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Interviewee: G. George Ostrom

Interviewer: Beth Hodder

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Note: Portion of interview restricted at interviewee's request.

Beth Hodder: My name is Beth Hodder, and I'm here with George Ostrom to interview him about his time as a lookout with the Flathead National Forest. Today's date is August 31, 2017.

So, if you don't mind, George, I'll begin just by asking you some simple questions.

George Ostrom: Ask your questions.

BH: Can you tell me about your childhood? Where did you grow up?

GO: I grew up at the Flathead Mine, which is up in the mountains above Kila. It was a mining camp. My dad was the foreman up there, so I was raised in the woods.

BH: Did you move here after that to Kalispell?

GO: I had to come down here to go to school. There's no high school up there, and I batched with Nancy Manning's parents while I went to high school. I quit high school when I was 17, but I went and lied—you've got the name Ivan O'Neil [see OH 453-00?—not yet in UM Archives]?

BH: Yes.

GO: And his cousin, Bob, and Jack King, who just retired from the Valley Bank. Quite a few of us. They lowered the age from 18 to 16 when you could go to work for the Forest Service, the Park Service, and the State, I believe. Anyway, all the guys went to war. Well, we went up there and told them we were 16. We weren't. I looked like I was 12 years old. But anyway, Carter Helseth did the hiring for the Forest Service for years and years, and he knew that I was a mountain boy and he forgave my being rather young. He put us to work.

BH: You call yourself a mountain boy. How did you get interested in the outdoors?

GO: Well, I was raised there.

BH: Because of the camp that your dad worked at?

GO: Yeah, it was a mining camp.

BH: How did you decide to become a lookout?

GO: Well, it was a job. We all wanted a job, and it paid pretty good. It was very interesting, and so we did that.

Another one, Walter Bahr, is a local retired banker. He lied about his age; he was in Bigfork. The five of us still get together and shoot the bull. I'm coming up on 90 years old. They're a little bit younger than I am, but we'll all be 89 and 90 next year.

We did the lookout stuff. We cleaned the trails, we fought fires; we hung the telephone lines; we did it all. We manned the lookout.

BH: Where were you a lookout?

GO: My major lookout was Battery Lookout, which is above Quintonkon Creek, northwest of Spotted Bear. But remember: that was all wilderness then.

BH: When was that?

GO: Forty-four. Ivan was on the next lookout north called Pioneer [Ridge]. His lookout is still there [Actually, it was gone by 1998]. My lookout was burned down or something years ago.

BH: You worked for the Flathead [National] Forest as a lookout, is that correct?

GO: Yeah, the Flathead.

BH: Where was the agency's headquarters at that time?

GO: Right here, Kalispell, in what is now the library. That was all Forest Service upstairs through the Federal Building. And the Forest Service operated out of upstairs at the library.

BH: And that's where your boss was at the time also?

GO: No, no. The bosses were same as they are now. The bosses were the rangers on the districts. There were a lot more districts then than there are now. They've combined a lot of those districts, I think.

BH: Do you remember which district you worked for?

GO: Oh, sure. Coram District.

BH: Do you remember who the ranger was?

GO: Stubb Eastman. He was a sticker. He was missing some of his fingers from an axe accident, and that had made him extremely cautious, and a lot of safety things he was actually a nag about safety, and eventually, he was killed by a falling tree in a forest fire down in the Swan here someplace. A live tree fell over and killed him, but he was a sticker, follow the rules, a safety nut. He was a good guy.

BH: He was the district ranger? Was that his title?

GO: That was his title.

BH: Do you remember, did the lookout sit on the ground, or was it a tower?

GO: Mine was on a 35-foot tower. It was wired with heavy copper wire so that if it was hit by lightning, the electricity would be drained off the tower and down the hill to a spring, down there about a quarter of a mile from the lookout. All the lookouts were like that, because they were a target for lightning.

Lightning hit my lookout. I had a hard time seeing, hearing, or smelling for days. My poor doggy was up there; he never did quite recover from it. I was on the bed, to drain off electricity, but he wasn't, of course. Poor little doggy. Anyway, it made burn marks on the lookout, the lightning, when it went down.

BH: Really? On the outside?

GO: Yep. In fact, there was a sign that said "Battery Lookout," and it caught that sign on fire.

BH: Do you remember the style of the lookout? Was it called an L-4 or a D-1 or...

GO: No, it was like the one on your shirt [L-4].

BH: Can you describe the lookout to me?

GO: Well, there wasn't much to describe. You've seen one, you've seen them all. Just a railing, and everything in it was wired to drain electricity. There was a little stove in there, and an alidade in the middle, which could be moved, because if you happened to have a fire right where there's a windowsill or something, you had to be able to move it so you could get a correct reading on where the fire was.

BH: Did you stay in there? Did you sleep in there?

GO: Oh, yeah.

BH: Did it have a bed or a cot?

GO: I had a cot.

BH: How did you communicate with headquarters?

GO: We had telephones, and those telephones were hard to maintain—elk would get tangled up in the wire, trees would fall over, and sometimes the snow would cause [them to go] down. And part of every spring was, all those telephone lines had to be checked, and it took a long time in the spring. We started first thing, and we followed the snow. The snow melted and we followed the snow up, hanging all those telephone lines, hundreds and hundreds of miles of telephone lines in tough wilderness territory.

BH: That would be. Did you have climbing gear?

GO: Oh, yeah. We were taught to climb. We went to climbers school; we had the spurs, the big belts, we had to be taught to splice wire, and how to attach them to insulators, because a wire should not be touching anything or it would ground them out. All telephones had to be insulated, and I noticed that sometimes the lookout was above timber, and we'd have to put up posts. We'd pile up rocks to hold up a post. It might be only 10, 12 feet high, but at least we'd get the telephone line off of the ground and maintain that. Then we would call in to headquarters and report in all the time. They had to know where we were.

We had to go to water. We always had to walk downhill. It seemed like an awful long way some places to go to the nearest spring to get water for whatever—drinking—we used to take a bath down at the spring in ice water. I don't know how clean we got.

BH: You were talking about water and your water source. Was the spring that was a quarter mile down there your water source, and how did you haul your water?

GO: Stubb wanted us to use those cloth bags, they're canvas, and they had to get soaked up before they'd hold water, because they'd always drip, and you'd lose water. Well, he insisted that we use those canvas bags. "Oh, yeah, we'll use them." Well, we never used them. The minute he disappeared down the trail—he took each kid up to the lookout to make sure he knew what he was doing up there—and the minute he left, we got out those big five-gallon cans and tied them to a pack horse. That's the way we got the water up and back and forth.

BH: Were they tin cans, the five-gallon cans?

GO: They were metal. They didn't rust, so I don't know what they were.

BH: Are they the kind that are narrow and tall?

GO: Yeah. They were heavy, I know that. And where my spring was is a zigzag trail. It was one notch under a cliff. The trail was back by the rocks and switchbacked down into the thing. Mine was a little more than a quarter of a mile.

BH: Do you know if the trail is still there?

GO: Oh, well, probably no—I doubt it. It would overgrow by this time. Anyway, I'm not going to go find out, I'll tell you that.

BH: Can you tell me how you cooked your meals?

GO: Well, it was a funny thing about the cooking. Some guys were better at cooking. Ivan [O'Neil] would actually make huckleberry pies, and he would cook stuff. We could not have bread up there, of course, because there's no refrigeration. We had a lot of Boston brown bread. It was in a round can, and I liked it. We could make cornbread. The stoves were such that the firebox only heated one side of the oven, so I discovered very early, when I made cornbread, I would put the cornbread in there, and then the heat would heat one-half of it. But I'd keep turning it around until I cooked it equally on both sides. So I got so that I could make good cornbread, and we'd make biscuits once in a while. I tried to cook, and Ivan did cook.

The Forest Service had a problem. We had one kid—he was from Kalispell—he was in my class. He's no longer around, but, anyway, he just ate all the fruit. We had canned peaches and canned pears. I can't remember—we might have had a little canned grapefruit, but not much. But he just ate the canned fruit. He ate all the stuff that you didn't have to cook, and then he just took off.

BH: What do you mean he took off? He never came back again?

GO: He never came back. They found him here in town.

And we had another guy, they hauled him for two days, for God's sake, into the Bob Marshall [Wilderness]. This is before we had the wilderness bill. It was a wilderness system, and the packer took him in there with horses, put him on the lookout—I can't remember the name of the lookout; it was way in the middle of the Bob—and hooked up his telephone and made sure everything was working. Telephone was working and everything was working, and the packer left him there. Well, within a little while, after the packer left, a lightning storm came up, and lightning hit pretty close. Well, this kid was from Whitefish. I'm not saying anything against Whitefish, but this kid was from Whitefish, and he took off. He got his clothes and his toothbrush and whatever, and he took off, and he passed—he was running—and he passed the packer on the way. And of course, then when they tried to call him that evening for the check in, he wasn't there. They were able to get the packer—they got him on the telephone at Black Bear [Cabin], some place, and he took his saddle horse and went back up there, and the kid was gone. So, anyway, he was through. He never hired back.

The kid that ate all the peaches, he was on a lookout on the east side of what is now Hungry Horse Reservoir. His dad came up and begged, and he kind of had a little pull politically. He wanted that boy hired back. So they put him on a lookout, which is right there by Lion Lake at Hungry Horse. There was no Hungry Horse; there was no town or anything. But he could see cars at night, see, he's on the lookout up there. I forget what the name of it is. Anyway, that was more than he could stand. He lasted maybe about a week up there and then he came down.

BH: Again.

GO: Yeah.

BH: So is it Lion Hill?

GO: Lion Mountain Lookout.

BH: So he was not fit to be a lookout.

GO: No. There were guys that weren't cut out for that.

Ivan and I were on the lookouts, and Ivan had the packer, Rudy—can't think of his name—Rudy brought up a...Ivan had a radio, and of course, those days we had no electricity. You had to have a big heavy battery. Ivan had that, and he was very careful about it, just using it a little bit, not leaving it on all the time, because of the life of the battery. But anyway, he was listening in 1945 when we got word that they bombed Nagasaki and the war was over. So Ivan called me up to let me know about that. Of course, we communicated almost daily. Those guys were interested in that. We had a lady who was the dispatcher at Coram [Ranger Station], and she was good about helping her boys, and, anyway, they let us come down. Ivan and I hiked out. Ivan could cross the Graves Creek Bridge. There was one bridge across the upper South Fork River. Well, there was two, but it wasn't at Graves Creek.

BH: So it went from west to east, you mean, across what's now the reservoir?

GO: Right. Yeah. So Ivan came down. His trail came pretty close to the Graves Creek Bridge, so he could cross it. Then he hiked up to Elk Park, which was a wilderness ranger station. Then he stood on the bank and held a lantern for me when I got there. I had a .22 rifle, and I packed that and everything. I held it in the air over my head, and I waded across the river to Ivan's held lantern so I could see to wade across the river. If I'd been 20 feet further down the river I'd have been in bad trouble. There was a big hole. My little doggy was with me, and he was swept away, and I thought I'd lost him forever. He went roaring down the river. I got over to Elk Park there, and a little while later, here came my doggy. He came up there, so I had him up there, so everything was fine.

I had taken a pack of cigarettes up there, and I had 7 cigarettes left. We'd been up there almost 2 months. We had a lot of fires. Ivan and I reported many fires. I would say we were in the teens with the fires that we could see from up there.

The smokejumpers were conscientious objectors. They were guys who didn't want to go into the service—it was against their religion to go in the service—so they were smokejumpers, and they weren't treated too well. They were dumped in some awful places. Later, when I became a smokejumper instructor, I wouldn't think of dropping guys where some of these fellows were dropped, but they did the job.

Anyway, we came down. My mama had a band, and they had blocked off Main Street. This is 2 days after the war ended. There was still some fighting going on, tankers in the war. My mother had a band here, a dance band. They had her band up on a truck, and they were dancing in the street.

BH: Right on Main, I'm assuming.

GO: Right on Main. Oh, another thing. When Ivan and I were sitting there trying to figure how the hell we were going to get to town—we're 25 miles from Coram, a beat up, old, dirty, narrow road out to civilization—but some guys were taking some beer up to the guys at Spotted Bear, and they gave Ivan and I 2 bottles of beer. So we had a cigarette and a bottle of beer for celebrating the war. We only had a couple of days and they sent us back up to the lookout, but some rains came and school was starting. Ivan was the manager of the football team, and I was the third string water boy or something [Laughs.] Anyway, I was with the teams. We came back down.

BH: How did you get down? You started to say that.

GO: We had to walk.

BH: Oh, you did?

GO: Oh, oh. Some guys came.

BH: They were taking the beer up to Spotted Bear and then they brought you back down?

GO: Yeah. Then they came back.

So we were there at the end of the war, and I had enlisted. My dad had to sign papers. He went and talked to the recruiter and said, "Now that the war's over"—it's a terrible thing to think about, but the psychology of the day was, we wanted to end Hitler's stuff forever. I felt guilty because I wasn't over there shooting some Germans. And, of course, we were told even when

the war officially was ended—there was a little bit of shooting and stuff going on but anyway—I always joke and say Hitler heard I was coming and killed himself. But my dad talked the recruiter into letting me try to see if I couldn't finish high school. I'd been a very good student. I got very good grades, and when I came down from the mountain, I got every disease known to man—except smallpox—you know, chicken pox, whooping cough, all those things, and I missed a bunch of school. My grades had gone to hell and I was very disappointed in myself, and I did want to go shoot some Germans. So I lucked out; the war ended and I served over there three years in the Occupation, which is a terrible thing. There were people dying in the streets and lacking clothing and shelters and stuff. Anyway, that's that.

BH: Wow. Back to the lookout, I guess. What kind of meals did you cook?

GO: I don't think you'd call it meals. We had canned ham, little sausages, and we had Spam. I didn't like it. And we weren't supposed to do this, but sometimes grouse would come near and die. [Both laugh]

BH: I see.

GO: So there was a fried chicken or two in there.

BH: [Laughs] Did any deer come and die?

GO: No, but one night, I was on my bed reading. The light stays better up there because it's so high, see, and I had good eyes, so I could read when it was getting about half dark. But I was lying on my cot reading a book—did a lot of reading—and that tower just shuddered, jerked. And I thought, what in the hell is that? I went out and looked, and there was a young bull moose. He had nice horns. He had been not seeing, walked in, and his horns hooked one of the anchor cables. So I yelled at him and told him to get the hell out of there.

I had a grizzly bear or two there, and a few goats once in a while. I never had bighorn sheep at all. A lot of mule deer. Sometimes a moose would get up high in those mountains, and the elk would, too, to get away to up in the wind from the flies and things that were bugging them.

BH: Oh, so I was wondering why a moose would be that high. I could understand elk and deer, but that makes sense if there were flies there.

Go: Well, he was up there. I was right about at timberline, I suppose. I don't remember what the elevation of Battery Lookout was. I would guess between 7,000-8,000 feet, something like that, which is nearing timberline. There were just little trees and stuff up there, but that moose sure scared the heck out of me.

Let's see if I can think of some of the interesting things. One of the things that happened there, we got a call—Addie Funk was the packer at Spotted Bear, and he loved his horses, and he

knew his horses. He had a special saddle horse that led his packing in the mountains, and some young guy had talked a girl into going with him. They drove up there somehow and got to Spotted Bear, and they stole 3 horses from the Spotted Bear Ranger Station and took them into the mountains.

Well, of course, all those lookouts had a dead end road. Well, we were all warned to look out for them. We had no idea where they'd gone. Eventually, a kid from Bigfork named Davy Greeson spotted them and gave the report on them, and they caught them. But Addie's horse had lost a horseshoe and that kid had tried to nail it back and had driven a nail into the horse's foot.

BH: Oh, no.

GO: And that horse was crippled, and I guess they had to stop Addie from killing the kid, you know?

BH: Oh, that's horrible.

GO: So that was one thing, and I had imagination that they would show up up there (Battery Lookout) and I would possibly have to shoot the guy. But I would be the hero to that girl.

Another one, they had a bunch of girls come out from back East, a girls' school. They were at a dude ranch down at Spotted Bear. And they took them up in the mountains on adventures, and I was hoping they would come up to see me. I was dreaming about that a little bit.

BH: Never came up though, I guess, huh?

GO: They never came up there. There wasn't much to do up there. An interesting thing, I played hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of games of Solitaire, and I kept track of them. I only knew how to play one kind. My wife can play about 4 kinds. Anyway, I played Solitaire and I kept track of how many I won and how many I lost. I also did some sketching—I like to draw—still I draw and paint. Before we're through here, I'll show you my house. I have an art collection here.

Anyway, that [being a lookout] was a fun thing, and I enjoyed it, I really did. I would get a little lonesome sometimes, but Ivan and I would talk on the telephone. Ivan has remained my best friend. We are still the very best of friends. We see each other not every day but several times a week. We raised our kids together, we were fraternity brothers in college, we both put our little time in hell with the United States military.

I'll tell you a little story here. Ivan had a bullet in him. We were out walking in a guy's farm out here. We must have been about a freshman in high school. I remember the headline in the paper said, "Little Ivan O'Neil in the hospital." He was shot. Well, he couldn't go in the Army

with the rest of us. All the guys my age, if they didn't enlist like I did, they got drafted to go and occupy Japan, whereas I went to Europe.

But to show you how good friend Ivan is—that's the point I want to make—I played the trumpet. I was not Harry James. Ivan would let me play the trumpet to him over the phone. Now is that a sign of friendship, or what?

BH: [Laughs.] Oh, that's marvelous.

GO: So, anyway, when I got out of the Army, I was a pretty bitter, messed up kid. I was only 20 then. Came home, I couldn't buy a beer.

BH: You had to be 21 to buy a beer?

GO: You had to be 21. My dad was the state liquor inspector, and the bars were afraid of him. He was the most honest man; if he caught them selling liquor to a minor, boy, they had trouble. Well, they knew, and they wouldn't sell me a beer. I still looked like a teenager. I didn't have whiskers or anything, and I'd put 3 years in the Army and I couldn't buy a beer.

But anyway, a part of getting my dad to sign papers and let me run away to the Army was that I would get the GI bill. They passed the GI bill to get guys to enlist toward the end of the war, you know. Ivan was going to college; he shouldn't get drafted, he has a bullet in him. This bullet came from no place and it hit him in the back. He thought a bee stung him. But it stopped just short of his heart, and that made him 4-F, and they wouldn't let him take ROTC. Anyway, he was a junior in college, so he hauled me down there and made me sign up, and I'm glad he did. It kind of straightened my life out and I'm very proud. I've been honored by the university [University of Montana] several times, and I'm happy about that.

I think that part of us fellows up there doing that lookout thing, it was a blessing for us. We all became responsible people. We've had business and career successes. So, it was a good training. It was fun.

When I got out of the Army, they had what's known as the 52-20 Club. For a year, veterans could go down and get 20 bucks.

BH: Just 20 dollars period?

GO: Twenty dollars. For the week. So if you're mooching off your folks, or whatever, that would buy you enough beer. I was going to join the 52-20 Club, see? Well, I'd been home about two days, and the phone rings, and it's Carter Helseth (?). He says, "I saw you downtown. You get the hell up here. We need guys." They were starting to build Hungry Horse Dam, short on labor. And there were still guys going in the Army, of course. You've got to go over and occupy Japan and Germany.

So, right back to the Forest Service. I started working up there, and they had the grand opening of the new American Legion Club on Main Street. It's still there. It's not the American Legion Club anymore but...I ran into Billy Hellman there. Billy'd been in the war, and he was a squad leader in the smokejumpers [in Missoula]. He filled out the papers, told them, and that's how I got to be in the smokejumpers. Billy was killed at Mann Gulch [fire in 1949]. He was one of the smokejumpers there.

And a strange thing there, when I'm telling you the story, I was on a fire over by Spotted Bear. I wasn't in the jumpers yet, but I was chasing fires. I was doing what smokejumpers did, but I was walking. What? [Laughs]

Another fellow and I came up for a fire at Spotted Bear, and a man came over with a pickup to get us. That was Billy's dad, Jim Hellman. I worked a lot with him in the Forest Service. He was a (unintelligible) crew there. When we got down to the ranger station at Coram—I won't mention his name—but the dispatcher came out and said—see, Jim was going to give me a ride to town there, and I'd get the bus back to Missoula. Anyway, the dispatcher said, "Jim, we got some bad news. Billy's been burned in a fire down in Helena and he's in a hospital in Helena, but I guess he'll live," he said. Well, this other fellow and I went up to take a shower in the bunkhouse, and when we came back out, Jim was gone. We had no way to get to town, and this dispatcher was sitting at his desk crying. I mean tears were running on his desk. I put my arm around his shoulders and I said, "Bob, can I help you?" He said, "George, do you remember what I told Jim?" And I said, "Yes." He said, "Ten minutes later we got a call that Billy had died."

We had one other kid from Kalispell who was the best friend of my baby brother [and] who was killed in Korea, taken in a Chinese machine gun nest. We had those two kids killed, and their dads were career Forest Service people, and they became terribly bitter. They brought lawsuits and tried to blame Wag Dodge, the foreman for Mann Gulch.

An interesting thing here with your lookouts: one of the boys burned at Mann Gulch had gone into the smokejumpers out of high school when he was 18 years old. He was from the Helena area. His folks just worried sick about him jumping out of airplanes, and they talked him out of not going back to the jumpers next year. He jumped in '48. He was on a lookout down in Helena [in '49], and he was the one that found Mann Gulch Fire and reported it. When the jumpers came, he walked down there and met them, and he got killed along with them. There's a lookout story for you.

BH: I'm pretty sure I know what your main duties were—just looking for fires. Were you also a smoke chaser?

GO: Oh, yeah. Now, the few lookouts hardly ever go chasing a smoke unless it set one right by the lookout. They have the crews and the smokejumpers and all that now, but I didn't have to

go to a fire. I was the first guy to report several fires, mainly across what is now Hungry Horse [Reservoir]. I was on the west side, of course, but I was looking across the river.

BH: So were you looking at Baptiste [Lookout] or...

GO: Yeah, yeah. I could see Baptiste, and that whole range of mountains between the South Fork and the Middle Fork. I could see miles up into the Bob [Marshall Wilderness]. I could see clear to these mountains out here [Columbia Mountain range].

BH: Did you have any big fires that you had to deal with that summer?

GO: No. I was involved with the smokejumpers and working at Coram, and I had the air patrol here for two years. I flew the air patrol for two years, hundreds of miles of the Flathead Forest, and I covered a little of the Lolo [National Forest] and some stuff for the park [Glacier National Park], and a little bit from the Kootenai [National Forest]. This had nothing to do with my personal reputation, but we didn't have any big fires. [Laughs].

No, we had a few; we had some terrible fires. I escaped a fire, quite a big fire in the Klamath River in Oregon, along the California coast with a crew of jumpers. We had to make a run for it, and we won by about 5 minutes. We got into the river.

BH: Wow.

Did you have any scary experiences or weird things that happened to you while you were a lookout?

GO: No, just that moose hitting that wire.

[This portion of the interview has been restricted at the interviewee's request.]

GO: I went to Washington—this is a little bit in my background. For reasons I do not understand, the largest crowd ever assembled in the state of Montana was over 40,000 people who came to the dedication of the Smokejumpers' Center, and the featured speaker was the president of the United States, Dwight Eisenhower.

BH: I'll be darned. So, you're talking about in Missoula.

GO: Yeah. We built a forest, several acres, brought in trees and stuck them in the ground, and put logs and brush. We're going to have a big fire for the folks and the president, and we're going to jump 16 guys and put that baby out. We're up in the air. I was in a DC-3 [C-747], and then the other guys, the smaller group, was in a Ford. Well, we're flying around there. Wind came up, terrible wind.

BH: Oh, no. And the fire was already lit?

GO: They just had one tiny little bit of it going. They said, “Oh, this is terrible. We’ve got to cancel the jump.” We’re communicating by radio. And then for reasons—I joke about this, but—they decided they’d let two guys jump. I didn’t know if they picked the two that they needed the least, or two of the best. But anyway, Joe Gutkowski (?), who just retired from the Forest Service and I were picked. So we get in the door, and they had to let us out—you know where the Smokejumpers’ Center is?

BH: Yeah.

GO: They had to let us out there, the intersection where Highway 93 meets the interstate. We’re talking a couple of miles from the fire. The wind was blowing that bad. Okay, so we jump. Joe blows half way down to Hamilton, never did show up. I land right in front of the stand. I’ve got a picture I can show you. But anyway, I was the hero of the day. [Both laugh]. My folks were there. That’s the first time they’d ever saw me jump out of an airplane. So now I’m up there on the stand with the president and all the big shots, and there’s a young war hero there named Lee Metcalf, who was a United States congressman.

BH: He wasn’t at that time, though?

GO: I can’t remember, but he was there. They sit me next to him, so I introduce myself, and there’s so much B.S. going on, they talk for hours, the speakers, and I start telling him about all the things that are wrong in the Forest Service. They were not taking care of the forest, there was hanky-panky in the logging business, they were not doing jobs in the forest like they should. I just bent his ear—I like to talk, as you can see—and I forgot all about it. He shook my hand, and nice meeting me and everything, and later on, after I had left the Forest Service and I was home here, married, a couple of little kids, the phone rang. Lee Metcalf.

“George, I am running for the United States Senate in this next election, and John Kennedy’s going to run for president, and I want you back here if we win.” I said, “What would I do?” He said, “I want you to be an advisor for me. We’re going to write the Wilderness Bill.”

BH: I’ll be darned, George.

GO: I couldn’t believe it. I said, “Well, well, uh, yeah!” So I came and talked to Iris and we talked about all I had to do and everything. We lived in another house out here. We sold our house, packed the two little kids in the car, and went to Washington. So that’s how I wound up spending the 87th Congress in Washington, DC.

BH: I’ll be darned. So you were one of the writers of the [Wilderness] Bill?

GO: Right. I mainly did research. I had been there; I had parachuted into many of these wildernesses. In the Bob Marshall [Wilderness], I rode horses in there, I hiked in there, I parachuted into there, I spent over a month all by myself working on a mule corral at Salmon Forks [Cabin], I had done a little hunting there, I had floated the rivers, packed in over Danaher [River].

BH: So, they picked the right person.

GO: Well, there are very few people who have that many different kinds of adventures. I had a pilot's license by the way—I had flown in and landed in a couple of the airstrips, which was legal then, but it wasn't later. But I had all that experience, and I had jumped in the Selway and the Salmon—all these wildernesses all over, and including things that became later wilderness in California, Oregon. So I had a lot of experience, and I could give advice on how we ought to manage them and Lee trusted me.

BH: Wonderful.

GO: The lookouts, though, they were fun.

BH: So, they were a good experience for you? Would you have done it again if you could have?

GO: Oh, God, yes.

BH: What do you think you liked the best about being a lookout?

GO: I don't know. I was lucky in that I had Ivan. I could call him up and we could talk. But, I don't know. I was a kid, and it felt challenging. I felt I was a man out there. I'm doing a man's job. I'm a wilderness lookout, and I take care of myself in the wilderness with grizzly bears. I was proud of it, and I wasn't eating all the peaches and then quitting. [Both laugh]

BH: So I guess with what you've been talking about with everything, it all kind of came together—all of your experiences as a smokejumper and working with Lee Metcalf, and some of the things that probably have happened beyond that, I guess, did being a lookout push you in any of those directions, do you think?

GO: Sure. Another thing about being a lookout, you're all by yourself. You get to do a lot of thinking. And I did a lot of talking; I talked to myself. I still do it. I got in the habit. I like to hear me talk. [Both laugh] Well, I've made my living for 62 years as a talker on the radio.

BH: How did you end up getting into there?

GO: I'm glad you asked me that. We were not to discuss anything about the fact the CIA was getting their trained, what they called "kickers," for the CIA to parachute into foreign land. This

was top secret. Nobody was supposed to know that, but people got the idea. I did not sign up for them. I had been cleared “top secret.” I worked top secret in the headquarters of the European command in Frankfurt, Germany, after the war. So I had a background there. Anyway, I stayed on, and, of course, I decided, that maybe I’d go—and I was well qualified—on one of these missions. Very dangerous. I didn’t know it at the time, I didn’t know until two years ago, the CIA violated their own rules. They released the names of all the guys, and the whole thing came out in an article. We were never to tell anyone what we were doing.

Anyway, I was with the smokejumpers, and I jumped a large, large fire.

BH: So, this is after the war, after you got out of Germany?

GO: Oh, yeah. This is several years later. This is 1964? I don’t know. Anyway, I jumped on a large fire. In fact, I think it’s probably the largest jump by smokejumpers. We jumped 20 some, maybe 30 jumpers, on one fire.

BH: Do you remember the name of the fire? Was it in Montana?

GO: No, it was in the old Peking burn in Idaho, Salmon River, Salmon River hell: rattlesnakes. There was a guy there that I had flunked because he pulled up his feet when he was going to hit the ground. You can’t pull your feet up or you’ll land on your butt. And he was so husky, I was worried he was going to break his neck. You can’t reach for the ground, and you can’t pull your legs up. You bend your legs slightly, and I taught this over the years. I taught hundreds of guys how to land without getting hurt. I had fired him, or not passed him. But they needed guys, jumpers so bad that year, they let him jump. He’s jumping with me. We jump with two guys at a pass. He’s not paying a damn bit of attention. He’s going into a bunch of big snags, and I’m yelling at him. [Makes an exasperated sigh].

And I was expecting my own safety. Unbeknownst to me, I was blowing sideways into a big snag. My parachute hung up over the top of it, I’m hanging up there 60, 70 feet in the air, and the snag fell over. Split my sternum. Luckily I blew it a little depression. Otherwise, I’d have been killed instantly. But I was lying in the depression and this log was across the top of me. I’d split my sternum here. I’ve broken all the ribs on this side. I had a (unintelligible). I broke my left leg, dislocated my right shoulder, and had a few other things. Now, we gotta get me out of here. Well, nobody knows I was missing. (Unintelligible sentence). A couple guys finally came, and they carried me. I weighed about 180 pounds, and with the stuff on, I weighed over 200 pounds. They carried me up a steep hill to the top of a cliff. This was the first experiences with the little Bell helicopter. They were not efficient above 5,000 feet, so they had to lift up off the ground and then dive to get flying speed to really go. So they carried me up there. I don’t know how those guys did that. They carried me. They shot me full of Demerol. Demerol? They shot me full of enough stuff. I thought it was a wonderful world we live in, and they flew me to the hospital in Missoula.

I came home here after I got out of the hospital, mooching off my folks. I got \$33 a day, and that just made my car payment. I had bought a new car that winter down in Florida. I was desperate for money, and they had just started a new radio station, KOFI, 10,000 watts AM. I went up and told them I'd like a job. They said, "Well, have you worked at a radio station?"

"Oh, yeah, yeah."

They said, "Well, we don't have any openings right now." They only had two announcers, plus they got owners.

I said, "Well, you'd have an opening if you fired that guy in there."

They said, "Why would we fire them?"

I said, "Because he has no personality. He can't read."

They said, "You think you could do better?"

I said, "A hell of a lot better."

They took me in a room and had me tape. I read some news like I was doing the news, and I read some ads. They thanked me and they made a tape. I took my cane and hobbled home. Stopped by the high school where my folks lived. Well, I no more got home than they said, "Come on up here. We fired the guy." We're talking, what, 62 years ago?

BH: [Laughs]. So there you go.

GO: I wound up eventually as one of the owners and the manager, and now I'm helping them rebuild KGEZ.

But, I was still going to go on this little thing with the CIA, but I met this girl from Whitefish and, brother, it was over.

BH: How long did that last? How long before—

GO: I never ever took out another girl.

BH: How long did you date her?

GO: About a year. I was still paying debts from my problem, but she had saved a little money, and she took a chance on me. She is a saint, that girl. That's how I happened to be an announcer rather than a parachute jumper.

BH: Or a lookout.

GO: We lost almost 10 percent of those kids that went—I say “kids”—with the CIA. They don’t talk about that. Not just in Laos and Vietnam and that Asia area, but all over the world. In Africa, Europe, South America. High fatality rate. So altogether, I was very lucky.

BH: I guess so.

GO: But the lookout is a fine thing. I’d love to do it. I had thought after my kids got raised, if I hadn’t stayed with this radio business, I would have loved to have gone back up. They’ve got several lookouts now—one of our guys, Hank...Hank...Hank...Hank, he died. He was a pilot in the wars. He hiked with us a lot, climbed. I’ve got a piece of him in my book. He and his wife went up different summers and served on a lookout. You could drive the car up there. See, that would be kind of neat.

BH: Did you go by horse or did you hike?

GO: No, no, I walked up there. Oh, this is an interesting thing about this. They had big lists of everything that they’d take for food for guys in the lookout. That was considered a 45-day ration, or maybe 50 or 60, I don’t know. Not us kids. They couldn’t believe it. They took Ivan [O’Neil] and I, and Bob [O’Neil], and took all the kids and put them all on the lookouts. My god, in 30 days, we had all eaten our food. We did get to see a person. A packer came up and brought us food. “What the hell you guys doing? Eating twice as some people.”

BH: [Laughs]. Well, you’re young.

GO: Yeah, we were young and growing. A funny thing there, I went in the Army at about 130 pounds, and when I came home, on my way overseas six months later, I was 175, and I gained three and a half inches. In the Army. They starved us to death. [Both laugh]

BH: All that food you that ate at the lookout got saved up until you got in the Army.

GO: I guess so. But the rations were good. In fact, to this day, I still buy some of that Boston bread in the round thing. It’s delicious.

BH: So I hear.

GO: You can warm it up, put butter on it. I have it with beans.

BH: As a reminder from your youth.

GO: I love that. In fact, I was out of that in about two weeks. I didn’t make pies; Ivan made pies. There were always huckleberries. I ate a lot of huckleberries.

BH: Did they go in your muffins or your biscuits or whatever?

GO: I didn't make biscuits a lot. We had baking soda. Biscuits are just flour and water and baking soda. You put something in them to make them rise a little bit and they get fluffy. Some guys were really good at baking biscuits. My biscuits were kind of tough.

We're straying off the subject here about the lookout. There were all kinds of lookouts, too, and Pioneer, which I think is no longer here, Pioneer Lookout was built up maybe five or six feet on rocks all around, and there was a door. You could walk around in under—it was not on a tower. One day, we were going up there—I don't know what the hell we were doing up there—I think I was with Barney Cox. We were going up to hang the telephone [wire]. That was one place where we had to put the last half a mile with just posts; we didn't have trees. But as we approached the lookout, there must have been 15 mountain goats. It was stormy weather, and they ran out from under there. They'd been in there. They liked it there. Somehow somebody left the door open.

BH: So they were living in there?

GO: Yeah. There used to be a lot more mountain goats on those mountains there, many more. I got the new Fish and Game magazine, and they're explaining what's happening to the mountain goats. I know what happened to the mountain goats. The Fish and Game sold too many permits. That's a fact.

BH: So they got shot off.

GO: Sure. When you'd run [along] Lake Blaine driving north on the old (?) road, you used to be able to look up there, stop the car, you could see goats up on those mountains over there. And some people shot them. Dr. [Loren] Kreck and I went and hiked into Big Hawk Lake several years ago, and we hauled out garbage. People put garbage up there. We found three goats, a mother and two kids that had been shot. Somebody just shot them. So, there are still some people misusing the woods. Always will be.

BH: Yeah. So, have you got any other thoughts about being a lookout? Anything I missed?

GO: Oh, I could tell you another lookout story. Bob—oh, I can't think of his name. He flew me a lot. I made a few skydives and stuff, mostly to make money, and I did a couple after I got engaged to make money to pay off my debts so I could marry Iris Ann. Bob had the flying service here. It wasn't out here at the City [Airport]. It was at the County [Airport]. It was still a smaller airport. He furnished the airplane for when I was the air observer flying the route. I'd design a route every morning, and I had a pilot and an airplane assigned to me. So a relative of Bob's got the job on Loneman Lookout up the Middle Fork [in Glacier National Park], and the kid [lookout] was going to have his birthday up there. A girlfriend had hiked up there and his

best buddy and his best buddy's girlfriend. They're going to have a big feast up there for his birthday. Bob's going to drop them T-bone steaks. So he told them to get ready; we're going to drop T-bone steaks and a bunch of other stuff. Pretty big box thing.

So I'm in the passenger seat, and Bob's flying the airplane. It was a big old red high-wing Stinson airplane, and I had this up in the window. The window would open. Big old airplane. And he said, "You throw her out." There was nothing there to stop it. The thing that holds the wings on was out ahead of it, so I had a pretty good shot. "I'll tell you." [Bob to George].

So he maneuvers the plane around, and he's heading in there, and I forget what the signal was, but it was "go." I threw the thing out. Uh-oh! It hit the lookout. It made a large hole in the roof. Lucky the kids were all outside. But they had to take carpenters up there and rebuild the roof of the lookout, and it did damage to some of the stuff inside. I don't know if it broke the alidade, but I think it ruined several thousand dollars, and Bob's insurance paid for most of it. But, yeah, just "Boom!" I don't know if they were able to eat the steaks then or not. I would think maybe it would make it just a little tender, but we had them wrapped up to keep them cold and everything. So they were pretty well protected. There was other stuff in there. I don't remember what they were—potatoes, or whatever—we had a nice feast there for those kids. They were going to have steak dinner for his birthday, sure raise hell with that lookout.

One time, I did something that was illegal. I didn't usually do that, but you know, I bought Moose City [unofficial "city" south of the Canadian border in the North Fork area of the Flathead]. I didn't have any money. I wrote a bad check to tie up the buy-sell agreement, and that was in 1967. We still own it. I got a bunch of my buddies—I'm a good salesman—I talked them into joining, and there are a bunch of families that own Moose City. Anyway, I had to fly up to Moose City to do something—I was a dictator for 25 years of Moose City.

BH: Not a mayor, a dictator.

GO: A benevolent dictator.

I had to go up there for some reason or another. Oh, I know. Besides taking some stuff up to Moose City—we have an airstrip there, 2,600 feet—Don Van Mann (?), an ex-Navy pilot, was going to give me some instructions on short field landings in the woods, mountains. I had some concerns. I was never a very good pilot. I was too in a big rush. So we're going up there.

It's early in the morning, just after sunup, and I can't think of the name of that lookout; I think it's Cyclone Lookout. There's a guy on Cyclone. Well, I come up over the hill and I didn't have a lot of altitude. I don't know what made me do it. I cut the engine, and I glided, right down over the lookout. He was out on the railing going potty. He was naked. And you know, an airplane like that, you don't hear them around. I'm right down there, and I got right over the lookout and gave her full throttle, and the plane just roared, just like the one that went over here a minute ago, just roared. Well, you never saw so much scrambling, and he dived in the door. I

hope he didn't get hurt. I'm sure there was no way he could get my number, because I was gone by then, you know.

BH: Oh, that's hysterical!

GO: But he was naked. He'd gotten out of bed and he was changing his clothes, I guess, and he had to go potty. So he was out there going pee-pee over the railing, and I scared the hell out of him. I've never done that before or since or anything. I would never. That's not a good thing to do, you know. Don Van Mann was a heck of a pilot. He gave me a lot of my instruction. He thought it was pretty funny, too, the way we caught the guy, because the guy didn't realize that we were coming. He was on the far side. He wasn't on the side as we were approaching. It would be the west side of the lookout. He was around on the east side. So it wasn't until I hit the full throttle that he had looked up. He looked just when we were right over the top of him. That was something. That was something.

BH: Well, do you have any other thoughts for me? Have we covered it?

GO: The one thing with that kid from Whitefish that abandoned that lookout, that's very unusual. Another lookout story here involved the son of a well-known local attorney. He was homosexual. I suspected it, but I was friends of the family, and I was a national officer of the Inter-Fraternity Council of America. You talk about gung-ho fraternity brothers. We took this kid in my fraternity. I wanted to help him. We were a Masonic fraternity. We were not allowed to have homosexuals in our fraternity. Well, I had to give him credit, but through his dad's pull, he got a job on a lookout. Spotted Bear Lookout, 50, 60 miles away spotted smoke coming up by his lookout. They called him. I'll call him Pete.

"Pete, look across the canyon there from you and see if you see a fire. So he looked. He said, "Well, there's something over there."

"How long has it been there?"

"Well, about a week."

"Why didn't you report it?"

"Well," he said, "when I went to that school they told us that there's a lot of dust down there and that could be sheep or something moving through it."

He was not cut out for lookout work. We jumped at the lookout. I can't remember where this was.

BH: Like down toward Missoula or the Swan?

GO: Yes, further toward Missoula from Seeley Lake in a southwesterly direction. Anyway, as it turned out, that was the only place to jump, was right around the lookout. And there was a road down there. They sent some guys to clear open the road and [they] were able to get some bulldozers on it, and we got it out. And that [fire] was spotted from the [other] lookout.

BH: Geez. You're right. He was not cut out to be a lookout.

GO: I think he'd been a very successful kid back East, a home decorator or designer. But we talked to the Forest Service. I didn't talk to his dad, but we had helped him. He was a likeable kid. I was going to help him. I did not know at the time. I was president of my fraternity, but I did not know that we weren't allowed to have homosexual people. We had one of the guys in my fraternity who was a homosexual. He'd won a silver star in combat in Germany.

While we're on homosexual things, I was a good soldier. I had two commanders, one at the center where I worked—European headquarters—and then back at the barracks where we lived. Back at the barracks where we lived, my Captain Blorindine (?) said, "Sergeant, I gotta talk to you." He told me the other sergeant was caught in bed with a new recruit kid, and he said, "How do you want to handle it?" This was right at the start of the Berlin airlift. We had trouble. The Russians blocked Berlin. I said, "I have to have that guy. He's the best high speed Morse code radio operator in Germany," and I said, "I have to have him, and I want us to forget it." And that's what happened. This guy'd been there in the whole war, but somehow, in a moment of weakness...So that was one of those things. This guy, unbelievable. You know what Morse code is?

BH: Yes. I've heard it. My neighbor was a...

GO: Dit dah dah dah dit. That's the ABC. I still remember it. This guy, unbelievable. He could talk to you, and you use a mill to take Morse code. A mill is just like a typewriter except the numbers are over 1, 9. He could take Morse code and talk to you. Now what kind of a brain is that?

BH: Pretty smart guy. Yeah.

GO: He would even get up and go get a drink of water while the Morse code is going on and come back and type it. I had to take Morse code as part of my training at Ft. Monmouth, New Jersey. I went to photography and radio school, and I had to learn; I could take 40 words a minute, which is fast, and I didn't see how any human being could do much better than that. This guy doubled it, for God's sake. I think he could take over a hundred words a minute. Unbelievable. I didn't care if he was homosexual or what the hell he was. He was a valuable person.

BH: Exactly. Well, you were lucky to have him.

GO: Yeah. I'd been there a couple years then, and we'd had no problems with him. He did not live in the barracks where we lived. He had an apartment. After the war got settled, and the Americans moved the headquarters, European command into the (unintelligible) building, in Frankfurt, there were places where the GIs would make some kind of a deal and they got per diem to live there.

BH: Well, I thank you for your time. It's been fun listening to all these stories. Unless you have any other thoughts, thank you, George.

[End of Interview]