

Bob Derry interviewed by Kathy Root for the Smokejumpers Oral History Project. July 20, 1984. OH #133-26.

KR Bob I really appreciate you talking to me again. I want to say that. I guess first of all I would like if you could give me an overview of your experience with fighting fire and smokejumping.

BD An overview. Hard where you start and where you finish. It always has been a challenging thing to me and obviously as my track record will show I stayed with it all my life. I had started certainly as a natural thing, having my older brother, more or less encouraging me, not necessarily encouraging. But it was there, it was a carrot on the end of the stick kind of sort thing. It was a natural thing for me to want to get into the Forest Service, on a parachute jump particularly. Because it was such a challenging, romantic sort of thing. Romantic, all the adjectives. [pauses] What were we talking about?

KR When did you first start fight fire?

BD When I was fifteen really. Illegally, as I mentioned that before. I probably couldn't get away with that today, with the computers and what not. But it must have been '41, I must have been a sophomore in high school. Of course in '39 the smokejumping deal started and three of my older brothers being involved in that. At Ninemile, as I recall, the place where I started, and the regular fire suppression crew. And my older brother, big brother Frank and he pulled the right strings anyway to get me accepted. They just cheated a little bit, because I would have been 16 during the following September.

KR In '41 you worked in the fire suppression crew, right?

BD Yeah.

KR And that was when you were 15. Then '42, you did smoke chasing?

BD Yeah, smokechasing, smokechasing. Because that was part of the prerequisite. You couldn't get to be a smokejumper, as I recall, unless you had been a smokechaser. Which of course was the elite of the fire suppression group. I'm sure there was probably some people that felt that, you know, that probably got in there [through] the politics of the older brother, probably got him in there. But I think for instance, I think, I'm sure I did as good as job as normally.

KR Was Frank, Chet and Virgil still at home, I mean, were you around them when they were jumping or were they off barnstorming?

BD They were off. They had been gone for sometime, because of the age difference obviously. Frank would have been roughly about 25 years older than me. Virgil or Bus as he was known in those days, four or five years younger than that. Then Chet was next

one in line was roughly four or five years. It was roughly four or five years apart. Then there was one in between us, Jim, and then myself. But they had long since gone. In fact I was home with my mother alone at that time. Dad had died when I just thirteen, he was quite elderly. In fact my mother was quite elderly too. It was just my mother and I home at that time.

KR Did your brother Jim jump?

BD No. He was the only one. He did finally make two or three free fall jumps. Because he just couldn't stand to be left out entirely, [laughs]. But oddly enough, it was kind of strange. He was a little bit of different. Not that we weren't all different. Even in the sense of being, of the five boys, four of the boys, myself included, were all color blind. We were all color blind. Except Jim, Jim was the only one that didn't really need to be... have color perception per se. Everyone else was in flying whatnot and of course Chet was as you know was a quasi professional flyer and here he was color blind. That is quite a story in itself, how he got as far as he got kind of shows his character. He just...

KR Ingenuity.

BD Ingenuity, yeah right down to the point of being a burglar, burgurlizing, [laughs].

KR Really, tell me about it.

BD Memorized. He got into the doctors, well this doctor. Maybe I shouldn't mention names, [laughs]. I won't mention names.

KR A doctor.

BD Anyway, he got his color chart, the color chart, you know the spots. What do you call that test? He actually memorized with his wife's help, he memorized the numbers in it. So that... so that is how he passed the color blind test. He wanted to fly so bad, he was going to fly. And I don't think that Chet got beyond the eighth grade. He did not want to go to school. He just, that was the waste of time. He just didn't want to go to school. But he was obsessed with flying and he just had to fly and he did. Some of the obstacles were just unbelievable that he went through to get to fly.

KR What was it about flying that intrigued him so?

BD I don't know. Who knows. I'm sure it comes back to the same old thing we talked about. The challenge of it. And he was such an aggressive type of person, in that respect, probably.

KR Was Frank aggressive too?

BD Oh yeah. Frank certainly was. On the personal side there. Frank was not particularly... how do I put that? Frank was the older brother. Frank was the, kind of acted like a father of the

family. Because dad was so elderly, really, my gosh, my dad was more like a grandfather to me. In fact he was in his early sixties when I was conceived. If you can believe it.

KR Really.

BD He was about 15 years older than my mom. So he was an old man at the time. Frank was very aggressive, very possessive and he was, you know, he would make the decisions and he would do this, and the other brothers resented Frank quite a bit. They didn't get along with Frank too well. There was bickering and there was a few fisticuffs now and then, [laughs]. In those days that's the way they didn't argue too much, they got down to the basics.

KR Worked things out.

BD Very quickly.

KR Yeah, Yeah. It sounds like Frank, Chet, Virg, Buzz. You called him Buzz.

BD Buster or Buzz, is what he was known as in those days.

KR Virgil's name. All real independent people. Including yourself.

BD Yeah, I think you can say that. I'm sure my wife would agree with you, [laughs]. No, but in a very soft gentle way.

KR After you got through with the fist fights.

BD Yeah, Yeah.

KR How was it Frank get into doing what he was doing? How did that come about in his life? He was a pioneer.

BD Yeah, you know going through the depression days, was the days everybody was grasping and groping for any nickel and dime they could get. Anything from, I can remember, I was too young at the time. I can remember very very clearly my brothers cutting wood, trying to make some bucks for the table, you know. I can remember going up the street in Wenatchee, on Maple street, there, going up there, they had a hand cart, with big wagon wheels on it, I can remember tagging along behind. They had cut some apple trees down, loaded on this cart, and actually hand pushed the thing down, they'd saw it up, and selling the wood you know. And everything went into the pot, the living pot. Things was tough. It was really rough. In the early thirties, late twenties, early thirties.

And then both the boys finally, one by one, left home. Frank was barnstorming around. I can't tell you of course, actually how he got into the parachuting end of it. Probably for the glamour, the adventure, the challenge, I imagine. Frank was always quite the promoter, he was always the wheeler and dealer. Anybody that

knows Frank knows Frank Derry was a wheeler and dealer, come up with lots of ideas, and he would usually work out some way to get somebody else to do the work finally. He, I wouldn't say a conniver, but, yeah bordering on it, that's what he was. And all the other brothers always had respect for Frank on that. I'm sure he didn't mean it, mean it, you know, to take advantage of somebody, particularly. That was just his way of...

KR Getting things done.

BD His way of life.

KR It wasn't malicious?

BD No, no. I'm sure of that.

KR So did Frank, when he was jumping, doing parachuting, was Chet flying him?

BD No, not to start with. That took quite awhile. Cause there again, Chet was considerably younger. He wouldn't even have been old enough. And in those days... to fly an airplane, was really something. You know we're talking about back in the thirties, you know. It was quite a difference what it is today. Chet was, now there again, in the depression days, I can remember him going into the CC camps, to help. Not only to take one more mouth away from the table, but to contribute to the family table, as many families did in those days. Frank you know got caught up in this airshow business, this barn storming around the country with, as I mentioned this Tex Rankin. He was a certainly, reknown, very widely known acrobat guy, flyer. He got pretty involved with Tex. Doing air shows around the country. Then he got the other brothers, particularly Virgil, or Buster as he was known then, Buzz got to go around with him too. To make some quick bucks. It was a delightful way to make a living, you know. To make a few dollars, they never made much.

I'm sure he could tell you some real interesting stories. I can remember just some locally there. They would go to the county fairs this sort of stuff. It was a big deal, parachutes in those days, you know. Somebody who jumped out of an airplane was completely nuts. It was like Evil Kneivel jumping the Grand Canyon or something. I can remember the Waterville Fair, Douglas County Fair ground there. Buzz made a delayed jump, landing in the middle of the arena. He admitted it was an awful lot of luck. In those days, you didn't have any, you had very little steering of a parachute. Where ever you baled out, and where ever you lit, that where you lit. It was quite a romantic thing. Also I can remember the red, white and blue chute that Frank had. It was really the crowd pleaser. Red, white and blue chute. That was something, you know.

KR It got peoples attention, the chute. Yeah. Back to your, you know... your progression here through the years. In '42 you were smokechasing and '41 you were in the fire suppression crew, at fifteen. '43 a lot of smokejumpers went into the service. And

that was your first year of smokejumping.

BD Yeah, yeah. Yeah it was a big year in my life. That was probably one, certainly one of the highlights in my life. '43 a seventeen year old kid playing the mans part. The big spoke on the campus, you know.

KR You were considered experienced going into that program as a fire fighter?

BD I suppose so. Two seasons. Whatever that's worth. Certainly it was a lot more than what the other fellows had, particularly the CO's of course at that time. They hadn't had any. So we were.

KR So you were highly experienced.

BD We were big stuff.

KR At seventeen was that hard? Was that growing up fast? Doing that at seventeen?

BD Well that was growing up pretty fast for sure for me. Looking back in retrospect, I might have had some problems with that if I had been an administrator, [laughs]. Because I had lived a pretty sheltered life. In retrospect, living with my mother. I had certainly never been out of Wenatchee. Pretty wet behind the ears, yet, to be put into that. But I had a lot of company, that was particularly helpful, I think. At that particular time there was a couple of other fellows, Ratigan and Cramer that, we were all the same age. We had somebody to share with, share the anxieties and the happiness and whatever.

KR What was it like being an overhead over CO's at that time?

BD Well, I don't know. Of course as a seventeen year old kid it was very satisfying as far as the ego trip goes. Very, it kind of tied into, I don't know how you describe it. You felt like you had a lot of responsibility. I do recall having some anxiety at times. A little bit fearful at times that I would be put in a position that I couldn't handle. I was aware of that, I was going to call in. But I was... between Frank and the other administrators would be sure they wouldn't put us in that position. They wouldn't cut the limb off, they wouldn't put us out on a limb too far. Certainly it worked out all right. And all the other fellows, the CO's being older people, I think they probably figured they would get us out of a jam, too.

KR The common sense?

BD But there was no other choice at that time, as we were called, we would be the, you might say civilians of the group and even in spite of our age, we were regular Forest Service personnel. The CO's were there, but might be not necessarily their choice. But it was an alternative for their choice.

KR So you were considered regular FS and the CO's were on assignment?

BD I suppose you could put it that way.

KR Did you spend your time, make any friends with the CO groups?

BD Yeah, yeah. We played pool with them, there was no problem there as I recall. Of course, they had the idea they were the conscientious objectors, religious type people. There was some of them that would have a lot of inner suspicion of, in that we really didn't feel they were all that religious. That they were, maybe they were taking the easy way out. And of course that was probably emphasized by our own desire to get in to the war, and do something in the war effort. And here these guys could be in there helping and they weren't. I think there was probably a little inner animosity there and yet we all lived together, eat together, sleep together. I don't recall of any really outward animosity. But we would go, when we went to town, Gordon and Al and some of the other regulars, the regulars would be a little by themselves. We'd go together and we'd socialize together, but I don't really recall socializing with a CO.

KR Did you get the impression that the team work was there with the job, or did it interfere with the job at all?

BD I think it was, my recollection was they did just as well as today. I don't know what the esprit de corps is in today's crew. But as I recall as far as getting out on the fire line, what fires we had. I don't recall how many fires I jumped in '43, but I don't think there were a good many.

KR What was your first jump like?

BD [laughs] Of course it just seemed like forever until we got that first jump in. It seemed like we trained, trained, trained and we were overtrained and we were so psyched up you'd almost get brainwashed. So that by the time the first jump was, I think you would have jumped that one without a parachute. Anything to get out of the airplane, you know. Of course, it was very exciting. Of course at that time everybody agreed that the third jump was more exciting than the first one.

KR Why's that?

BD We described it anyway, that the first one you didn't know what was going to happen, you didn't have any idea. The second one you thought you knew what was going to happen. Well the second one wasn't like the first one, [laughs]. Then the third one, what going to happen this time? Then you didn't know what was going to happen.

KR Do you remember those first early jumps? Do you remember taking that first step out of the plane into thin air?

BD Oh, I... you know in all fairness I can't really remember the details of it.

KR Were you scared?

BD Yeah, [laughs], yeah. I only made twenty-four jumps in the two seasons. So I didn't... compared to smokejumpers since then, that isn't all that many jumps. But I know just from listening to my brother, who has made hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of jumps that you never get over that. You always have that feeling, the adrenaline running.

KR Do you like that?

BD Great, love it, you bet.

KR You miss that? You miss jumping?

BD I wouldn't hesitate to jump tomorrow. But I have found other things to make the adrenaline run, to kind of take it's place. I know it isn't really realistic for me to jump today. I'm sure I could do it, I'm sure I could handle myself, because I have kept in real good physical condition. Yeah, but there's always substitutes, alternatives you could do to make up for those sorts of things. But the jumping, that's just the glory part of it. When you get on the ground, that's when the work begins, and that, I don't really need that today, [laughs]. I've had enough of that for thirty some odd years, [laughs]

KR So it was the jumping that really did it for you, as opposed to the fire fighting?

BD Oh yes, very much. Yeah, yeah.

KR Did you get that adrenalin rush from fighting fire from going into a hotspot and knowing that potentially it could crown out and go over you or was that something that was just work?

BD Oh, you'd have to, I think you could probably say all of the above to that. Of course, certainly, there was always that risk involved. It was part of the challenge and part of the satisfaction. I've always found it extremely satisfying, to battle it out, it's like having a fist fight with somebody. Getting a little dramatic, but to conquer, you know, to kind of pitch yourself against the odds and come out and win, be a winner. I don't want to be first place or anything, but I want to be ahead of whatever's second. [laughs]

KR It's a way of looking at it anyway.

BD Yeah.

KR What kind of guy is it that goes out for smokejumping? What is that you see, similarities between you brother and yourself, and the men you worked with? What makes a smokejumper?

BD Well, I think we've talked about that. You've got to be an aggressive type of person, I don't know how a person who is not aggressive could do it. You can't have a wimpy type of person that collects butterflies or something. I'm sure there are some tough guys who collect butterflies. But you know, you have to be an aggressive type of person who is looking for some excitement and the challenge and the satisfaction.

KR Sure, sure. Do you remember anything about the '43 smokejumping? Any big fires, any of the fires that year that you went on?

BD You know that's strange, but... I just seem to blank out there as far as the fires go. I guess there wasn't anything particular, there any big fire, wasn't anything particular, you know, that made a mark on my mind.

KR Did you have any crazy landings, you land in a tree and have to let yourself down, land in the middle of a river or anything, or did you have pretty good landings?

BD Usually pretty good landings, I had some trouble with tree landings that was quite adventuresome.

KR What's that like when you come down into the middle of a tree?

BD It doesn't make sense does it?

KR No, did you ever get hurt?

BD Not smokejumping. No, the only time I got hurt was when I was in the fire suppression crew. We were over in Yellowstone Park as a matter of fact, and I was cutting out a log with a pulaski and I was standing too close to it and the grub portion of the pulaski, I cut into this log and it ricocheted off and it cut my leg, my shinbone. And they hauled me in, and we had to go eighty or ninety miles to get a drug store. As it turned out it was a drug store, it was a Sunday and there wasn't any doctor available, and the druggist with my permission sewed me up.

KR Really?

BD God that hurt, [laughs]. But I had to be tough, had to go through the, had to play the game.

KR Did they give you any painkiller?

BD No, no. You didn't have any pain killing, no nothing to do with it. He said I can do it for you if you want, otherwise you have to wait until tomorrow. And Jesus, he just got out his needle and thread, sterilized the needle, I remember three stitches. I still got a little bit of a scar down here, it never did heal up too good.

KR Really gashed you up, huh?

BD No, I did pretty good. I think I twisted an ankle or something like that a little bit, but nothing of any consequence.

KR Was it '43 that you jumped with Al Cramer and Dave Ratigan?

BD Yeah, we were just waiting for, we had to wait to be drafted or join. Rather than to be drafted I elected to join. I don't know if you want if you want to hear the Coast Guard deal again, inconsequential really, anyway.

KR You went into the Seabee's, right?

BD Yeah, yeah. On account of my color blindness, that is how I wound up in Seabees, which was the best thing that ever happened to me. It just verify's that my whole outlook on life is that everything is for a purpose and everything happens... you might not think it is right at the time. But it always works out to be the best.

KR You told me before, those two years in the service, '44 and '45, and you came back December of '45. You got some real emotions about those two years.

BD I kind of felt I had been cheated out of couple years of my life. And I certainly wanted to make up for those. If it hadn't been for my brother Frank I wouldn't even entered the University. He talked me into it, you know. He really got with me, rightfully so. It was the thing to do. Cause he was sure if I wouldn't jump right in it, I never would. It would be awful hard, the longer I waited, the harder it would be. So against my wishes you might say, he got me to sign up at the University. Which I signed up as a forestry major. Which I did miserable, very miserably at. I just didn't, mentally, I just wasn't ready for that discipline, I guess, is all. I didn't want to take the time to study. I didn't want to, when I walked by that chemistry building over there a little bit ago, same old building. Boy, I remember that, I can remember taking a quarterly exam, looking at those questions, tears rolling down my cheeks because I did not know the answers to the majority of them. [laughs] I just cheated, oh dear! But it served me well because I met my darling wife here. It was worth the trip, [laughs].

KR You were here for a reason?

BD Yeah. Yeah. I was here for a reason. It certainly proved out very well.

KR What did you do instead of study? Party?

BD Yeah, yeah.

KR Taking a vacation from those two years?

BD Taking a vacation. You know like a kid, we were stationed down on, most of the time, down on Kwajalein on the Marshall Islands with twenty or thirty thousand other guys. I think there was seven or eight nurses of one type or another. We very seldom got a glimpse of a female. You know, I really felt like I paid my dues. My study habits was mostly in the Broadway tavern and the Park Hotel, [laughs], the favorite hangouts in those days.

KR What was it like, when you went back to smokejumping that spring '46? Did you go back as squad leader or as a crew chief or a crew boss? Which you had been in '43, right?

BD Yeah, There was a little resentment there. Because there was, there was several of the fellows that did not have to go into the military, that had stayed in the Forest Service and of course they had the experience, the background. So they were in the overhead, they were the administrators. And here I was, I had what experience I had, I mean three seasons, but nevertheless I wasn't, you know, in all fairness to the Forest Service, I wasn't as qualified as they were. Yes, I did have, I'm sure, a little resentment there. Necessarily so, that was just the ball game. I was like any other recruit, and went through the recruiting procedures. How to use climbers, to climb trees, how to saw a log, how to use an axe, sharpen an axe. All these things that I knew all about, you know, supposedly. I didn't really feel at that time that I needed to do that. I was called in a time or to, by my older brother, as well, hey, Rocky, what is going on? You are suppose to set an example or something, I wasn't really setting an example that he wanted me to do. Looking back, I wasn't too proud of my actions. Today, I wouldn't been very proud of my outlook. I did the job, I did what was required. I wish I could it over again, today.

KR I think it was understandable though your attitude was the fact is, having been, had a position where you were in a leadership position before you went into the service and then having to come back and not even having that leadership. I mean you went backwards, in terms of your standing in the Forest Service. Some of your friends had progressed.

BD Apparently so.

KR Yeah, I think that is real understandable.

BD Even though, probably it would be normal for any kid that's twenty years old, he thinks he's big stuff. In the Seabees I wound up, I was crane operator. And I had a little responsibility involved there. That you know, I probably thought I was 35 years old, you know, at least mentally. But I certainly wasn't, I was twenty years old. I'm sure I acted more like I was seventeen or sixteen. I'm not sure about that. You'd have to talk to somebody else on that.

KR '46, there was a lot of vets returning to smokejumping, right?

BD Oh yeah. Right.

KR What was the percentage were vets that you worked with?

BD Boy, as far as I know it would be, I can't say 100 per cent, but there was a tremendous amount. I mean it seemed like, it seems to my recollection, a majority of them were vets.

KR Did some of those other folks coming back from the service have similar feelings that you had?

BD Well, I'm not sure... I'm sure they did. It would be hard for me to believe that they wouldn't have under the same circumstances. I can't imagine that they wouldn't.

KR Was everybody out there busting butt? Or were there people, who just, they worked hard for the last two years, saving their own butt.

BD Maybe. Maybe. I don't know.

KR Do you remember?

BD I don't know. I can't really remember that much. There again, I think a lot of the vets... as I recall, I don't think really had that much experience in the Forest Service. Previous experience too. I think they were probably pretty much raw recruits as the Forest Service goes. And I would rather suspect, it would be reasonable to assume that the Forest Service didn't have time, there wasn't that many people available. Because here again the CO's had been the experienced crew and now they're gone and so now we have our veterans coming back with veteran's preferences and this sort of thing. But they had been in the Forest Service, per se, as I recall the majority of them were forestry majors. I'm sure that's what they were using at that time, mostly forestry majors, from all over the country.

KR Were there a lot of fires that year, '46? Do you remember?

BD There again, I can't remember as there being a particularly lot of fires. I don't think there was a lot of fires, I mean, as far as my own fire experience would go. 'Cause of the two seasons, I only jumped twenty-four times. The first season, you got to crank in the training jumps, which I'm sure there must have been eight or nine or ten training jumps. There was a few refreshing, refresher jumps in '46. But probably, I don't imagine there were more than a half a dozen fires that I jumped on.

END OF SIDE A

SIDE B

KR Did you go back in '47?

BD No.

KR No, you were through with it?

BD Yeah.

KR No more?

BD Nope, no more.

KR You were through with it?

BD No that was it, I'd had enough of the Forest Service.

KR Had enough of the Forest Service or had enough of jumping?

BD Everything, all the above, I guess. I was surprised that Ratigan went back, but I can see now why he did, because he continued on with his education and it certainly was an ideal situation, a summertime job, really. But at that time I think really we were kind of outlaws, I think it would be safe to say that. Because of this thing that we mentioned, resentment type of deal. And that at least in our eyes, the politics, the rigamarole, the rules and regulations and stuff, you know. We were probably tired of the discipline, the militaristic aspect.

KR It was pretty military oriented?

BD You know, certainly not like the military per se, but certainly military as far as your hours, regulations and...

KR So what did you go into?

BD Oh, '46... oh... boy, oh yeah Ratigan's brother, I think that got me to California. Ratigan's brother was in the Marine Corps, Jim, and he had a car that left... at Port Hueneme, or Camp Hueneme, I think it was, California, and he needed somebody to drive that back. And I went down, I went down to drive that car back as I recall. Uh, isn't that funny, I just thought of that, and now I can't remember the rest of the story. [laughs] But any way I ended up in California, my experience in the SeaBee's, the big crane operator, I was just going to go to work operating cranes. That was not to be, you don't just jump into operating engineer. It was a little difficult for me to make that. But I did get into the operating engineers and started running a compressor, a jackhammer, it's what I wound up on. But it did get me in on operating engineers.

That winter, '46, well, Christmas time, I just couldn't wait to get married, I just couldn't wait to get married. Which I did, in December of '46. and then I went back to California, because I had this job with this compressor deal. And we were there for a little while but then Frank, brother Frank had a, he had, let's see, had he retired then from the Forest Service? I think he probably had at that time, and he was building this marina up on Flathead Lake, and he offered me the big deal. Here, brother Frank, wheeling and dealing again see, and he needed somebody to do some work. [laughs] And he got me fresh.

KR Hungry?

BD Hungry, and put me to work building the big log breakwater up there, which is still there I guess, today. Boy you talk about work, I mean I had to work. Everything was done by hand, pulling those logs, and he did that the primitive. He was a sharp guy, he was very imaginative guy, he had an old Model A, about a '29 or '30 Model A. He cut a pipe, split it, bolted in on the rear wheel, jacked up this Model A and used that for a capsan, a winch, and that's how, with using snatch blocks and whatnot, we dragged these big logs, sixteen foot, eighteen foot logs, they average at least a foot in diameter, drug those out and put rolling hitches on them and notched them with bolts, spikes, spiked them together and built this thing up. And then we got all this thing built up. Why then to fill it, used this same deal, the old Model A with the capsan with a little hand slip, and of course I was on the end of it. I tell you that was some tough days, tough days. Hundred dollars a month, the rent was fifty dollars a month. No, rent was twenty-five dollars a month. I had bought a Lincoln Zephyr, twelve cylinder Lincoln Zephyr, oh it was a dandy, but the payments were forty eight dollars a something...

KR A month?

BD A month. So that left twenty-five dollars a month for groceries. And that poor little wife of mine, of course she didn't know any better [laughs]. So we lived on twenty-five dollars a month there and we had nothing but poached venison and flour. She still tells the story of winding up with twenty-five cents, she had twenty-five cents, she walked down, about a half a mile to a little grocery store. She bought four slices of salt pork. She remembered how her grandmother fixed salt pork, she soaked it out, you know. And she rationed that, we had two meals out of that [laughs].

KR And that was a treat?

BD That was a treat.

KR I have to ask you, we had this fire back on the hill here yesterday. What was going through your head when you saw that smoke, of that fire?

BD I said to Gordon, got a shovel? Let's go up and put that out. [laughs] Ah, no he says, let her go, that's good for it, that's good for that hill, when it comes back it'll look lots better next year.

KR Were you with Dave when you saw that fire? Dave Ratigan?

BD Yeah, yeah.

KR Did you want to just go get it?

BD Oh, no, not really.

KR But that feeling?

BD Yeah, that feeling, well it reminded me of home because last week we had the very same thing. The only difference was that I was up there with a shovel.

KR What is your career?

BD Fire Chief of the Fire Protection district of Douglass County.

KR And how many years have you been doing that? Fire fighting on the rural residential?

BD Thirty-four years, four years as a volunteer. It was a very small department at that time. It was only two paid men at that time and I was hired as the chief at that time and that made three people. And since then it's progressed, it's a ten, ten paid employees at this time.

KR So smokejumping influenced your career.

BD Very much, I'm sure that's right. I enjoyed the construction, I enjoyed crane operating. I did finally work into a journeyman in just a couple short years really. Through a chain of events I did get a journeymen's card and I was running a crane, cranshell and shovel, and did the whole bit. And it was extremely, I really enjoyed that work. But I could tell, very... right away, that this was going to be a rough life. Looking around, all your construction people, you know, don't have a pot or a window to throw it out of, except maybe a trailer and a good car to travel with.

My wife was pregnant at the time, right away, and I wanted to get something more. Conversing with a school chum friend at home in Wenatchee, his father-in-law had a little restaurant that he was trying to sell. My mother in law wanted a restaurant so she backed us, loaned us five thousand dollars, we bought this little restaurant. It was a little kind of greasy spoon eating type deal. And it was, we got it for six thousand dollars, but in retrospect it was only worth about two, the equipment was terrible. But anyway, I had that, I was in the restaurant business for about five or four, four years, from '49, part of '49 through '54, when I went into the professional fire service. I was a volunteer all that time, and I would just, like the shows in the magazines or the comic strips almost, when the whistle go, I'd throw my apron off and tell the guys to put your money in the cash register [laughs] and away we go, you know. God, I was really, I was so wrapped up in fire, I really thought that was really neat.

KR What is it about fire with you? There's a sparkle in your eyes every time you say fire. There is.

BD [laughs] It's great, I guess it's true what they say, a volunteer fireman is really just a controlled pyromaniac [laughs].

KR I've heard that before.

BD Yeah.

KR You think it's true?

BD I think maybe it's partly right.

KR I think I have a tendency to agree with you.

BD Yeah.

KR Is that thrill still there today a little bit.

BD A little bit, yeah, you never get rid of all that. But I have to admit in all honesty that some of the edge has wore off. I'm inclined more to pick and choose my fires now, it's got to be worth my while.

KR But you were out on a line last week?

BD Oh yeah.

KR More or less putting a line around a brush fire back home.

BD I didn't really have any business doing that, in my position. I mean that is what the book says, I'm supposed to be at the command post.

KR Right, but you're unorthodox that way, you don't follow the book as Fire, you're what Captain Chief?

BD Fire chief.

KR You're head honcho, right?

BD Yeah, yeah.

KR And you don't follow the book?

BD No, no [laughs].

KR What kind of things do you do that you're not following the book and why do you think that's important?

BD Well, I think that book is fine, I don't disagree with the book. I think the concept is, and I can see the need for it, but then there's, there comes a time when there isn't in my own, just like myself on the fire line last week, there was absolutely no purpose in me being in the command post. I was not doing anything, any accomplishment, I wasn't serving any purpose

whatsoever being in the command post. And especially working with volunteer firemen, there's nobody particularly wants to put a shovel, put a backpack on and go down over about a sixty to seventy percent slope and rock and snakes and whatnot, you got to be out of your mind. [laughs] Who needs that? You know.

KR But you did it?

BD I have an inner feeling of not, I just don't like people who sit in the armchair and tell somebody else to do something, tell somebody else to do that, he'd do it. I'd never tell anybody to do something I wouldn't do myself.

KR Where did you learn that? Where did this come from.

BD Where did I learn that. [laughs]

KR Where did that come from in Bob Derry? Does that come from smokejumping?

BD Who is this Bob Derry, I don't know, you know.

KR Where does that, that, right there, you're not going to do anything that you wouldn't get up and do yourself. I mean you're not going to be big chief in the easy chair. Does that come from smokejumping? Does that come from experiences you had in the FS?

BD Could be, you know, there's probably that much, there's probably a portion of it?

KR How much is that?

BD How much is that, compared, to, that much, from one to ten?

KR Are we talking about twenty percent, fifty percent?

BD I don't know, I'd be shooting at the moon to tell you in all fairness. But my experience in the Forest Service in the smokejumpers certainly has been, has been pretty much that everybody pitches in. Of course being probably in the smokejumpers, you probably find a little more of that, because of being a smaller group, a small elite, hopefully, group, that everybody works. A six man crew you're not going to have somebody who's just walking up and down and cracking the whip. Everybody builds fire line and I think that's a good, a real neat way. That's the kind of group that I want to be in. I don't want to be in that white shirt group, that..

KR So you want more of a family? You worked hard to create a family with the ten person crew that you've got now, is that right?

BD Yeah, yeah,

KR It's important to you?

BD Very, very important. In our department of course, fortunately, you don't have to come to grips with the Civil Service Union. I can see around me what that has done to the esprit de corps of the troops. They just lose something, there's so many of them that are eight to five type of people, a paycheck with the benefits. They're not there because they like the job particularly. I don't know, I see a different group of people coming forward, I don't really particularly want to be a part of.

KR Do you consider yourself a professional fire fighter?

BD Yes, up to a point.

KR You do now, with thirty years behind you. Did you consider yourself a professional fire fighter when you came out of smoke-jumping? Or did you consider yourself a professional smokejumper?

BD Well, you have to kind of define that fire fighting. I think I probably recognize my limitations. I felt that I could handle any, a small fire, you know we're talking about anywhere from a two man to a six man, I suppose, somewhere in that ball park, a reasonable small fire, that took the proper procedures. Because I felt like I had been trained well, the procedures of putting out a fire and backtrailing it, and this sort of thing, and digging it out, and doing the right things. I think when I left the fire I wouldn't leave any smoke like you see up there on the ridge, that would be bad, no-no. But as far as a professional I would have some problems with that, I guess. Just like I don't I recognize my limitations as a fire chief, I couldn't do a fire chief in a big city, because I don't have that kind of background and that kind of a not only actual experience but I see the need for a lot of formal education in being a fire chief, an administrator. You could say I've been a nuts and bolts fire chief.

KR Bob you've done a lot of things. I know you've told me that you've kayaked, you run, you bicycle, you smokejumped and I don't know what else you've done with your life, a lot of challenging...

BD Yeah, love it.

KR And you go after it continually. What are your favorite years, looking back from today backwards?

BD Well, favorite years.

KR Or year?

BD I don't know, certainly the year of 1943 is certainly got to be one of the highlight years of my life. Just from the fact of, of course my age, I was so extremely impressionable you know, and things meant an awful lot. And I got an awful lot of satisfaction, you know. I was moved up so quickly in the

life's... there's a lot of satisfaction in there. And of course since then, my career with the fire district, I just loved every year of it, every day of it. Just one of those things, it's been so difficult for me to make a commitment to retire, because I do enjoy it, I enjoy the challenge, every day is different, busy, busy days, time goes fast, there's no card playing or checker playing. It's something to do every day.

KR Do you remember your last jump?

BD Nope, not per se, I can't have, it's kind of strange, you'd think you'd remember, boy twenty four jumps that isn't too many things to remember. But you know, other than that one tree jump I told you about with my friends, my jumping partner jumped in going through that adventure. And then the one with the old Eagle chutes with the opening shock that blew a couple of big holes two three shroud lines hanging down, give me an extra little adrenaline run. That's about the only two that I really remember, that really sticks to my mind.

KR Did you do any rescue jumps?

BD No rescue jumps.

KR We're coming to the end of the tape. I wondered, I don't ask all the perfect questions, is there anything that you'd like to put on this tape? Anything at all.

BD [Snickers to himself] Boy, I don't, I've certainly enjoyed this reunion, [Missoula, Mt. '84 Smokejumpers Reunion], more than what I anticipated really. I went to a, couple of years ago they had a small one up at Winthrop that I attended and I kind of went away from that a little disappointed. I don't know what I expected, but I didn't of course, Winthrop really wasn't, even though it being my home court, I didn't really know anybody up there. Other than Francis Lufkin, and I was never really that close to Francis, he was... only through brother Frank. But this one has been really enjoyable. I guess I met a lot of people that I didn't really expect to see, didn't recognize any, very few of them, but their voices didn't change. Just the fact of getting together with Ratigan and then brother Virg coming up from Texas, rendezvousing with us. We had, we've had a real good time so far, socially, social time.

KR Did you say you knew Francis Lufkin?

BD Yeah, I just knew of him, because I didn't have any personal contact with him, smokejumping.

KR Bob, I want to thank you again, I really appreciate you, it's a very good interview.

BD I don't know, I hope you get something out of it to make it worthwhile.

END OF THE INTERVIEW