Interview with Larry Fite by James Stephens. 5/24/84.
Smokejumper Oral History Project. OH #133-121.

JS Today is 24 May 1984, 15:00 hours at the Missoula Smokejumper Base at the Aerial Fire Depot. My name is James Stephens, GS 6 smokejumper and I am interviewing Mr. Larry Fite, GS 9 foreman. I hope that this will pick us both up and if it doesn't maybe we can stop it and make sure it does. I'm really curious about you. I would just like to know what it was like when you trained and you know, whatever you would like to start... tell me and everybody else.

LF Well I think... when I started which was in 1960 there was, I believe, about 55 in our new man class. Training was really pretty similar then to what it is now. I think in some ways it was a little more rigorous. We started, ah... well, 6:00 in the morning with PT for at least a half hour if I remember right and then it was back on at 8:00. Generally we was done at 5:00. But, as far as the training itself, [it] was actually pretty similar to what it is now. It's pretty near the same program.

JS Was that out at a camp?

LF No, no, at that time all the training was done here. We did a lot of field work but we trucked to the field. But, we was back in here every night.

JS So the units were located in the same place?

LF Yeah, the same place. All the units are different now as far as the apparatus themselves but, ah... basically it was the same. There was a jump tower, ah... our landings at that time consisted of what was called a Canadian Swing which was kind of a hoop arrangement like's there now only it was controlled with block and tackle... with the instructor holding block and tackle and you swung on it. Then he would release it and give you either a forward or backward roll, or side roll. It wasn't near as good a simulation as what we have now.

JS Yeah, I really... I think the one we got now is great. I've learned a lot on that thing. Well, so, your rookie year is the same year they made "Fire call Jeremiah".

LF Yes it is, yeah.

JS I've showed that to many groups of people over there and I always point out the fact that you were there and you're still here jumping, you know. They get a big kick out of that. You'd be surprised. So, did you just get picked out of a crowd for that or how was that?

LF Yeah, that was, ah... well, I just worked on parts of it. That was kind of, ah... oh, it was one of the projects that we did that summer as far as you know... if you was in here and not on a fire, they was filming actually the whole summer and if you
was available you might go out and work with them on "Jeremiah". I happened to be out there a few days when they were doing some filming as far as you know, falling the snags, and they simulated that 2 man fire and then about the same time they simulated the digging line and stuff like that.

JS Well, did you make the fall that's in that movie too?

LF Yeah, I did the fall as far as the guy that was injured. The guy that they picked up and put on the helicopter was somebody else, but I did the fall.

JS Oh, I see, OK. Yeah, because somebody told me that and I never really knew for sure or whether or not you did.

LF Yeah, that was simply standing on a road cut on a bank and doing an Allen roll down the road cut.

JS Oh really. Flip-flopping down there, huh?

LF Yeah.

JS It gets the point across pretty much in the movie. You know everybody seems to enjoy that thing. Well, back in those days everyone was pretty young though, weren't they, when they started out -- or not?

LF Yeah, well of course at that time they had, I believe it was, you had to be under 27 in order to get into the outfit. They had an age limit. So, that kept the age limit down a little bit. Ah, the absolute max you could start out at was, I believe it was 27... you could not be... you had to be 26.

JS That was back in the days of the 40 age turnout?

LF Yeah, you had to... then you couldn't jump beyond age 40.

JS The PT test has been the same throughout basically?

LF No, at that time there was no PT test. The PT test, ah, was, you know, the ongoing thing. You had to keep up on the units. It was just like our unit training is now without a PT test to begin with. The guys that were out of shape just washed out on the units.

JS Yeah, I see. So they were just grading you on the obstacle course and other things other than that?

LF Yeah, there was minimums like on the obstacle course and I believe it's still the same right now. That's where you got it. If you wasn't in shape you didn't keep up during training.

JS It was 3 or 4 weeks... it's always been about the same?

LF It was, ah, it was 4 weeks at that time, yeah... 4 weeks, 7
jumps. The jumping was about the same that it is now, about the same program... started in big spots and worked down to timber jump.

JS Did you get the same wings back in those days when you got your training?

LF The silver wings?

JS Yeah, have they been the same throughout?

LF Yeah, exactly.

JS That's interesting. I didn't know that. When did they start that program of giving multiple of 50 wings?

LF Well, at that time, they gave out the gold wings to anybody that had 50 jumps, but that was the only pin they gave. At that time, well even the old foremen that were around here like Samsel, and Cramer, and those guys were right around a 100 jumps. That was the max that anybody in the organization had, was 100... 115, right in there. So, a 50 jump pin, when you got 50 jumps in those days you was a pretty salty dog because there was a high turnover. I... you know, you jumped... they did a lot of fire jumps and there was less proficiency jumping. Refresher training was 2 jumps and there was never a proficiency jump during the course of the summer. So, you didn't jump as much in those days other than on fire. And then, people hadn't been here that long in those days because, well, just everybody was younger here then. The 40 year limit and all the other things that kept people moving through.

JS So, what parachute did you train on?

FL I trained on the FS 2 which is a 28 foot chute with Derry slots and tails. That was the standard parachute at that time.

JS That was a candy stripe one?

FL It was a candy stripe, yeah. It, ah... we had 2 parachutes at that time, but the 28 was the one most used. They had, ah... they were in the process of developing the FS 5A. The parachute they had then was the FS 5 which was 32 foot, like the 5A only it had 7 foot slots in it instead of the 10 foot slots that the 5A ended up with. It [FS 5] was a dog. Nobody really wanted to jump it and nobody did jump it hardly. They had restricted... the weight limit on it. I think you had to weigh 165 pounds before you was even allowed to jump the thing on account of it was drift... they felt you would blow out of the country if you put a light guy on it.

JS Oh, I see. Just because it was a bigger canopy?

LF Yeah, yeah.
JS Did it have steering toggles or did you have to pull the shroud lines down?

LF You had guidelines on it but they didn't have togs. They were just attached to your risers. They were green line. They were sewed to your riser just like the rest of your lines only they were longer so they hung with a little bit of slack in them so you could find them. They were always the outside line on the front riser.

JS I see. Well, then I guess the FS 10 came in in the late 60's sometime?

LF The real late 60's, yeah. Yeah, we went the FS 2 and then it was phased out in, ah, oh like 62 and 3 with the F 5A. About that time was when we adopted the deployment bag for deploying the parachute. Then it was within the 5A that we started development work on the FS 10... started in the late 60's and we started adopting it in, I don't remember, 69... 70... 71... in there.

JS So, the deployment bag came in prior to the FS 10?

LF Yes.

JS That was quite a revolution wasn't it... getting that thing or not?

LF Well, yeah it was. It, ah... in the 5A system that was developed, we developed our own deployment bag and it was actually a little different system than the FS 10 system had. Ah, the lines were stowed on a tray board which was a stiff tray board that was on your back. It was rubber band stowed instead of being stowed on a d-bag like it is now on the FS 10 system. The mouth of the bag was tied closed with break tape instead of having locking stowes on it. Um, and it was in a container about the same as the FS 10 is except it had the stiff bottom in it for stowing the lines.

JS Well the deployment bag though, basically cut down that opening shot though, didn't it, by reversing the process of having the line speed out first and then the canopy, right?

LF Yeah, the same as... the effect was the same as far as just some of the finer points of the deployment system was a little different than what we have now. But, ah, yeah, the reason for the adoption was to reduce the opening shock.

JS Well, what other types of airplanes did they use back in those days?

LF Well, primarily, ah... out of Missoula base we had 2 DC 3's, we had the DC 2, and the Twin Beeches which were the 1811 model of the Twin Beech. That was a military version of it. The Ford Trimotor was used... based in Grangeville and that kind of varied
I believe year to year. I believe in 1960 they only had the Travelaire in Grangeville and I don't know where or if the Ford Trimotor was in use that year.

JS Did they actually feather the engine on the jump side when they jumped out of that Ford?

LF No, no they didn't and you couldn't. In the first place, the old Ford's, ah, up until the time of that one had the engine come off of it in 1964 I believe it was, didn't have feathering props on them. As a matter of fact they didn't even have variable pitch props. [Inaudible].

JS Yeah, they're supposed to try a jump I guess. One of those FS guys asked me about the weather and geez, I didn't know.

LF The other thing about the Ford Trimotor is they were real bad as far as torque, you know, on one side or the other. If they lost an engine, they were... either one of the outboard engines, they were kind of in bad trouble keeping it in the air. But they didn't have to... the Ford, you know, flew and cruised and climbed and let down at about 90... 95 max and they could get down to 60 mile an hour jump speed real easy. It was a nice airplane to jump.

JS Yeah, it sounds like it... just drop right away from it. You know, I heard a story here, my years around here, about you being a spotter or in an airplane that had some kind of problem with a prop. This is the story that I heard, some part of the prop came off and went slamming into the airplane. What happened was, this is the story that I heard, you were in the back of the plane and you got up to talk to the pilot or something and everybody jumped out while you were doing that. Is there any truth to that?

LF No, there's no truth to it at all. What you're talking about occurred except I wasn't on the airplane.

JS Oh really, oh.

LF It was... that was basically right. What it was is it was in a Ford Trimotor and it was 1964 I believe and they were flying to a fire out of Grangeville. What happened was, the prop... ah, the tip came off of one of the props... just broke off apparently. The tip of the prop came through the fuselage and the engines where the... the outboard engines on the Trimotor was... the cockpit was just right in front of it. There's a bulkhead and then the passengers compartment. All that, the bulkhead and the props were in line. The prop came through the side of the fuselage right up kind of right behind that bulkhead, if I remember right. Looking at the airplane, I've seen pictures of it, there was a crease in the bulkhead and then the prop went out the top of the fuselage, up through the wing... the other wing... the wing on the other side of the airplane and out the top.
JS So it actually passed through the fuselage?

LF Yeah, the spotter was riding in the cockpit with the pilot. Ah, the jumpers were in the back. Of course, after the tip of the prop came off that put the engine so badly out of balance that before the could do anything about it, it ripped the engine off. Just the vibration tore the engine off. It fell off and it punctured... flattened the tire on that side when it dropped away, plus the gas lines were loose and it was pumping gasoline out. You know, gasoline was leaking out. But anyway, the jumpers... the spotter which was Ted Nyquist [Charles T. Nyquist], ah, the story I heard about it was by the time he looked around to tell jumpers to jump they were already getting out.

JS Well, that's really fascinating because it is a true story. Do you know when that happened or approximately?

LF It was in 1964. It was... I don't know what the date would be. I would assume July or early August. I remember when it occurred. Of course everybody heard about it.

JS There was no one hurt?

LF No, there was no one... they made a landing at Elk City. They were right by Elk City when it occurred. Ah, the spotter stayed in the aircraft with the pilot. The pilot was Frank Borgeson. Matter of fact is, he kind of had to stay in with him in order to help him land on account... like I was saying earlier, when they lose an engine on one side or the other on the Ford Trimotor, there's so much torque on it and the way it was built aerodynamically with small rudder and stuff like that they didn't have enough trim to counteract it, or apparently whatever goes on there. But, anyway he kind of had to help the pilot hold rudder to keep it straight. If he hadn't the pilot probably wouldn't have been able to land it by himself.

JS Boy, that's a real fascinating story. Well, you must have come across some pretty close calls in all these years, haven't you?

LF Not really.

JS Not really? [Laughter]. Well, there must be something in there that gave you a start... that sticks out in your mind? [Pause]. Has anyone ever been... well, Harper told a little group the other day, counting the ones that died at Mann Gulch, there's been 21 killed, total, of all the hundreds and thousands of men here, and that includes the ones that... the fellow that drowned, the misrouted shroud lines and all that other stuff. So, has anybody been killed since you've been here in an accident or a plane crash or something like that?

LF Well, ah, not at the Missoula base. Let's see, there's the
plane crash, ah, a spotter was killed out of McCall. That occurred in 1965, I believe. The drowning... I don't remember how many of them there was, did just one guy got drowned?

JS Yeah, that's the only story I've heard.

LF Yeah, I know that there was somebody drowned over there. I believe there was a plane crash out of Winthrop. Is that right? Did he mention it?

JS No, he just had the basic history up there and kind of went through it quickly and told people, because they are going to be interviewing all the old fellows from the conscientious objection and the black jumpers and all that stuff. So, he filled them in on all the details and it was one of the facts that he had that here has been 21 total deaths counting the ones at Mann Gulch.

LF Well the... the jumper at Redding that died jumping with the static line. Well, OK, I was jumping at that time also when the woman in Alaska got hung in the letdown.

JS Oh, that was in Alaska?

LF Yeah, that was in Alaska. Ah, like I say, I'm not real sure. As far as I... nobody here... now the year before I started the jumpers, there was 2 jumpers killed in Moose Creek in a plane crash. That occurred a year before I started.

JS Well, I'll just have to nail that down and find out because that kind of fascinates me. I think most of the other extraneous deaths of which there's about a half of dozen or so were plane crashes or something like that, you know. Well, I read this book that Randall Hearst wrote back in the mid 60's and there's one story in that book where they jump a fire, there's like 8 men on the fire. One of them gets a streamer and he pulls his reserve in the last 2 seconds and makes it in all right. But, what amazed me... the way he wrote this book back in 65 or 66 was that after they got to the ground and all got back together, they just acted like that was no big deal. You know, here one of them came within 2 or 3 seconds of being killed. Were streamers a real problem? I remember from the statistics when I started here, before the A-nets there was about 1 in 500 jumps was a streamer. Have you ever had one of those?

LF No, I've never had a malfunction. It, ah... malfunction... streamers were rare. I've never seen a real streamer. You know, I've seen a lot of malfunctions as far as lineovers or Mae Wests, whatever you want to call them... lineovers. They were a lot more common before we got the d-bag. That's one thing that the d-bag did was made it a lot more reliable opening system. I don't know what the malfunction rate was prior to that time, but it was a lot higher than after we adopted the d-bag and then, of course after we got the A-net. I think our 5A system with the d-bag was not as good as the 10 system. I think we had a higher malfunction rate with it than we did when we went to the 10 and
of course the A-net has cured them all so far.

JS  The 5A you said earlier was the 28 foot?

LF  No, the 5A was the 32. The 2... FS 2 was the 28.

JS  All right, now I'm clear on that. Well, back in... they used to have a regular Alaska detail out of here, didn't they for in the 60's and things?

LF  Yes.

JS  How did they work that? Was it like the Silver Crew, the same fellows go to it every year or did they have a... I know that the base is over on the coast now. Two years ago when we went up there they told me that they have a lottery where anybody that wants to go up puts his name in and they draw like that. Did Missoula ever do anything like that?

LF  No. I don't... well, we had the detail from, ah, 1960 or 61. I went up in 1961 and we had that detail up through 70 something... mid 70's or right close to there. The way the selection was here, first of all it was volunteers. Then if they had more volunteers, I guess, the selection was they picked they figured... the best people to go using whatever criteria was used. It wasn't a lottery as far as, you know, their names weren't drawn out of a hat. It was a selection process that they followed. That detail varied from year to year depending on whether the previous year had been a good deal or bad deal whether there was enough volunteers or whether it came to a point of almost having to draft people. It was not always a good deal because through the 60's they had, oh, quite a few years up there without hardly any fire season. You went up there and put in 8 hour days on projects out there on the brush and you'd come back to Missoula.

JS  I could see that. Well, over the 20 odd years that you've been here, do you see kind of a change? I understand what Iseman [Larry] was explaining to us the other day, how they carved out so much more wilderness in prescribed burns and all that stuff, but are we getting fewer responses than the old days, do you think? Are people calling for our services a little less in the 80's than they did in the 70's and even less in the 60's?

LF  I think so. A lot's changing, in the 60's, particularly the early 60's up through about say 67. Ah, there was not all that much organized helitack for example. We were, along with ground crews, were kind of the primary initial attack, particularly in the boondocks, you know. We were kind of it because there wasn't the organized helitack crews around although they did helitack a lot of those fires during those years too. The district organizations were from a fire standpoint and fire people, they didn't really have the fire people like they do now. The big difference was at that time everybody in the Forest Service was a fireman regardless of what else you did. The fire was number 1.
JS Did they move the jumpers around to, you know, Redding and McCall?

LF Oh yeah, yeah.

JS That's been the same throughout?

LF Yeah, that's been the same. Ah, I think during those years we did a lot more initial attacking. After 67 which was a devastating fire season as far as large fires and large losses, I think a lot of money became available and a lot of districts and forests were able... money was free enough that they were able to start building up their own helitack team in and through the 70's it all increased so that they became, particularly through the 70's I believe, took care of a good share of the initial attack. Then we became the backup with our 16 manners and 32 manners and stuff like that. We still initial attacked some... some small 2 manners in the boondocks when they were out of people or fires are hard to get to and really our bread and butter during those days was the 16 manners. Now... of course we haven't had a fire season really in the 80's to know where in the hell we're at, because we don't know what's going to happen other than that one bust in 81 I believe it was.

JS Boy, I sure remember my first year, 79. At the end of it, I was just saying to myself, "My god, how do these people do this every year?" Now 5 years later I realize that was kind of an abnormally active year, at least around here. Have you ever come across a situation where you jumped in the same place years apart. You know, like fires... I know one other guy, I can't remember who said it, but I was on a fire with some old timer around here and he says, "Yeah, I jumped here 10 years ago." Has that ever happened to you?

LF I haven't jumped in the same spot. Now, I've been... I've been back to the same place. Matter of fact is, a few years ago... oh, it's been several years ago now, on a fire, dug line down the same place we dug line down before. Down the exact same place except the fire was on the other side the second time.

JS A jump fire both times?

LF Yes. Ah... wait a minute, no the second time I pounded the fire. The first time was, jump. We jumped it which was Alison Creek that particular time. The second time we pounded it, it was called Ruby Rapids. I jumped right in the same area, you know, just like in across the draw from where I jumped before, but I haven't jumped the same spot.

JS Were there a lot of injuries in the old days? I mean like now injuries are relatively rare, I guess. It seems like they're rare. But did people get badly hurt back in those days?

LF Yeah, particularly when we was on the 28 foot chute. Ah,
there was a lot more injuries. I don't know what it was but... the injury frequency. But, yeah it was not uncommon to... 2 or 3 people around here on crutches during the course of the summer. It seemed like you never hardly ever had a 16 man jump or a 32 man jump or what, there wasn't somebody banged up. He may not have been seriously hurt. Broken backs were pretty common. I think almost every year we had one at least... maybe 2. Head injuries were a lot more common... concussion type injuries, and that was primarily the head gear and hard landings. We for years wore football helmets for head protection. They really didn't need these side or back protection. You know, when you come in backwards and smack the back of your head, you used to hurt.

JS Have you ever jumped on a rescue?

LF Yeah... ah... 2... 2. One was in New Mexico. One was out of Grangeville. One of them was... oh, it was a... he was a district... the one in New Mexico was a district fellow on fire. Ah, I guess he was lost. I don't remember everything. I think he had a radio and supposedly his horse had trampled him. We jumped on a lookout. I believe the lookout was Blue Mountain... was the name of it anyway. The elevation was 10,200 there at the lookout. Kind of spread out and searched for him. Found him, the fellow really wasn't hurt all that bad and we hauled him up to the lookout and they helitack... helicoptered him off. The other was out of Grangeville. It was a district fellow on a fire stung by bees who was allergic to bees. We jumped in and then they dropped... a doctor sent out some medicine and they dropped it to us. I don't remember what the stuff was. Probably Adrenalin, I guess. He had instructions... [tape ends in mid-sentence].

[END OF SIDE A]

[SIDE B]

LF I don't remember what the stuff was. Probably Adrenalin, I guess. He had instructions for me on how to administer it to him. We gave him a shot. By the time we got there, I believe he was through the worst of it and starting to recover anyway. After we gave him the shot he said the swelling was... he was all puffed up.

JS Yeah, that's a hell of a scarey deal. I've got the same problem with yellow jackets and I didn't know it until it happened, you know. But that really scares you pretty severely.

LF But, we gave him a shot, cut a helispot and helicoptered him out of there. I think that's all the rescues I've been involved in.

JS Have you noticed a change in the smokejumper organization? It seems to me that in my time here that people are really conscientious about the environment and don't really want to cut down trees needlessly. Has that been pretty much the case
throughout or do you see more aggressive fire fighters in the old days than now?

LF Well, it was... it was... fire fighting was more aggressive in those days in that, you know, it was an all out effort to put out any and all fires. You know, if a fire occurred you went to it with whatever means and whatever it took to get it out as soon as possible. That was the policy. Ah, the environmental awareness and movement really didn't exist yet at that time. Hell, we weren't... standard operating procedure was... you know, all your rations, which we had canned rations in those days, was, you know, you buried your cans. If you buried our cans out there, you did a good job. Of course, you know, most of the time a bear was right behind you and dug them up after you left and you had cans scattered all over. But, that's the way it was then. Ah, as far as what you did on a fire, you know, there really wasn't any thought given to whether you fell or didn't fall a tree. If there's any reason that it should come down from a fire standpoint you probably fell it.

JS Were chainsaws as active then as they are now?

LF Ah, we had chainsaws, but like in 1960... the early 60's the chainsaws were not near as well developed as they are now of course and not as good. Particularly on small fires, you did a lot more crosscut work than you do now. For one thing, chainsaws was heavy, you know, so you didn't... if you was on a small fire or if there was any way you could avoid getting a chainsaw in you didn't get it because you had to pack the damn thing out. And then they were, like I said cantankerous and slow really compared to what we got now. So, we didn't use them as much, but we had them and on crew fires we used them. But on small fires... 2 man, 4 man, 6 man, fires like that you didn't take a chainsaw unless you absolutely needed it. You do a lot of crosscut work before you get a chainsaw out.

JS Do you know approximately how many fire jumps you've got?

LF Ah, I believe it's 148. I'm not real sure. It's right around there, yeah.

JS And you must have over 300 or so total?

LF Yeah, I've got 440 something.

JS Oh really, oh wow. At looking back at all those jumps and all those years, did you reach a time when you really felt proficient and kind of stayed at a level or was it, the curve continuously getting more educated through parachuting through the various years?

LF Yeah, I don't know where... I think, ah... I think a guy really continues to get better although along with better you have to maintain proficiency as far as, you know, jumping. For example, it don't make any difference, like right now I got 400
some odd jumps, if I don't jump for 6 months, you know, my level drops way below where if I had just come off of making 5 or 6 jumps in a period of a week or 2. I don't know, there is a place where I think a guy really picks up proficiency or reaches kind of a plateau... plateau as far as, kind of being good. I'd guess it's somewhere around, you know, between 100 to 200 jumps. There's a lot of variation between the individuals. Now some people, you know, pick up jumping right in new man class and they're fairly good, you know, they're consistantly there. But, to really be good in all conditions, you know, I think it takes somewhere between 100 to 200 jumps and then I don't... you know, 300 jumps is better... 400 jumps is better than that and I think a 1000 jumps is probably a whole bunch better than that. But, along with it you know, you got to maintain proficiency as far as jumping fairly regular.

JS  Do you think jumping once a month is adequate for us?

LF  No, no, not adequate.

JS  I guess I'm about the only one that feels that way then. I've got 64, I think, or 66 after refresher and I still think about it quite a bit, which is understandable. Have you ever jumped in... no doubt you've jumped in the big trees then?

LF  Yeah, I've jumped over out of Cave... out of Redmond. Ah, I don't have any real big tree stories to tell because I never hung up in any big ones. Actually I was fairly lucky for my jumps over there. I don't think I really got into the real big stuff. But, there was big enough trees around. After you're about 50... 60 feet off the ground it don't make any difference anyway.

JS  Right, that's definitely going to hurt if you fall out of those things. Well, is it true that the A-net as an addition to the canopies was a Canadian invention wasn't it and how did we find out about the thing? I've seen a lot of Army jumpers... pictures of them at least that don't have that on their chutes even today.

LF  I think... I'm not real sure... the development came out of either the Canadian, British, or they might have adopted it out of NATIC Laboratories which is the U.S., kind of Army... military test... parachute test organization... parachutes and a lot of other things. I don't know just exactly who did invent it. But, the Canadian's and British both, I believe, adopted it before the U.S. Army did. Ah, where we got onto it was... I'm just trying to think. I'm not sure I remember exactly the details on it, but our military was adopting it... was starting to adopt it and we adopted it at the same time. A matter of fact is, most of our parachutes were converted under and along with the same contract as the military when they were converting all their parachutes. Let's see... now I lost my thought. I forgot what I was going to say.

JS  Well, kind of along that same line, how long has the
military been coming out here and working? Well, what I'm really curious about is these special forces fellows are pretty interested in the FS 12, aren't they or is that a better piece of machinery than what they're using? Do you know anything about that?

LF Well, the parachute itself has better performance than what they're using. What they're using is what they call the MC 1-1 which is exactly the same thing as our FS 10 was. That's what they're using. Our parachute, of course we adopted because it's a better parachute as far as maneuverability than the MC 1-1. They're interested in it and we've shown it to them and I don't know whether... whether they will or ever will get into it. I think from the special forces standpoint or ranger insertion, I think probably their next step, where they're going is Ram Air type parachute.

JS Ah huh. Well, when did Missoula go to the policy of having all the jumpers here in Missoula, because years ago they used to have people out in little towns, right? Then at some point in time they started having whole cadre here. Do you remember anything about that?

LF Well, no. When I started, ah, it was the Missoula jump base. Of course they had a spike base up in Grangeville and they had one down at West Yellowstone. That was all they had in the region. Although everything was here, unless there was fires, you know, all the jumpers weren't here. We were out on project work. Just as soon as there was a lull in the fire activity, you know, everybody was shipped out. So you was on whatever ranger district that they had project work for you. Ah, when I started jumping and I don't remember when they switched, but we was on subsistence in lieu of per diem. We didn't get per diem. I don't remember what year we got it, but I wasn't... it might have been even as early as 61 or 62 we did start getting per diem so I didn't operate under subsistence in lieu.

JS So we're actually moving back to a previous situation then... a lot of the changes then are going back to the way it was 25 years ago?

LF Yeah, or even earlier. Like I say, you know, ah, we really didn't over the years change that part because we had project work. Where the bind come in was in the last... I don't know, what it's been... 5 years when they started to begin with, on account of the energy crisis, restrict travel in mileage. OK, that made it tough for us to get jumpers from here to... to, ah, where ever to do their project work. OK, along with restricted mileage they started restricting per diem costs in order to reduce travel which was to begin with was the energy crisis. Well, now we have the budget crisis which... [blank spot in tape].

JS Well, you know, one big question that I'd like to ask you is that having all these years in here and now in the last 5 years
or 8 years, the fellows that are in here are older and sticking around longer. Do you think that that's good for the organization or should we get out and let you guys train a bunch of other fellows or what? How do you feel about that?

LF Well, I don't... personally, I have no objections to the experience level that we have here now. Ah, I think there's a lot of advantages from it. On the other hand I don't fear new people coming into the organization. As a matter of fact, I think it's good to have a certain amount of turnover. But, I believe that probably... I think right now... of course we got some problems due to the lack of fire seasons in the proficiency standpoint, but I think right now we're probably a better organization due to the experience that we have in here than we ever have been in the past. That's my personal feeling.

JS Well, that's great. I'm glad to hear you say that. Well, I've talked to a couple of these pilots and they seem to be sold on the Cessna 206 as a safe efficient jump plane. Do you feel the same way?

LF Ah, I think it's a safe jump airplane. From the cost standpoint certainly it's, ah... it's probably the lowest priced airplane we'll ever be able to contract. Ah, it's a safe enough jump airplane, I think. I don't see any problems with it from a safety standpoint. It's kind of, ah... oh, it's kind of a hearty little bastard to operate, but it's all right, you know. I don't think as a prime jumpship it's all that good,... as a backup ship... for example, at a jump base, say Grangeville, with a Twin Otter it's a good backup jumpship when they get, you know their single 2 man request comes in. They can take off and man it at times when there's probably not going to be any other fire occurring at the same time, you know like when a single hangover shows up. Early in post season it's fine. Gives the option of going one direction with the Otter and then if you get a fire reported at the other end of the forest you could use the 206. By itself, ah, just being able to fly with 2 people, it's pretty restrictive if you're trying to man a jump base. For example, even I feel like the Hamilton jump base.

JS How many fellows do you keep on deck down there? Just 2 or 4 or so?

LF It depends on what's going on as far as fire activity or danger down there. We may be anywhere from none early in the year to 2 and a spotter or 4 or 6 or maybe the whole crew in. Just depends on what's going on. The way it's been the last couple of years, generally we've been keeping in 2 to 4, you know, from at least the middle of July on, I guess. But, ah... but of course, we've been looking at the unusual fire season the last 2 years.

JS Do you remember when the Twin Otter started as a jumpship?

LF I believe it was, ah... it was 1968 or 69 I believe, Silver
City, the R-3 [Region 3] crew was the first one to use it. It was contracted down there. I believe it was 68. It was either 68 or 69.

JS It goes back farther than I thought. Did it always have a step for an exit?

LF That was standard as far as where we used it, reaching on, yeah.

JS All right, well, gee whiz, I'm just kind of played out here with questions. Is there anything that sticks out in your mind that you'd like to throw out here. Oh, one other thing, do you think the DC 3 still has a place in this organization?

LF The turgin DC 3 with the turgin engine on it, yeah. Yes, I think definitely. I think it would be nearly the ideal jumpship. Ah, I think the need for that size of 16 to 20 man jumpship is there. I believe that we've lost a lot not having the aircraft, in that we've lost the 16 to 20 man... the crew type action. We're doing it now with 10 people... we're going out with a crew of 10 where we should have 16 or 20 man crews is what we're ending up with out there. Ah, consequently I believe that we're losing a lot of business as far as jumping business... fire action on account that we aren't able to provide that class of crew action.

JS Well, I can remember distinctly, my first few fire jumps were 30 people or more back in 79.

LF Yeah, it's like I said. That was our bread and butter particularly through the 70's and even in the 60's we did a lot of initial attack but we did a lot of crew action. You know, the local fire gets away from them and escapes their initial attack and the first place they can get a crew from is here.

JS How do you... this is another topic, but when they showed us that Ram Air parachute here when those fellows came down from Alaska, how do you feel about that chute ever being adopted down here in the lower 48? How do you feel about that use in Alaska or just the whole idea of those square canopies?

LF Oh, I think as far as it being adopted eventually, I don't think there's any question that it's going to be adopted. Ah, I don't know when it's going to be adopted and I don't know whether the smokejumper organization will last long enough but no, that's the technology... well the technology now, but it's the future for the jumpers as far as if there's ever any advance in equipment or parachutes that's where it's going to be. It's got to be because in round canopies, I'm sure that we've gone about as far as you can. Ah, I'm glad to see the BLM... the Alaska jumpers into it because they're laying a lot of ground work if it's successful that we can use to adopt it. I don't think there's any doubt but what we won't be adopting it, I'd guess roughly 10 years or less. The problem we got now is we just...
one of the problems that's keeping us from really seriously
looking at it or getting into it right now immediately is, ah, we
just acquired the FS 12 system and spent a lot of money there.
It's pretty hard to throw that away and go right into something
else so we're going to have to wait. Plus that gives us a chance
to let the BLM take a lot of bugs out.

JS Right, work the kinks out.

LF I don't know whether the exact parachute that they've got is
what we'll end up with, but it's going to be something similar.
They're figuring out, you know, the training. They've made some
real remarkable advances in their training system for training
people as far as the ascension system that goes with it and all
that stuff. You know, they invented just about everything that
is needed to make it possible for us to get into it.

JS Wow, that really surprises me. It certainly makes sense.

LF Well, I feel the Ram Air parachute, like I say, I don't know
whether the equipment they got right now is the ultimate answer
in it, but there's no doubt in my mind that that's where it's
going to be because you've got a parachute that'll penetrate, you
know, 20... 25 mile an hour wind. I don't know for sure whether
we'd be able to jump that kind of wind down here even if you
could on account of the turbulence and other factors coming in.
But certainly you could jump what we're jumping now, you know, 10
to 15 mile an hour... which is our cut off now. You could do it,
you know, without even almost... you almost don't even have to
drop streamers to do it. Plus, there's a lot of other things.
You look at the Ram Air system... you know, they're designed to
be packed in the field, or you don't need a loft to pack them,
you don't need a tower to hang them to inspect them, you know,
any kind of... it only takes about a 10 foot ceiling or something
like that. [Inaudible] you have to run that dang thing up to
inspect it. Ah, they're light weight, you know, you talked about
weight reduction. The system they got now, the 2 canopies which
they're using the back and reserve, weighs 16 pounds. Our main
weighs 18 and our new reserve will weigh something like 9.

JS Oh really. There's a new reserve coming out?

LF Yeah, yeah. We will have that in another year or two.

JS Oh really, huh. Is it brand new... designed here?

LF Ah, well it's... it's... the system is kind of designed
here. It's nothing... you know, the parachute, the canopy itself
has been around. [Inaudible] been using it. It'll be, I believe
it's a 26 foot triconic canopy which has been around for a long
time.

JS Well....

LF But anyway, as far as the Ram Air system, there's a lot of
advantages to it and I think, "Yeah, we'll end up there eventually."

JS You don't foresee any problems with jumping the rough terrain we have in like the Cascades or any place like that with that forward speed? I guess you could stall it out though can't you?

LF Ah, as long as... as long as whatever canopy you end up with, as long as you can slow it down or break it down to 0 forward speed and not land with an unacceptable rate of descent. It's going to have to be a canopy, you know that cannot be stalled or is hard to get into a stall and you will recover from a stall real easy. That's kind of what they're into up there now.

JS You know, in the Archives I read the Russian smokejumper report and they have a diagram over there of the Russian Forester parachute and a break down of what it's made of and everything. It seems very similar to the FS 12.

LF Yeah, it is. A matter of fact is, a lot of the FS 12 is in a way copied off of it. As matter of fact is, our steering slots are almost a direct copy off of it... off the Forester.

JS Really?

LF Yeah. The.. if I remember right on that Forester canopy, I believe it's almost like a Paracommander in some ways. It doesn't have an even skirt on it. It's got extended skirt on the sides, I believe. When they developed the FS 12, they opted to stay with the basic round canopy, even skirt, which gives you better reliability in opening the static line which is what we're after. They went to the 3 porosity material in it. I believe the Russian chute has more porosity. I don't remember what they are.

JS So, they did... I mean Sear and Sanders were the primary inventors of the FS 12 and they did collaborate with the equipment the Russians had?

LF As far as that parachute, yeah, they looked at it. The parachute was here, ah, well prior to and during the time they developed the parachute. There's some other development work in the molaporosity materials in the canopy that was done in another canopy by... I don't know what the heck his name was... some guy. I believe he was in Minnesota University. He was an aeronautical engineer. He was a professor back there and he had been working with big... with the T 10 canopy... our FS 10 canopy doing the same thing. He had put 0 porosity in the front of it and low pull to the sides and the regular porosity in the back of it. He got some... done some fairly remarkable things in that parachute as far as development... that is forward speed. You know, getting more out of it than had ever been done previously. But, there was some other problems with it that made it really not the canopy to use. To go with just a flat surfer like what we got...
works better with that system.

JS   All right, well, sure there's nothing else you want to throw out?

LF    No.

JS   You sure? Boy, I sure appreciate this. This has been great. I guess we'll... it's now 4:00 or 16:00. We'll just cut it off.

[END OF INTERVIEW]