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Steve Reynaud interviewed by Kim Maynard. 6/7/84.
Smokejumper Oral History Project. OH#133-90.

SR Steve Reynaud and I started jumping in 1965. I started a little bit different than probably most folks. I was on the district and, ah... Twisp District and we had... there was a fellow the year before had worked on the district and came out to North Cascades to jump as a district jumper. He did it that year. The next year he would have kind of liked to have had someone to come out with him for fires that he knew. So, they asked me if I wanted to do it, so, I said sure. So, I went through rookie training as, ah... GS-3. Then in the last couple... or last week of training, one of the regular fellows, ah, broke his arm and so, they asked if I wanted to continue on as full time at North Cascades. So, I did and I'm still here. I did spend 2 years in the service... '66 and '67 and returned here in '68. Then '68 through '72 I spent most of my summers in LaGrande which was at that time a satellite base of North Cascades. Then in '72, LaGrande became a base of it's own and so I worked there until '76, and then transferred back to North Cascades. And I've been here since.

KM So, tell me about your first jump and your training?

SR Ah, the training seems harder than it is now, but I think everyone says that. It was, ah... it was demanding physically and mentally as... I think everyone has that same feeling about it.

KM How about your first jump out... practice jump?

SR I don't really think I can remember that. I probably had my eyes closed and didn't remember much of it anyway. [laughs] I don't really think that I knew really too much of what was going on until the third or fourth jump... was just pretty much routine then. By then I started to enjoy it I guess, or realized what was going on.

KM How about your first fire jump?

SR Ah... that was pretty much ho-hum, I guess. I remember I spent about 10 hours in the airplane circling fires and we'd come back to the base and another load had already went out so I'd be number 1 on the list again. And then it took me all day to get... to finally get out. So, the apprehension was probably a little higher than would be if you just went right straight out and jumped. But, on landing I did my roll and rolled into a uprooted stump hole and parachute came down over the top of me. I didn't know for sure if I was OK or not, but [laughs] my jump partner came over and rescued me.

KM Do you have a packout?

SR No. Had a ground... well, a half mile maybe. Nothing you would call packout. Ground crew came in within a hour and

relieved us and we made it home before dark, so.

KM The same day?

SR Yeah. It was right here on the Twisp District. It was... then, ah... I think you pretty near got relief on every fire that was within walking distance... within a couple miles of a road or so. It seems that the districts were more used to; they had a fire and they just got a crew together and sent it in. They walked in and relieved the jumpers and they came out. Now, depending on how far you are from the road, but it seems like you're there for the duration. A small two man fire. They usually leave you there and finish it up. Those first few years it was; when you had a fire, everybody was dispatched to it at one time and you always knew there was a crew coming to relieve you on the ground, unless it was in the wilderness. But, those ground crews would walk in 3 or 4 miles sometimes in the night and always relieve you. I think the policy then was to... the jumpers were strictly initial attack, and your main duty was to hit the fire, get relieved, and make it back. It wasn't uncommon then to get 2 fires in one day. People still do it, but it was more common, I think, then. We usually... if we got relieved at midnight, we packed our gear up and walked all night to the road, or wherever, so we could be back the next day at daylight if there was anymore fires. Now, I think the tendency is a little bit more to stay through the whole duration of the fire. You don't get any relief, so, on the smaller fires that are in... within a mile or more off the road, you hardly ever get relief. So, your duties are a little... a little different.

KM Do you remember any other significant fires in that first year? How many jumps did you have that year?

RM I think I had 13 total and, ah, 5 or 6 fire jumps the first year.

KM Anything exciting happen on any of them?

SR Well, it seems like they were all, you know... being new, they were all exciting and everything was brand new. You'd come back with a story and the old guys would look at you like, ho-hum, you know, it was no big deal. I think everyone has that their first year is a pretty big deal to them and then after it happens to them 2 or 3 times, well, the same thing over again, it gets to be pretty old hat. It's usually... there's good ones and there's bad ones. They seem to equal out... generally on the bad side, I think, probably... they lean a little bit more that way. Packouts [are] probably the thing that makes it the toughest or the hardest.

KM What's the longest packout you've had?

SR Oh, with full gear, ah, probably about 5 miles cross country... no trail or anything, just, ah....

KM The toughest, too?

SR Yeah... well, I'm not sure it was the toughest, ah... sometimes, you know, a 1/2 a mile... 3/4 of a mile can take you all day if it's in that kind of terrain and we can get into that kind of terrain on the Mount Baker, [where you] have to let your packs down with your rope, have to let each other down and, ah, things like that. Probably in the first years we didn't have quite as good of equipment to pack our stuff out. We had what we called an old elephant bag. It was a military personal gear bag, I guess you would call it. It was a large green, tubular shape bag that all... most all service men used to throw their gear in when they traveled from one place to the other, with straps sewn on it. The fire packs were... there weren't any boxes, the fire packs were... all the gear were packed in one of those bags and the extra bag for the two man fire pack was placed in the bag and it was dropped as cargo. They weren't very comfortable. The ones now are... we haven't come a whole long ways but they are a little bit better than the other ones.

KM How about years afterwards... stories, rescue jumps... did you ever do any rescue jumps?

SR Ah, I've never been on a rescue jump. I've been rescued, [laugh], but I've never been on a rescue jump.

KM What happened?

SR Ah... another fellow and I jumped on a... after a lightning storm and it was snowing and raining, and there was a couple of inches of hail on the ground back in the Satan Wilderness, in a place called Teapot Dome. It was out of the Arrow Commander and, ah, that airplane was pretty difficult to exit. And I evidently tumbled or spun or something, but you only exit that aircraft one at a time. I had twists, and I couldn't get them to come out. They were... there was knot in them or some spaghetti garbage in the lines and so, I was in the process of struggling with the... to get the lines out when I hit the ground and I... my descent rate was probably a little bit faster, but I think the main problem was that I wasn't ready when I hit the ground and I broke my foot. So, they sent a crew in to get me out.

KM A jumper crew... to rescue you?

SR Yeah, yeah... somebody else to stay on the fire with my jump partner and they brought a helicopter in later and took me out. So, that summer I was laid up for... I think that only kept me off the jump list for 22 days or something and I was back on... probably before I should of, but I didn't want the rest of the folks to get ahead of me, so. [Pause]. But, I've been real lucky. I have 100... better than 150 fire jumps in, so, I feel real fortunate that I've landed in the rocks, that many times, or the trees or whatever, that I haven't done something else.

KM That's the only injury that you've ever had?

SR Um hm... that's the only injury, yeah... bruises and sprains. You know, things like that, but nothing that anyone else doesn't get from time to time, or... whatever.

KM Ever have any malfunctions?

SR Ah, no. I've never had a malfunction, other... I guess maybe you'd call that... when I broke my foot a malfunction. But as far as having to throw my reserve... I should have threw it that time, I guess, but at that time that really wasn't the policy. It wasn't stressed quite that hard to throw it when you had twists. So, I didn't throw it, but that's the only time that... I've had jump partners with malfunctions and....

KM Oh, yeah? Like streamers?

SR Line overs, Mae Wests, and they worked the lines off before they had to deploy their reserve. Then I've been on the ground when... in the stick behind me a fellow had a Mae West and rode it out. We were all hollering at him to pull his reserve but he didn't get it done. Fortunately he lit in a tree and it didn't hurt him. So, ah....

KM What other stories can you tell us about... any other fires that were significant, or you had a bout with the bears, or anything?

SR No, not really.

KM Any fires that were... that you had to run from, or any excitement that come around?

SR Oh, I... a few but I wouldn't really call... we had to run from them. I mean... we had to get out of their but it wasn't... it wasn't touch and go or anything. But, ah, it... not... I suppose the majority of my fires have been small ones. I've been fortunate that way. Those are the best kind.

KM Pretty much local? Did you go East when everyone was called?

SR Yeah, I've spent 2... 2 seasons back East and, ah... well, 1 fall season and 1 spring season.

KM How was that?

SR Excellent duty... excellent duty, yeah. A lot of jumps and the people were just excellent. We stayed in the best places and they treated us great. The, ah... I think the local people back there were... kind of thought of us or... we were a novelty like astronauts or something else. We're here in the west where people kind of grow up knowing there is Smokejumpers even if they don't ever see them and then, of course, people around the areas where there are Smokejumpers, they go out with their kids and

watch and it's kind of old hat. But, back there, it's... they'll just drive out to the airport and sit there and watch and never come ask if you're going to jump. But, they'll just sit there and watch, and watch, and come back for days, and days, waiting for you to have a practice jump and they're, ah... it was, you know, a new thing to them.

KM Steve, you never ran across any of the arsonists down there?

SR From back there? Yeah. Most of the fires there are from arsonists and we did happen to get on this one fire that was arson caused. We pretty well had the fire contained and they came on the radio that they had the arsonist... well, not really apprehended because they hadn't got to him yet but they had him cornered. So, we drove up there and the fellow had an old beat up truck and he was in the middle of this old logging landing and the Forest Service and law enforcement people were... had his exits blocked, but we couldn't get him out of the pickup. Every time that anybody would try to walk into the landing, well, he'd charge them with the pickup. Then, naturally, everybody would head for the brush and then he'd back the pickup back out to the landing and wait for someone else to try to get him out of there. So, that took about a half hour and finally they got him out, but there's... sometimes you could just go down the road and you'd have a fire call and you could just pick up one fire and about half a mile or a mile away there'd be another fire right along the road where someone... the same person had just drove along the road throwing incendiary to start the fires. But they... I think a lot of those people are... that's a way of life to them. They've been starting fires for hundreds of years and it's... it probably won't be until the next generation is taught about Smokey Bear, and the right way to take care of the forests, that things will change. Because the older folks, I don't think that they'll ever be convinced that that's not the, you know, the way they do. They get a squirrel in a tree and they set the tree on fire for the squirrel to come out the top of a tree... out of a hollow tree and that's... they've been doing that for food for years and they're just going to keep on doing it, so... I doubt if that's going to change. And I really don't know how many of those fires were started just to watch us jump. [Laugh]. Sometimes I wonder if we didn't do more harm than we did good. Not really. But, boy, there'd be a crowd formed right away. One interesting story that... we jumped on it. I think the wind always blew back there, real hard. Probably too hard for jumping here in the west, but the terrain there isn't as rough and I think that we probably jumped in a little stronger winds than we would up here. But this one particular day, we jumped a DC-3, and when you jump there, you don't have the ordinary hazards that you have here... well, you have your rocks and snags and things like that but you also have houses because you're literally... it's well populated and you're literally jumping right in amongst houses and things like that. Well, not like city or suburb type, but farms are all over the place. So, my jump partner and I blew backwards and down this valley and there was this large power line going across from the road on one side

over to some houses. Well, not a large power line, but a regular residential service type thing but they were bare lines. And so, there was a time there when either it was time to turn and run and get over the power lines or chance it and try to hold against the wind and make it down on the leeward... or the windward side of the power lines. So, I chose to turn and run across them and he didn't. So, consequently, he hung up in the power lines. I lit in this fellows corn patch and was drug backwards, and ruined about half his corn field. There was a bunch of kids came running out to see what was happening. So, as soon as I gathered myself together and got loose from my chute and stood up. Well, I heard this one little girl screaming and so I looked over where my jump partner was and there he was hung on the power lines. He was hanging there limp and I just knew he'd had it. So, I got over there as quick as I could. He was OK and I talked to him and, ah, he just wasn't moving because he didn't know what to do and he was about 50 feet off the ground, I guess, hanging in the power lines. The chute was over one side of the power lines and he was draped down the other side. As the gust of wind would come, well, his parachute would inflate fuller and pull him up towards the power line. I just knew he was going to get... you know, each time he went up a little higher, it seemed like he was going to touch the line. What I didn't know, that the circuit had already been broke on there. Then when the wind would die down, the parachute would let him go a further down and then I would realize that if he fell from that far, he would definitely be hurt and so it was kind of, hope the wind blows and then hope it doesn't blow too hard... and then don't want him to go into the lines or the chute let him off of the lines.

KM He couldn't do a let down?

RM Well, there just wasn't... there really wasn't time because it was all happening pretty quick and I didn't really have any advice to give him because I really didn't know what to do. But, ironically, the wind sort of changed and he stayed suspended on the lines with the chute billowing, but the wind switched and the chute worked it's way down the line and got over a highway where it wasn't so far to the ground. Of course, there was probably, by then, 15 or 20 cars backed up on the highway in all kinds of fashions... skidding and sliding and everyone was out onto the road, and so... coming from both directions. Finally it slid him over to the roadway where he wasn't over this creek and this little indentation and it wasn't so far to the ground. The wind let up and it let him down on the ground. He lit real hard and he was just laying there. So, I bent over him and said, "Are you all right, Barry?" And he didn't say anything. I said it again, "Are you all right, Barry?" And he looked up and said, "I guess this is going to be a war story." So, I knew then he was all right and he still had his sense of humor. That was a pretty trying few minutes, but it all worked well.

KM What do you think were the effects of the Vietnam War and that whole '60's era on the jumping.... if any?

SR Ah... I don't know if it had any greater effect on jumping as it had on any other people. We had a lot of veterans in the program... or that's generally the age of the people that we hire, so, there were probably more verbal people... I mean that age group was probably more verbal about the war than the rest of the population. I guess, basically, I was gone during that... 2 years of it and when I came back, I don't really remember that there was any great effect on the... you know, on jumping itself. The people were... some of the people were a little, maybe different or, ah... that effected them, but I think it didn't really effect the jumping any more than it effected their attitudes and their... than they would on or off the job. I think they're all glad to be here jumping. [Laugh].

KM If you had to pick out the best things about jumping or the things you like most about it, what would it be?

SR Well, I thought about that a lot since I've been here quite a while, and I think maybe it's a combination of things; of not doing the same thing day after day. It's always different, especially during the summer. The winters are a little bit, the same type routine as other Forest Service personnel but, ah, I think it's, you know... tomorrow you could be in Alaska or wherever. I think it's possibly the friendships you make and the... in just working with a group of guys that... from wherever they're from... for the most part are just a lot of fun and doing it basically for the same reason you are. It's because they like to do it. It's real hard to put your finger on. It's probably different for everyone and I guess I've been here long enough, I just don't know how to do anything else. [Chuckle]. It's too late to change, maybe... I don't know. But one of these days, the old body is going to say "enough", and I'm going to have to give it up, but I don't really look forward to that.

KM Any other stories that you can think of that either happened to you or other people in it... times in the plane... anything else?

SR Well, I remember, we had a poster we put in a DC-3 of a fellow upchucking in the john. It was quite a popular poster a few years back and so everyone that got sick in the DC-3 had to sign the poster. I guess maybe those are things that happen all the time. We used to take patrol flights out of here... we had 2 airplanes. And we would take an hour to 2 hour patrol flight everyday and it was always right after supper. So, the cooks that we've had here were notorious for fine meals and everyone would eat it... eat too much and then they would go on the patrol flight and so there was probably more airsickness than usual because of that.

KM What kind of changes have you seen jumping go through?

SR Well, there really isn't a whole... whole lot of changes, I don't think. We're still basically doing the same thing... using the parachute as a means of transportation to get to the fire.

We've changed parachutes several times but we haven't... the lower '48 jumpers haven't come a long ways in the type of chutes. They're still, ah... basically go down. [Chuckle]. I was remarking this morning to the fellows... we were out working on the tower and for a long time here, we didn't use the step on the airplanes. The last steps we used were on the old Twin Beeches and I think they, in this Region went out... oh, late '60's early '70's. So, last year, we put a step on our airplane, so that's full circle. So, we got a new reserve... not a new reserve, but a new reserve container and the ones a long time ago had 4 snaps to hold it on and then we went to 2 snaps and this new one has 4 snaps, so, I don't know if we're progressing or what, but it seems to always go full circle.

[INTERRUPTION]

SR Something that might be interesting in this day and age is that in the '60's, and maybe before that, if you wanted a job as a Smokejumper, you just kind of walked in here. I don't know where it... like it was at other bases but... or if the manager knew you from high school, or you played sports or whatever. Basically, you just applied here and if he liked your looks or your past experience, you were hired. You didn't... that was all there was to it, and you didn't have to go through a lot of paper work and rosters and everything. That was... there was quite a few local fellows that were hired right out of high school. They were seniors and the next day after they graduated they came to work, if they were 18. But, ah... so that....

KM Think that changed the attitude of the jumpers, or do you think that made it better or worse than what it is now?

SR Oh, I don't think it made it better or worse. You just, you know, there might have been some favoritism that possibly wasn't fair... to some people. Except the people that got hired thought it was fine. I don't think it... you know, the caliber of jumper, I don't think it's made a whole lot of difference. If Bases do their homework on the people they hire and get the best ones they can, well then, it shouldn't change it.

KM You had about 45 jumpers, is that right?

SR At one time, yeah, in the '60's. Well, excuse me, no. After 1970 we had up to 45 jumpers.

KM Because of the 1970 [inaudible]?

SR Yeah, the whole Forest Service was in a "gear up" situation. Districts all had 20 person fire crews and we had a lot of jumpers. Every District [it] seems, had a helicopter... sometimes they'd have to share one, but there was a lot... a lot of resources. And then it's... the last few years, it's swung completely the other way. Somewhere hopefully, it will find the right mix.

KM Well, how many jumpers do you have here now?

SR We'll have 20 this year.

KM And when did you start cutting back?

SR Um... '79 and '80 we cut back... down to 10. Then this year we built back up to 20. So we're kind of a Base again.

KM Yeah, and I hear you may be getting in a few more too, is that right?

SR Well, we don't have 20 here right now but at the... when the rookies are trained we will have 20, but we have 15 now... experienced jumpers.

KM Do you rookie a class every year?

SR Ah, no. During our cut... when we cut back, we didn't have rookie classes. We had so many people, in fact, we had to turn away people that had jumped for us and re-hire rights and they went to somewhere else and got a job. There was a few years there we didn't have any rookies... quite a few years in fact.

[Someone prompts Kim to ask Steve about the first jumper death].

KM Oh, yeah, I don't know if you're familiar with it... 1945 there's apparently... new information has it that Mann Gulch fire wasn't the first jumper death but the 555 Battalion of black jumpers, someone landed in a tree and fell out, I guess, and died. Do you know anything about that?

SR Oh, ah, no... I had never heard that there was any... anyone had died on that. I knew there was a high rate of injuries... sprained ankles, broken bones, and things like that but I didn't know that... at that time... did you talk to Francis [Lufkin] or ask him that...?

KM No. They talk to him this afternoon.

SR OK. Well, he would be the one to ask for the Honey Boys or someone that was jumping during that time but I don't recall that... you know, that that had happened.

KM OK. Well, thank you.

SR Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]