty one years old do.

RG Right were there any traditional bars that you went to in Missoula or Seeley?

RW Yeah. The Park Hotel was a kind of a pretty good hangout for the jumpers. King's Inn, out here west of town was a good spot. Seems like the Swallow was a spot that we went to, but I don't recall if we went there that often. Marvin's was a pretty good hangout, out there at the "Y." Of course, I was home in bed at 9:00 every night, so I don't know too much about those things.

RG [laugh] You only heard about them, right?

RW Yeah, right. We were good boys.

RG Right. Were there any traditions that you remember having, or being a part of? Like initiation parties or yearly parties.

RW I'm sure there were, but I just don't recall that many. The freshmen jumpers pretty much stuck together, we did our own thing, because we'd been through quite a bit together, and the comradery was there. No, just guys being guys, trying to kind places to go and girls to chase, I guess. [laugh]

RG Right. Would you... er, did you ever imagine when you were smokejumping that there might be women smokejumpers some day?

RW No. Never even imagined it. No.

RG How does that strike you now?

RW I covered that in my questionnaire.

RG Well, please talk about it.

RW OK.

RG Yeah, I'd love to hear it.
RW Yeah. The questionnaire's reference to the American social and racial policies feelings and so forth about jumpers, and I have to be honest, I didn't even know what the Black 555th Parachute Battalion was, or what the White attitudes were towards the Black 555th Parachute Battalion. I'm not a person that's prone to be prejudice in the first place. One of my best friends in high school was Pete Rhinehart, and when we'd go on athletic trips, I was always the one who asked Pete if I could room with him. And I didn't see any color there, I just knew him as a friend. And I have a lot of Black friends today that I don't notice their color, so that was nothing that affected me at all. And still wouldn't. Your question is directed towards the women, however, and I do mention that. And I want to be consistent here. I may have some reservations about female jumpers only because I know they're... how very difficult some fires and pack outs can be. The physical requirements can be excessive. And regardless of what egalitarian theories may abound, there are differences. Just as in the military there are some jobs that women perform, and some jobs that they don't. There are some women that are physically able to perform as well, if not better, than some men. But the jumpers are insuring that these are the ones that they are hiring then they have no problem with it. It's too easy to generalize on topics like this. If the perspective remains objective and the women jumpers are fully qualified and are assets rather than liabilities, then I have no problem. However, if they are filling slots just to meet some foolish, bureaucratic quota, for some off the wall Department of Agriculture feminist nic-pics, then I'm absolutely opposed to the hiring policy. And that's my feelings.

RG Are there any other changes that have occurred in the smoke-jumping organization since you were a jumper that...

RW Yes. I mentioned that also. When I was jumping, you had... probably the longest at guy could expect to jump would be four years, unless he had already had his military requirements out of the way. We were involved with the draft at the time, and all the college guys were obviously on college deferments. If you hadn't been in the service, you were going to go in the service. And if you were a jumper, I doubt very much being 4-F would have qual... would have been a factor, because you wouldn't have been jumping if you were 4-F, because the physical requirements were quite severe.

RG Now, what do you mean by "4-F?"

RW 4-F is... you were deferred from the draft because of physical reasons.

RG Oh, OK.

RW 4-F was a qualification. If you were 4-F, you didn't have to go into the service, because you had flat feet, you were blind, or you had some physical disability that precluded you from serving. As a result of this, you had a fairly young jumper
organization. A fairly well educated jumper organization because
everyone... for the most part... 90% were pursuing degrees in
college. And you always had a turnover, every year you had fifty
or sixty new jumpers coming in, because you had fifty or sixty
jumpers that were going into the service. In talking to jumpers
today, and I have class that are jumpers and they go along with
this, they say that the average age of the jumpers now is
probably twenty seven or twenty eight years old, maybe higher.
The average age then was probably twenty two or twenty one. When
you've jumped six or seven or eight or ten years, the novelty of
that type of profession, whatever you want to call it, tends to
wear off. You don't have the enthusiasm that you once had for
it, like your second or third or fourth year.

[END OF SIDE A]

[BEGIN SIDE B]

RW ...it feeds me for five months or six months out of the year
and I'd go do something else and come back to it. You don't seem
to have the close knit comradery that you had at that time, and I
think that's also doing....

[INTERUPTION]

RG ...Whaley on June 27th, 1984. Bob is gonna continue to talk
about his thoughts about some changes in smokejumping today.

RW With the advent of the... not the advent, but the draft
being very much a part of our lifestyles at at time we obviously
had to serve in the military, and what I was gonna mention was
that there were strains going through the organization of unity,
the whole concept was organized around a military concept,
because you have your leaders and you have different echelons of
leadership. And I think they still have that, obviously you have
to have that in that type of an organization, but I don't think
that you have quite the continuity or the comradery that you had
in those years. And that is just my own, personal observation,
and also the observation of people that are jumping today out
there. They've mentioned this. I guess that answers your
question.

RG Right. [pause] This may refer back to the questionnaire
again, but I wanted to ask you if there was any social or
historical event prior to your becoming a smokejumper that
affected your attitudes towards work?

RW No. Not... you mean towards work, in general?

RG Right.

RW I've always, as I've mentioned in the questionnaire, and I
don't know if it's the same question or not, but I've always been
part of... the work ethic has always been a part of me. Mowing
yards when I was a kid, shoveling sidewalks in the Wintertime,
anyway you could make a dollar. It was always... obviously, when I was growing up, it was the tail end of the Depression, there were still a lot of pretty deep scars around the country, and not just Montana. But jobs were available for those who wanted to go out and find them and do the types of things that you had to do to really make some extra dollars. And, as a result, I think I carried that with me into just about anything I've ever done, really. Eight hours work for eight hours pay. Sometimes ten hours work for eight hours pay, and if that's what required, that's what you do. There was no specific social event that affected me. I think, like I mentioned growing up in Missoula, Montana, where the Forest Service was very, very big and the jumpers were very evident was very... justification enough for me to pursue like this. My... in my eyes, that was something that I wanted... always wanted to be.

RG OK. During the three seasons that you were a smokejumper, were you ever stationed at different bases?

RW Yes. We went down to Redding, California for some fires down there. They had a real bad outbreak, I think that was in the Summer of 1958, and we were there, for probably ten days. I think I got two fire jumps in that ten days. We worked with the Shasta hot-shots in the Shasta National Forest.

RG What... what are they?

RW Oh, they're ground pounders who came into the fire and joined us after we, obviously, got it under control for them.

RG [laugh] How far away was the most distant fire you jumped?

RW California.

RG California?

RW Right.

RG How many different states did you jump in?

RW Just three, I guess: Montana, Idaho, and California. I didn't get over into Washington at all.

RG Is there any event or experience that you remember as being really exciting?

RW No. All the jumps were anticipated, always different. Somebody said, "You'll never make two jumps the same way." And that is very true, none... no two are ever the same. But, no everything was just, I guess, as routine as a forest fire could be. [laugh] If there is such a thing.

RG So, you were never involved in any especially harrowing experience?

RW No. No. No, nothing heroic at all, just surviving and
doing the best job you can.

RG Is there any activity that you were a part of as a smokejumper that you became particularly fond of?

RW No. Just doing your job and going to work every day.

RG Right. OK. What kind of planes do you remember jumping out of?

RW The Ford Trimotor, the DC-3, Travelaire, and the C-45, which was a Twin Beechcraft. So I jumped out of four different... oh, and also the Lockheed Loadstar, which we jumped out of down in California.

RG Was that plane only used in California, or...?

RW I think it was. Yeah, out of Redding there.

RG Did it differ significantly from the other planes that you jumped out of?

RW It did. I wasn't sure how to exit the aircraft, techniquewise. I just tried to do the best you can. Of course, jumping out of an airplane is jumping out of an airplane, but it didn't have a... it was a small door and it didn't have a step, so you had to hunch way over to get out of it. Most of them, with the exception of the DC-3, had steps steps that you could kind of leap... put your foot into and leap off, but that one didn't. It was no problem, just a little different.

RG [pause] What was the average length of response time to a fire that you can remember?

RW Well, from the time that you were called, if you're right at the top of the list, you could be in the air in thirty minutes, because the planes would taxi right down from where the Johnson Airlines was there to the jump center. It only took you, maybe, fifteen minutes to get into your gear and ready to go. I'm guessing at that, it probably took you less time than that, but you had to go and get briefed on where you're going, and make sure that you had your cargo equipment and everything out there. Really, you could be in the air, easily, I think thirty minutes, maybe less than that. It's a very quick response time. From the time a fire is discovered, until you had jumpers on it sometimes could be an hour, which, in the old days, it could be a week, really get out of hand.

RG I know you talked about this in your... er, you wrote about this in your questionnaire, but I'd like to ask you if your smokejumping experience had any impact on your later career?

RW It had a significant impact on my later career because when I finished jumping, I joined the United States Marine Corps as an aviation officer candidate. When we got back to Quantico, there
were, probably, 365. I think, aviation officer candidates out of roughly 700 officer candidates. We were suppose to finish our training and then report to Pensicola, Florida for flight training. There was a large screw-up in the numbers, which resulted in only, I think, ninety three being selected to go down in that first group to Pensicola to flight training. Of this 365, there were some people that were far more qualified than I was academically, experience-wise some guys had private pilot licenses, there were aeronautical engineers. I was a political science major, I did have a fairly good math background, but nothing too... would apply to engineering school or anything. And this required a number of interviews by people from the staff there at Quantico, Virginia, where we were located, aviation personnel... commissioned officers who were aviators would conduct interviews with the 365 aviation officer candidates. In almost every interview that I had, which I think was three or four, it came down to talking about smokejumping. Some of the guys wanted to know, "What's a smokejumper? What is that?" I put that down on my jack thing that I had jump experience. As a result, I ended up telling them about jumping and some of the experiences that I had in smokejumping, and they thought that was just fantastic that there were guys making their way through college doing this type of a... participating in this type of employment. And I think every board that I came out of, I came out quite well, because I had demonstrated that I was aeronautically adapted, where as a lot of people may not have been. And they asked me if I ever got airsick, and I said, "No." One occasion I did, but that was understandable. But... so I think that helps in my selection in being one of the ninety three that was selected to go down there to flight school in Pensicola. And of the ninety three of us that went down, probably thirty-five actually made it through flight training. And, again, my background, I think, in jumping probably helped me to some degree, in becoming adaptive to aeronautics... aviation and flying. Incidentally, I loved it so much I spent twenty-one years in the Marines as a aviator, so it served me well. Not that smokejumping was the key to the whole thing, but I did like flying.

RG Are there any other impacts that smokejumping had on your life?

RW I think that for the first time in my life I was given responsibility that I never had before. When they take you out and drop you, and you're the head of a two man fire, in other words, you're the senior jumper, you might have a freshman jumper with you or two second year jumper, or whatever, and you know that it's your responsibility to get that darn thing out, make sure it's out cold, which is not a tremendous responsibility, but it is to some degree. You got to know what you're doing. And we out in the boondocks twenty-five miles from, maybe, the nearest ranger station or, yard station, or whatever. And you got to get your gear packed up and you got to find you way out. You have to know how to read maps. You have to be aware of safety procedures, you got to be first aid qualified in case somebody gets hurt. It
gives you feeling of confidence to be able to do something like that, and as a result... it was never a problem for me because when I was a little kid I used to go out in the hills up here way behind Mount Sentinel and find my way home at seven years old... eight years old. And this was just a chance to get out and do it on a grown up basis, I guess. But it always made you feel kind of good that you knew you could get out there in the boondocks and you weren't afraid of the dark, you weren't afraid of the animals. It just gave you... maybe a confidence building experience. And realizing that it could snow, you could be in a survival situation, and you felt confident that you'd get out of it. And that has served me well, I think, in my later years because I was never afraid in my three tours in Vietnam of being shot down and having to escape and evade because I felt comfortable. First of all, I felt comfortable because if I had to eject from my aircraft, I was not afraid of the parachute sequence. In fact, I'm kind of disappointed that I never did have to use it, really, I'm serious about that. And I always wanted to be in an escape and evasion type of situation, which I never got into but that's probably fortunate. But it's something I was never afraid of, I almost anticipated it. And I think a lot of that came from the confidence that was given to me through my experiences with the smokejumpers.

RG Was the experience of working with other people important to you?

RW Exceptional. Exceptionally important, really. The chance to work with other people from different parts of the United States was very, very interesting to me. Growing up in a little town like Missoula, you don't really have the exposure to other parts of the country, or how people think, or talk, or anything else. And for the first time, I was friends with people from Florida, and from Tennessee, and from Virginia, from all... from New York... guys from New York, and it was kind of like being in the service, I guess, because you're thrown into the same kind of situation. And it was really interesting to me. It was a great orientation for things to come later on in my life in the Marine Corps, which was a snap after the jumpers. Really easy, I went back to Quantico, Virginia thinking, "Boy, those Marines are gonna turn me every way but loose." The first hike we had was three miles. I thought, "Three miles? My God! I've been hiking twenty miles with packs and all this stuff." But you had to realize that not everybody that was reporting to Marine Officer Training was coming out of the mountains of Montana after having made "X" number of jumps and all this other stuff. There were school teachers, and stock brokers, and people coming right out of school, you know, really people that had never done a lot of the things we had been doing. They got us very quickly to what was respectable. [laugh]

RG Are there any other stories, or experiences, or thoughts that you'd like to share with me about smokejumping?

RW Experiences... I just... I've written a few things... a
couple antidotes or whatever you want to call them, and I don't know if you want me to go through those or not. I think having had them written down would be enough.

RG Sure.

RW I didn't want this to sound like it was a racial thing or a slur against anybody, but I wanted to write it up as it happened because, I think by editing experiences, you lose the gist of the experience. And... where was it?

RG Oh, yeah. I'd like to hear about it as you remember it happening.

RW Let's see here... let me just follow through some of the things here. Some I have edited. OK. I'm gonna follow this, because it is a little easier this late in the day to recap everything. This is kind of an antidote. I don't know if it's funny or not, but this was kind of funny to me when it happened. On every training jump we had a pool where each jumper kicked in $1.00, and the trainee closest to the "LZ" or the jump spot got the kitty. That day I had been assigned to jump out of the Travelaire aircraft, which I mentioned previously, it was also a day when many friends and family would be observing down there right around the jump zone. I stepped out of the aircraft... the part of the aircraft, counted three, felt the opening shock, and then traditionally looked up to check my canopy. And in so attempting to do so, found I couldn't move my neck, my [inaudible] had gotten... my risers had wrapped up three or four twists and I couldn't get my head up. And I also had a line over and I couldn't steer the chute. We jumped at an altitude of about 1,200 feet and I think I probably had descended 500 or 600 feet of that 1,200 feet before I finally got unwound, got my line over taken care of, which didn't leave my very much time for maneuvering. By the time I got control of things, I had tracked away from the "LZ" and really thought that I was out of the money. But when I got turned around toward the zone, it appeared that I just held almost a perfect course if I just held where I was. I would have made it right in on the... I tracked and pulled down on the front risers, doing anything I could to get just a little bit more out of the chute. And about ten yards shy of the "LZ" I just crashed into the ground. I mean, feet together on my knees and on my face, and not at all the type of landing you're suppose to affect. And I heard one of my jumper friends with his camera shouting, "Outstanding! Outstanding! That was just great! Great, Bob, way to go! Way to do it!" And I responded, I said, "I said that's probably the worst landing I've ever made or ever even seen. What do you mean 'it was great?'" He said, "I've been waiting all day to capture on film the way you're not suppose to do it." About that time I realized the validity of the old saying, "No one is completely worthless; you can always serve as a bad example." And... which I had done. But there was only one other guy that got closer than I on the jump and I still didn't get the kitty, the other guy got it. But I was close. Anyway that was... that was one little story there.
Got another episode that... I told you about the bull and... ah, yeah. "What large correction fire do you remember most and why was it most memorable." I mentioned before that I got sick one time. This was the time. I think it was a ten man jump and some of us had been out the night before having a few beers, and we were alerted to an early jump. I lived at home, and when I'd get home there'd be a note on the mirror in the bathroom, "Report to the jump center at 5:00" or whatever. So we had an early call. We went out to the old mess hall, which they opened up for us real early and we were loading up on bacon, and fried eggs, and ham, et cetera. One of the more sage Jumpers advised going easy on the greasy stuff, because of possible turbulence in the air. We kind of guffawed him and indulged. About forty-five minutes after takeoff we were circling our destination out by Lincoln, Montana and it started getting turbulent. We were flying in the DC-3 with five Jumpers on each side of the aircraft facing one another. The plane circled, the jump master could not locate the fire, the air got rougher and we circled. Finally, one jumper seated next to me got sick. Then the one across from him got sick. And the aroma caused a chain reaction, and it seemed that everyone was barfing. The jump master said, "The hell with it." Picked a spot outside there somewhere on the ground, and kicked us all out of the aircraft. He said, "Get out!" We never found the fire, and we're back at the base late that same afternoon, and dinner that night was fried eggs and hash. [laugh] Something to that effect. Anyway, that was... I'll never forget the expression on the jump master's face, though, as he was kicking everybody out. "Just get out! Get out of here!"

RG Did smokejumpers very often get airsick?

RW Very rarely, I think. I didn't see hardly any. That's the only time I ever saw anybody get sick, and most of them wouldn't gotten sick had that one guy not gotten sick. One other incident, about twenty-five Jumpers were flown to Billings in a DC-3, and then bussed down to a small town called Ashland, Montana, which is in the very southeastern part of the state. It was down on the Cheyenne Indian Reservation, and we were to fight an outbreak of scattered fires that were caused by numerous lightning strikes out there. Our first night in town found us gathered at a local watering hole... one of the local bars there and we were trucked out to these fires, there was no... we weren't jumping. And there were a number of Indians also in the bar with us, several of whom were large women. I was standing at the juke box while the other six to eight Jumpers, that were in the bar at the time, were seated at the bar. And while searching the record titles on the juke box for a good Hank Williams or Johnny Cash tune, I felt this heavy handed slap on my shoulders, half spinning me around. I didn't know what to expect, I thought some guy was gonna deck me. And I was kind of ready for that, and I was face to face with this large Indian woman who kind of slurred out, "You're nice. We dance." She didn't speak very good English, and it was kind of slurred because she had been drinking. And she grabbed me and started waltzing me around the
dance floor. Fortunately none of my buddies had seen this before I got it stopped. I got it stopped by telling her, "No, no. Dancing is against my religion. Please stop. But, do you see that guy at the end of the bar with the plaid shirt?" And she nodded, and I said, "He said to me that he thought you were cute. But he's shy and doesn't know how to introduce himself." And that was all it took. She dropped me and flew over to him and spun him around off the bar stool and, as I said here, I don't know what little license I took with writing out with, had him into three bars of Rosemary Clooney's "Tennessee Waltz" before he knew what had happened. And she was probably two inches taller he was, and out weighed him by about twenty-five pounds. And, as I recall, his feet touched the floor about... every now and then. Although he vowed to get even with me, anything he could have done would not have eclipsed the entertainment he provided us that night, for he went along with the prank with great style, 'though he and we did not overly endear ourselves to the male Indian patrons of the establishment. And that's a whole new story, because they were waiting for us outside after the bar closed. The bartender came out and he said... he said, "Come on back in." He said,"Just wait around for about a half an hour or so," he said, "they'll got home." Which they did, and about twenty minutes later they were all gone, so it wasn't any problem.

We went out on the fires there, and it was very boring fighting fires there. There was just... it was just kind of grass fires they burn up a little bit into the trees and they were all very tall pine trees, so there's not much to burn. I came back, I was offered a job there working with the cooks that they'd hired to feed the people, and that gave me an extra two hours of overtime a day, which I wasn't getting on the fires, so I said I'd do it. Besides, I had a driver's license. The District Ranger, or whoever it was there providing food, and I guess the government had some kind of regulation about if bread is over four days old, you're not suppose to serve it and if eggs are over five days old, you're not suppose to serve them and so forth. And they threw out perfectly good bread and perfectly good eggs. And they said, "Take the truck", it was a big state truck, "down to the dump, which was on the Cheyenne Indian Reservation, and get rid of the eggs and get rid of the bread and all this stuff. And I had another helper with me and the two of us went down and he said, "Whatever you do, don't let the Indians get a hold of the bread or the eggs." So I said, "OK." So we drove through the Reservation by these just hovels, just how anybody lived in these places I'll never know, particularly in the Wintertime. And these little Indian kids are out there playing in the dirt and we drove through and went up to the dump. And anytime we could have a little bit of fun with something, we did it. So we'd take the loaves of bread and throw them in the air and we'd take the eggs and hit the loaves of bread with the eggs in the air. And we saw the little kids down there watching us, and I said, "Hey, you want to try one?" I gave him an egg and took a half a loaf of bread and tied the thing around it, threw it up in the air, and the kid was gone with the egg. I said, "Jeez, they're probably hungry." And then I said, "Let's
just leave the rest of it here," just kind of set it off to the side of the truck. We took it to the dump, don't know what happened to it. He said, "Yeah," but he said, "Make sure you break all the eggs and destroy all the bread, you know, just mash it up or whatever and throw it out there in the dump." I said, "I didn't hear that, did you?" He said, "Yeah, the ranger told us that. He said, 'Don't let the Indians get the bread and the eggs.'" And I said, "Bullshit!" And I said, "If I lose my job over this, it's worth it. He can reprimand me, he can do whatever he wants. The only person who's gonna find out is if you tell him. I'm not gonna tell him." And he says, "I'm not... I won't tell." He said, "Don't worry about that." I said, "OK, from now on, if we have bread and eggs, or anything that's consumable, it's going to the Indians." We made two more trips, and jeez, we had to be careful because after the first time instead of having three or four little kids out there, we had about fifteen or twenty following behind us. And I'm not so sure that they didn't find out sooner or later because the guy that sells bread and eggs to the Indians obviously... in town obviously wasn't selling as much as he was before we got there. But I never heard anything about it, so I guess... but I couldn't sleep that night without... you know having destroyed as much as I did in front of those people that were hungry, so...

RG Right. Right. Well, I want to thank Bob Whaley for sharing his terrific experiences while a smokejumper with me tonight. This is the end of the tape.

[END OF INTERVIEW]