

Oral History Number: 163-001

Interviewee: Robert Painter

Interviewer: Kim Taylor

Date of Interview: August 12, 1986

Project: Civilian Public Service Smokejumpers Oral History Project

Kim Taylor: This is Kim Taylor interviewing Bob Painter for the oral history at Camp Paxson at Seeley Lake on August 12, 1986. Okay, Bob, can you give us a little bit of personal history?

Robert Painter: Yes. I was born into a Quaker family. My father was a Quaker minister. My mother died very early, so I was away from home from the beginning of high school. I went to a Quaker prep school for four years, Westtown School near Philadelphia. After that, I went to Quaker college—Earlham College in Richmond, Indiana—for four years.

KT: Okay. Where were you when World War Two broke out?

RP: I was still in college, and I just barely finished college in time to be drafted in 1943. At that time, I was accepted to go into medical school, but because I would not take a commission, I lost my place in the medical school class and was drafted and took the CO [conscientious objector] position.

KT: Did you have any problems getting your status as a CO?

RP: Not at that time. I didn't have any difficulty getting my CO status because I came from a Quaker background.

KT: When you got your status as a CO, where did you go?

RP: I started my CO career at Big Flats Nursery—Forest Service nursery—in New York State. Then I applied for smokejumper—I was there for probably six months—applied for smokejumpers. In the meantime, I came to another camp at Elkton, Oregon, and then to Missoula for smokejumpers in the spring of 1944.

KT: How did you find out about the smokejumper job?

RP: It was through the CPS [Civilian Public Service] administration. I wanted something which was active. Something which would prove that I was not a coward and do something constructive and probably prove to myself, too.

KT: What kind of project work were you doing before you actually got on as a smokejumper?

RP: I was working out in the woods cutting wood most of the winter and forestry work in the CPS.

KT: Where did you do your training as a smokejumper?

RP: I was at Missoula—at Nine Mile. I trained with a group that was retraining and training to go out to Oregon at Cave Junction. I think my crew leader was Jack Heintzelman who was the head of the unit at Cave Junction, Oregon.

KT: What was your first impression with the smokejumpers unit?

RP: I was fairly enthused over it. At that time, I was fairly young. I was in good shape. I had been playing football every year and was in better physical condition than many of my colleagues. I loved the vigorous exercise and especially the hiking, cutting trees. I was not at all afraid of the jumping part of it. This was just a thrill to me and something I looked forward to. I was not in any way afraid of it. It was just a challenge.

KT: What did your training entail?

RP: Well, heavy calisthenics. Probably the worst part of the whole training was the jumping off the tower where you get a shock which was probably greater than the shock when the chute opens. You'd see stars for this, and we kind of dreaded that part of it. The calisthenics—climbing out of trees, climbing ropes—all of that was easy for me. I enjoyed it.

KT: Do you feel like the training prepared you for the actual feat?

RP: I think pretty well. We had to be in good physical shape because if we hadn't, the injuries would have been greater. The foremen were good to us. It wasn't like a military unit. We were all working together and helping each other. I enjoyed it very much, and I enjoyed the rest of the fellows very much.

KT: What were some of these other guys like that you worked with?

RP: Really, I felt like I was quite young and just out of college and many of us were, and yet we had some who had been out in professional life—professors—and been out in the real world. We kind of looked up to them as having had a good deal more experience, and many of them had, so there was a difference between those that had had a great deal of experience. The other difference was that many of the fellows came from Mennonite and Brethren backgrounds off the farms and had very little touch with the outside world. Their experience was very limited, whereas some of us had been in education or had traveled a good deal—had many experiences beyond what they had. There was a little bit of a division between the Mennonite-Brethren boys who came off the farm and had very little education and those of us that had at least college educations.

KT: How did that seem to work out?

RP: It worked out all right. I have many, very good friends. They broadened their experience. We

learned from them. I think from my part I have just as many friends in that group, too.

KT: What was the first practice jump like?

RP: I don't remember specifically—anything specific. It was just a natural. We trained for it, we went up. Sure, there was a thrill about it, and we did what we were trained to do. No question about but what we would do it. I remember always coming down was a thrill—to come down to the ground. As we got closer and closer to the ground, the ground comes up faster and faster towards you, and you get a little bit more rapid pulse. But it was always a thrill to me. I loved to jump and always did. Fortunately, I never had any injuries.

KT: Had you had any previous fire experience?

RP: No, I had not.

KT: What was your first fire like?

RP: My first fire was in Oregon, and I think I had several walk in fires before I jumped in on a fire, so I had some experience with it before I actually made my first fire jump. I think my first fire jumps were probably small fires with maybe two to four jumpers going in, and fairly easy as far as getting the fire out and the work getting back out. Fairly easy experiences. I did have some large walk-in fires. So after I had my training, I went to Oregon. I thought I'd like to see as much of the country as I could. Also, the crew leader wanted me to come out. At that time, I became the assistant director of that unit. In other words, the smokejumper who was in charge of the rest of the smokejumpers and the go-between between the Forest Service. I was assistant director as well as being a jumper.

KT: What other duties did that entail?

RP: Make out reports to come back to the CPS headquarters, take care of any disagreements with the Forest Service, take care of time off and any medical problems that the jumpers had. The jumping unit was very small at Cave Junction. There were only 18 of us.

KT: Did you ever feel any animosity from the Forest Service being a CO crew?

RP: Not very much from the Forest Service. From the community, yes. I had many experiences of being thrown out of social things, like dances, by gangs. Again, after we had proved ourselves as jumpers, we had a good deal of self-esteem and people respected us and we had very little difficulty. We developed some friends in the community. Churches did not welcome us because we were conscientious objectors. This always hurt me.

KT: Why do you think that is?

RP: They felt the patriotic duty to God was to serve your country. We were just trying to serve God in a different way and do it in a constructive manner.

KT: [pauses] What was your most memorable fire experience?

RP: I had two. I had one walk-in fire that was right on the edge of the redwood country in Northern California which was a very hot fire and crowned out on us. We had to run through the fire to get where it was cool enough rather than running away from it. There were trees falling all around. It was hot. It was a very bad fire. We didn't get it out until the middle of the night when we got control of it. Very hot fire. I still get shivers once in a while when I think of running through the front of that fire, and I have done it on more than one occasion.

The next most memorable fire was when our entire crew from Southern Oregon was taken by military plane—a DC-3—all the way to Northern Washington to jump on a fire in the Northern Cascades. On that trip, we circled over Crater Lake, went on up, stopped at Wenatchee to get the Forest Service personnel, went up Lake Chelan, and within sight of Glacier Peak we jumped on very rugged country—very rugged fire. At about the same time, a group of jumpers from Missoula came in—a group of eight—and jumped on it. It was a large fire. They covered one side and we covered the other side. Extremely rugged country to jump into. We fortunately didn't have any problems, but we could have. Very fast plane. We'd never jumped out of a DC-3 before. We were on that fire for over a week. I think about ten days. They had a ground crew that came in also, but we stayed and mopped it up. In order to get out of the place, we had to walk down to the ranger station about 12 miles by isolated strip of road from Rye Bridge down to Stehekin by truck. Then by boat, all the way down from Stehekin to Chelan, and that was on a cattle-carrying boat that carried sheep up there for the summer. It wasn't exactly pleasant. By that time, it was getting pretty cool. Then by bus, all the way through Northern Washington—Wenatchee—to Grant's Pass, Oregon. That was a very memorable fire. Since that time, I have hiked back to that very spot myself and seen it.

KT: What were your impressions when you hiked back?

RP: Memories came back. It was extremely rugged country. It was mountain goat country. I was setting up a radio for contact to get food in, and I had to go up to the rocky points at night. The mountain goats were just climbing all around me. I went back up to almost the same spot that I hiked back from 20 years later.

There's one other experience which probably has not been ever documented or written up in smokejumper history and one that I was very close to. Can I go ahead and tell this story?

KT: Oh, please do. Please do.

RP: The plane we were jumping out of was a Fairchild 700, I believe. We had one pilot and one mechanic there at the very primitive landing strip at Cave Junction. We were to take a fire jump,

and I think four of us suited and our spotter—our Forest Service man, Jack Heintzelman. We were to take off in the afternoon. All ready, taxied, took off, and about 300 to 400 feet the motor conked out. All of us had had some flight training and knew what to do just instinctively. I looked out the door, and I saw that I did not have room enough to jump. Could not have opened the chute soon enough. We moved to the front of the plane, got the weight down so we glided into the next field beyond the airport and made the emergency landing. We all tore down a fence and pulled the airplane back to the hanger. The mechanic and the pilot worked on the plane for better than a half an hour and said, "Everything's fine now. Everything's ready to go. Let's go." Jack Heintzelman, our Forest Service foreman, thank god, told them to take it up for a test flight before we took off for the fire. The pilot was a little bit angry about this, but he took it up in a very sharp climb off the field. Again, at about 400 feet, the motor conked out. This time he didn't have the weight to put the weight forward. He winged it over to try to glide and turn it over, but he didn't. He drilled it right into the ground, and the thing burst into flames right before our eyes, naturally killing the pilot, but this was shocking to us. I can't even remember all of the jumpers who were in the plane with me. I know one who saw it from the ground.

Needless to say, we did not go to the fire. We didn't have another backup plane. I would have gone, but it was rather shocking to us. That has never been written up for anybody that was in the plane—the experience has never been expressed. There was some dissension between the smokejumper crew out there and the Forest Service foreman, Jack Heintzelman. In fact, that's why they asked me to be the assistant director there to try to work this out. I had respect for him, and we got along well together. As I said, I have even more respect for his judgment in that case. He did the right thing.

KT: What were some of the feelings among the crew members?

RP: There was shock. We'd known this pilot well, so naturally we had grief for him and his family. As far as personal fear, I don't think I ever felt it, and I don't think any of the group really expressed fear. There was no fear about taking off and going to a fire again or no fear about airplanes. I just did not feel fear at any time, even at that experience, although it's a very vivid in my recollections.

KT: How about when the engine conked out the first time with the full crew on board?

RP: Our hearts skipped a few beats. As I said, I looked out the open door right by me. I never could have got the chute opened, and it was a matter of just instant judgment that that was not the thing to do to jump. A little bit of relief that we glided into the field. Definitely relief. But I would have taken off again. I think I would have gone up. I wouldn't have said no.

KT: In general, what kind of relationship was there between the crews and the pilots?

RP: Usually rather casual, but that pilot had given us flight instruction and we'd taken on our own. I think we had a little bit more attachment to him. His name, by the way, is in the smokejumper booklet one place. I have forgotten it offhand.

KT: Thanks for sharing that story with us. It's pretty touching. Okay—

RP: There was one other experience relating to jumping when I was there that maybe hasn't been related, either. We were doing a practice jump, and Frank Derry who invented the chute—the Derry slot—was there to supervise the jumping there that day and was up in the plane spotting us over the landing strip. I guess we didn't jump on the landing strip. We jumped on a field. He spotted me when I went out of the plane. I went out, and as you may have heard in other stories, chutes sometimes turn inside out. That means that some of the lines would be across the middle of the chute, meaning that there are just double chutes on either side and you sort of spin coming down. The old expression was that this was a Mae West-type of opening. I had chutes with lines over. We were taught what to do in that case. The first thing we were to do was to try to get as many of the shroud lines on one side in our hands and just climb it, hand over hand, all the way up until we could have silk in our hands. Supposedly those lines in the center then would slip over one side. This was what we were taught to do.

We're jumping at 2,000 feet, and we had plenty of time. I climbed my shroud lines until I had silk in my hands. The lines didn't slip off. So I said, "Well, I'll let them up as fast as I can, and maybe that'll shock them and they'll come off the other side." I let it up very rapidly, but then I had shroud lines between my legs and over my shoulder and around my arm and every place. Looked down, and I probably had another 1,200 feet yet to go, so I said, "I'll climb the other side." This time I took the shroud lines, and there were lines all over. Took the lines, and it's just like climbing on a rope only these shroud lines are very, very small. They slip through your hands. We had leather gloves which helped. I climbed that other side and got silk in my hands, and I pulled in as much silk as I could. I just pulled the silk down as far as I could, and the lines came loose.

That stage where the lines were crossed then. You had the lines crosswise so you had no control over the chute. In fact, you were going backwards so landing...but at least I had a full chute and was coming down at the usual speed then. I made a hard, backwards landing at that time. I remember Frank Derry said I had done everything right according to the training. I had one other alternative. It was to take out my knife and cut the shroud lines that were across the top. We never liked to do this because we knew how hard it was to repair them. It was very difficult to tell which lines were crossed when you were there. So I never had to resort to cutting the lines. I had one other alternative, but Frank had seen this before. We were trained for it fortunately, and he said I had done the right thing.

KT: Did you ever have any problem in landings?

BR Never any serious problems landing. I jumped a number of Eagle chutes at first which were very hard openings, and I saw stars every time. I still have whiplash damage from some of those whiplash openings. Never any bad landings, no. I did land in a tree twice and had to let myself down. In Oregon, we carried 125 feet of rope because we had large trees—longer rope than they did in Montana.

KT: Were there ever any injuries on your crew?

BR We were remarkably free of injuries. We did not have anybody. The only thing that kept anybody away from the work was an attack of appendicitis one time. He was cooking at the time so I had to take over the cooking. [laughs] In that following winter, we cruised timber out of Roseburg, Oregon, and were out cruising timber for four months without ever coming in.

KT: Did you do any other kind of project work?

BR Maintenance of telephone lines and trail maintenance also. The second year after cruising timber all winter...You want to get the rest of that? Should I go ahead?

KT: Oh, please do.

BR: Came back to Missoula for some refresher training. After the refresher training, went back and got married, brought my wife out to McCall, Idaho. That was a real wild experience—no income, no job. My wife never having been outside of...across the Mississippi River. God was really with us at that time because my wife found a place to work in one of the resorts, cleaning cabins. This woman, Nelle Tobias—had been an architect—was a wonderful person. She gave us the use of one of the unfinished cabins and asked me to finish the cabin off, do carpentry work for her in my off time, so we could at least have enough to live on. The time I wasn't out on jumps and fighting fire and other projects, why, we were able to spend time together in the cabin which was about a half mile from the headquarters. I've kept in contact with this woman ever since—wonderful, wonderful person. She's come to realize our philosophy and stand and admires us for what we have done.

The only practice jump my wife ever saw me make was there at McCall, Idaho, at the airport. We all bet on trying to get as close to the circle on the airport as we could. I was very competitive, and I was usually pretty good in hitting the spot very close. I'd slip my chute, I'd do everything I could to get close to it. We all had bets on it. Five of us jumped out at the same time—Ford Trimotor—and all of a sudden I realized that the other guys were falling away from me. When you're jumping 2,000 feet, you should come down in about a minute and two-thirds. They were falling right away. I said, "Hey, where are you going?"—yelled to them. I looked up and the plane was just as close as it was when I went out and the chute opened. I had hit a thermal. I was just hung there. I looked down on the ground, and I saw all the fellows land. I was still probably 1,500 feet up, saw them take their chutes off, and everybody was yelling at me. Meanwhile, I felt like I was drifting a little bit further away. All of a sudden I felt myself go off in this thermal. The chute oscillated back and forth. I just felt myself go off, and then I came down in the normal fashion. By that time, I was over into about the next field and was furthest away from the target. There was quite an excitement for my wife. She kept saying, "What's going on up there? How come he doesn't come down?" [laughs]

KT: What did your friends and family think about your being a smokejumper?

BR My father had been a conscientious objector in World War One and was very strongly in favor of my stand. It was just a natural for me. I had been in various war protests or peace marches when I was in high school even. I had written articles and papers when I was in college. At the beginning of World War Two, I was very much against the relocation of the Japanese and wrote in the paper on this. My wife's family was not as strongly supportive. There were people in that family who were rather critical of us, yet they accepted me as a person and never said very much. The financial problem was great.

Is there anything else you want to know or ask about jumping experiences and so forth?

KT: Do you have some stories to tell? No?

BR Some stories? Funny stories or anything? No, the fires were fairly routine. Out of McCall, we were remaking the Chamberlain Basin airstrip so all of us served a time going out to Chamberlain Basin to work on the airport. We had a small bulldozer out there, and we did a lot of handwork and increased the size of it. On our off-time, like on weekends, we would go up to some of the lakes that we could see from the air. One of the pilots told me that he had stocked this one lake ten years before with trout, and he didn't know anybody that had ever been in to it. He pointed it out to us, so cross country we hiked up there for a weekend and fished. Never have I pulled out two fish on two hooks at the same time. But that is just full of trout that were somewhat stunted, but we had a wonderful trip up there and then brought trout back—enough for everyone to eat.

KT: How did you think your experience as a smokejumper affected other decisions in your life?

BR I loved the out-of-doors, anyway. My experience with the Forest Service probably led me to—later in life and even at present—to put in my own Christmas tree plantations. I bought land—160 acres. I put in Christmas trees and took care of them, and my family did. It put all of my family through college. I harvested 120,000 trees off my first plantings, and then I got more interested in Christmas trees. At one time, we had about 400 or 500 acres—not all of it in trees. At present, I'm just harvesting my second crop now, and I'm going to be putting in more trees now. During my retirement years, I'm going to be managing and raising Christmas trees because I love it. I love to get out, trim trees, and see them grow. I worked on a woodlot. I cut my own wood, and we heat with. That's the one direct thing.

Influencing my life, otherwise, not a great deal because I had my vocation already planned. Interestingly enough, two days after I was released from CPS as a CO, I was entering medical school. I had been accepted previously. I was accepted even before I was out, and in Philadelphia, I went back to medical school. All my life I have...and what led me into medicine was to take care of human life, to take care of the healing process, and to try to prevent illness. Killing just did not go along with this. Neither does nuclear threat, and I've been very active in the position for social responsibility, which is strongly against any nuclear war and trying to get disarmament of the nuclear way. I've spoken many places on this, and I'm still very strong. That's the first step we can

take. I may not be as dogmatic as I used to be—as absolute—to take things from where they are. But I've been active in positions for social responsibility for which I am very proud.

I've also done lecturing in many other fields too. I'm on the board of trustees of our local community college. I've taught courses for them and give the workshops. I'm very strongly into holistic medicine and holistic health and lectured on this and teach courses on it. This doesn't come directly out of my smokejumper experience, but it's part of my philosophy of the dignity of life, the preservation of life, the preservation of our great environment, and caring, and my philosophy that there is something of God in every man, therefore, we cannot kill them. I don't believe in capital punishment. I've worked with prison people and still am. All of this is part of my life, and smoke jumpers was just one phase of it. I was able to prove myself [unintelligible]. I had much more self-esteem after that. I knew I could face crowds that did not believe in me and did me bodily harm—mobs. I marched in some of the Vietnam protests also, and I said, "Well, here's another generation that may take over and produce what we didn't do with peace in the world that we're still hunting now and working for."

[Break in audio]

KT: Do you have any other comments that you would like to make about your experiences as a CO or as a smokejumper?

BR The relationship with the other smokejumpers has been very great and very lasting. I have kept in contact with some and see them every year. I've come to two of the three reunions. We have a great feeling of purpose, and I think many of them...it's influenced their lives greatly. I feel a stronger kinship to this group than I ever have any other group—a real feeling of love and brotherhood. Even though we come from entirely different backgrounds, done entirely different things, it's influenced the lives of all of us.

KT: Why do you think that is?

BR Our dedication with purpose. I think is the main thing. It's different than just jumping with a group that might be hired or be doing it for money. We were not paid. It was a real sacrifice for us. All of us sacrificed. Some of them that were married were sacrificing a great deal. I did not get the GI bill after that, and therefore had to put myself through medical school which was difficult.

There's one other thing I'd like to say, too, which I neglected to. I went through the draft a second time after I became a physician, and again I applied for conscientious objector status. This time they wouldn't give it to me even though I had been through all of this service previously and tried to prove myself. They did not give me CO status. I had to take it up through the judicial process. I appealed for myself. It went all the way to presidential appeal to become a conscientious objector. They couldn't see why I couldn't go into the military service as a doctor, but this was part of the system I just could not do. I finally...I was over-age about two weeks before my final CO status came through.

KT: Okay, do you have any other comments you'd like to make?

BR I think it's a wonderful project, and I hope that it's written down mainly to show that COs try to do something constructive for peace and for their environment and they're not just a bunch of slackers and yellow-bellies that were against war. Thank you.

KT: I'd like to thank you for this interview, Bob.

[End of Interview]