

Fred Rohrback interviewed by Dan Hall. 7/21/84.
Smokejumper Oral History Project. OH# 133-91.

DH Fred, I'd like to start the interview by asking when you became a jumper?

FR I started jumping 1965.

DH Where was that at?

FR Missoula, Montana.

DH Had you had any previous experience with the Forest Service before that?

FR Yes, I worked 2 summers in '61 and '63.

DH What were you doing?

FR Ah, the first year I worked on trail crew... Red Ives District, St. Joe National Forest in Idaho. The second year, I was foreman of the trail crew, the same district in Idaho.

DH What made you decide to try smokejumping?

FR Well, I first got interested in smokejumping in my first year working trail crew. About August we had some fires which they put some jumpers on and it was just... I always liked to sort of participate in elite groups and I made up my mind at that time at some future point I would like to be a jumper.

DH Did you have very much contact with jumpers while you were working for the Forest Service?

FR Ah, there was one fire we relieved them. I only spoke with them maybe for a few hours... that was about it. They were only on the fire about a half day. That was my only contact with the jumpers. However, I did hear a lot about the organization, but as far as contact goes, very little prior to jumping.

DH Where did you train to jump? Where did you do your training at?

FR Right here in Missoula.

DH Nine Mile?

FR Ah, the original... well, the current smokejumper base, yeah.

DH Were you living on the base during training?

FR I lived on the base during training. Training period at that time... 4 weeks which I think it is now... stayed on the

base in the dorm, I'd say, for about 6 weeks and then I got an apartment in Missoula.

DH So, you weren't required to live on the base?

FR Ah, not at that time, no.

DH Has that been changed?

FR Now?

DH Yeah.

FR I really don't know if it's been changed or what, Dan... I think so.

DH How well do you remember your first jump?

FR How well? My first jump, believe it or not, in 1965, I remember it very vividly to this day. It was the first time I had ever flown in an airplane, OK. That's no bullshit, Dan, by the way, who the hell edits this anyway. [Chuckle]. No, but really, it was the first time... I'd been in a helicopter a few... prior to that a few time in fires in Idaho but the first time in an airplane. I remember it very well.

DH Was this your training jump?

FR Training jump... first jump, yeah.

DH What were you thinking of when you were standing there at the door?

FR Well, naturally, our class in '65 was quite a large class. I think it was 80 or 85 people because at that time they had a basically a lot of college kids. You had a high turnover rate, let's say, during the '60 era. Now they train very little. What I was thinking about when I first started jumping was... well, I'd never ridden in an airplane, let alone jump out of one, OK. So, the ride wasn't that bad, but you always think, "Will you ever jump or not." You know, that goes through a lot of new man's minds, OK. But the conditioning was so well that it's just more or less, in my opinion, a reflex action. They condition you in the jump towers and all the training apparatus out at the base where you just go on command and there's no problem at all.

DH How about your first fire jump, can you tell me about that?

FR First fire jump... that was in '65... only had 2 fire jumps... wet year. First one was, if I remember right, on the Nez Perce National Forest. I don't recollect the district. It was a 2 manner and there was me and another fellow, I can't remember his name now.... Small fire, just a snag, maybe about the size of this room were in here. I remember I jumped out and they always taught us to count 3000 or 4000... whatever it was

and look up and check the canopy. I did and I had a partial line over... Mae West, OK. But it worked it's way free... came in... stayed on the fire about a day and a half. That was basically it and packed on out. It was no real big event, but I remember though.

DH Can you tell me what a Mae West is?

FR Line over.

DH Lines get tangled up on the chute?

FR The lines, when the chute opens, you can have one or a couple of the shroud lines gets over the canopy, OK. It gets over the canopy then and that's what a Mae West is.

DH How did your family feel about you becoming a smokejumper?

FR My father thought I was nuts... really. But, he... well, he accepted it, I mean, he wasn't really against it but he said I was crazy to do it. After the first year he was proud of the fact that I was a jumper, yeah.

DH What about reaction from friends?

FR Friends. Well, you know, was just... you know, at that time in the during '60's everybody thought it was all right, so, no real reaction... negative of positive, either way.

DH Is there any one fire that you jumped on that sticks out in your mind as being the most memorable fire?

FR I wouldn't say... there is probably quite few fires, ah, I would say probably the most memorable... the fact is, we almost all bought the farm on that one... was up in Alaska the last year I jumped in 1973 with the Bureau of Land Management. We call it the BLM... out of Fairbanks. We jumped the fire. We flew in a DC-3 from Fairbanks to McGrath. Set down there for about 4 or 5 hours... had lunch in McGrath. Then we had a fire call [came] in. A lightning storm had passed through and ah, we got up in the air in a DC-3. If I remember right it was a BLM aircraft, not a private contract aircraft, which at that time the Forest Service used to quite an extent. There were 16 guys in the DC-3... spotter, assistant spotter and, ah, we got over the fire... it was on tundra maybe about 50... 60 acres in size going like hell, it was pretty windy. And I remember we took the door off, the spotter went back... there's a little tool kit, sort of like a tool kit where they keep the streamers in. You know, they check the wind drift and everything and he bent over about right opposite... his back was opposite the door... bent over to get the streamers out. The spotters wear a different type of chute, a spotters chute, you know, it has a rip cord, not a static line like we have. One of the pins came undone in the back and their chutes have a little pilot chute that's spring loaded and when you pull the cord on it, the little pilot chute will pop out and

it will drag out the main. It'll catch air and drag the main out. OK, the little pilot chute was sprung out and flew out the door. I was sitting second man from the door... we had these bucket seats against the wall or the windows and I just... he was a blur. He went right out the door... sucked him right out. We had a safety strap on the door. He ripped the safety strap right off... from the door to the rear of the DC-3 there's a larger cargo door that can come out... it's hinged in the top, bottom on four corner's let's say. He ripped the bottom hinge out completely... ripped the safety strap, it just ripped the metal right off the door and I remember seeing him flying out there doubled over. I thought he was dead. His chute... he had about 3... 4 lines over. His chute was about 60% deployed and, the first reaction was... me and another guy, we tied off the door quick. I was real worried that the wind, you know, the plane still flying could knock that cargo door off and it could hit the horizontal stabilizers and then we'd all just take a dive in. Tied the door off... there was a chopper in the area... we called the chopper and they picked him up. Ah, we didn't get to jump that fire. That was probably, I mean if you really want to get down to... it wasn't an actual fire jump, but that was probably my most memorable... stands out in my mind.

DH Was that guy all right?

FR I met him... met him last night at the party... Gene Hobbs [Eugene], he's from Idaho. He had some disability... he looks OK. You know, he's about like you and me now but he had a severe concussion, broken ribs, I think, legs, back, scalp was ripped away quite a bit. I saw him on the ground as we called the Air Force base. We got him on a plane to fly him out to Anchorage... a hospital. But, he was in hospitals... God, for about 5... 6 months if not more for that year. That was my most... stands out in my mind. I mean, I can go into other fires too... but, my most memorable one, yeah.

DH Did you ever get hurt jumping?

FR Never did... never had any injuries... a sprain or anything, nope.

DH How do you feel about the safety record of the organization as a whole?

FR I think the safety record is excellent due to the, ah... it's a small organization. Training, I felt, was very good when I was in it. To my knowledge, when I was... when I stopped jumping in '73, to my recollection, only... I think the whole jumper organization as a whole, which includes the Bureau of Land Management and Forest Service had only 2 fatalities directly related to jumping, one happened at some point in the '60's with a Bureau of Land Management, jumper but he had already landed in the trees. He had some lines... he hung up and he was making a let down and the lines that were underneath his neck, he didn't clear them out and when he released out of his harness, he more

or less hung himself. Another man, I think, out of Redding, California, when he went out the door, he had the static line over the wrong shoulder wrap around his neck and just more or less snapped his neck going out. I think the safety record is real good due to the fact that safety is stressed all the time in the training here, at least in my mind, you know, we were instructed fairly well. Versus, after I quit jumping in '67... Uncle Sam got me. I had to go to... in the war and I jumped with the paratroopers too. Compared with the military, it's just, ah... I remember we made our first training jump out of Ft. Benning, Georgia. Jumped a C-119, both doors. I think we had at least 1 fatality and probably about 10 or 15 ankle or leg injuries on that... but compared to military jumping... Oh, military jumping the safety record is still not bad, but I mean there you have higher numbers... maybe thousands of men jumping.

DH You mentioned the BLM has jumpers, ah, is that a pretty big organization or is that small?

FR BLM in Fairbanks, ah, currently... I'm not that well up on it now, at the time I jumped out of Fairbanks, there were about 70 people in the whole organization, which is... compared to Missoula when I jumped out of Missoula... started in '65 through '67, I think our crews there averaged about 180 to 185 which is higher than what it is currently now. I think it's about 120... 125 now out of Missoula.

DH Are there any similarities or differences between the BLM and the smokejumpers?

FR Do you mean similarities between the BLM and the Forest Service smokejumpers?

DH Yeah.

FR Ah, not really. I mean, a jumpers a jumper. When I jumped with the BLM in '73, we had a short fire season then up there. By short... our fire season would start earlier in the year... from about May... mid May to maybe first part of July. Then about mid to the end of July, the rains would come and it would be about finished. I got a number... it was a pretty good season from May to June, July... the beginning of July it petered out. And what they did is, they shipped us down here to stateside. In '73 we were based... I spent 4 weeks at LaGrande, Oregon, they had a sub-base there which is now... since closed. They don't use it anymore. I made a number of fire jumps in Oregon, eastern Oregon. Then after LaGrande quieted down, I moved over to Missoula in '73 for about 4 to 5 weeks... all the way up to about the end of September. But, the BLM at that time had a reputation as being, that's where the old smokejumpers went when it got to hard because up in Alaska, for the most part in the State of Alaska, where we jumped it was basically tundra or stunted trees. There wasn't really the thick trees or very mountainous like it is here. You jump in a lot of flat areas or wide open mountain sides... easy landings and everybody used to

joke about the BLM jumpers, more or less in this respect. Also at that time, too, in '73, a lot of the BLM jumpers had a stigma... they didn't work that hard, kind of lazy, lackadaisical organization which we proved them wrong in '73 because I would say about 50 to 60% of the BLM jumpers in 1973 were ex-Missoula jumpers. Those BLM jumpers that did come down to the lower 48 in '73, I think, we made a good name for the BLM at that time. I don't know what the reputations the organizations now have.

DH How man different bases have you jumped from?

FR I've, ah... I was only based out of 2 main bases when I jumped... Missoula, later the BLM. But, I did jump out of sub-bases. I've jumped out of Winthrop, Washington; LaGrande, Oregon; Redmond, Oregon; Redding, California; and I spent one season at Silver City, New Mexico; and West Yellowstone.

DH Can you give me a comparison of the different bases, or is there one that's better than the other or is there one that's more modern, ah, are they all pretty similar?

FR Well, when I was jumping, Missoula was the biggest base. I would say, probably, the best base I liked to jump out of was, ah, Silver City. It's smaller in size. I mean, it's... it really wasn't modern. We were based right out there at the airport. We slept in town at the Forest Service dormitories. West Yellowstone, when I jumped, which was in 1966, it was a little like a compartment, I would call it, at the airport... very small, OK, which I think now, since it has changed. But, I did like jumping out of the sub-bases, such as West Yellowstone, Silver City because the crews were smaller. There was less politics going on... less bullshit if I may use the word, OK. By nature, I'm basically an independent kind of person. I don't like to get around politics so much and I don't like to follow orders so much, either, although I do work hard and had a good work record.

DH Were you a college student, then, while you were jumping?

FR I was a college student, yes, and I used the money I made jumping to help put me through college.

DH Was that pretty common?

FR When I jumped, I would say, for instance our class in '65 had started with about 80 to 85 people. I'd estimate that at least 80%... roughly 80% give or take 5 or 10% either way were college students.

DH Was there any particular reason why it was so popular with college students?

FR Ah, a lot of them... a lot of them used it as a way to put them through... basically pay their way through college. It was a money... the money was fairly good. You could make a lot of

overtime in a good fire season. And that's basically why I would say it was pretty popular.

DH There were a lot of things going on in campuses across the nation at that time, a lot of social unrest. Do you think any of that that affected the smokejumper organization or any of the jumpers?

FR By social unrest, do you mean about the war?

DH Um hm.

FR I stopped jumping in [interruption]... in '67 I stopped jumping in Missoula. Then I got drafted, had to go into the military service. Was in there for 2 years, discharged in '69. Then I got my degree when I came back from the military and, ah, got my BA degree... went on to graduate school in the midwest. I saw more unrest really when I got out of the military than when I quit in '67, I think. I... it was really hitting it's height probably from '67 on, Dan. I didn't really see it effect the jumpers during in the years I was in, no... as far as social unrest goes, no. It could have possibly had some effect later on, Dan, but none the time I was in.

DH How did you feel, or did it affect you at all when it was later announced that women were going to be let into the smokejumping organization?

FR Well, I first heard of this... I think I read it in the paper... Seattle or Portland paper a few years ago that the first woman out of McCall, Idaho, she'd been terminated or what... tried to get into the jumpers, they rejected her. She filed a lawsuit and they had to reinstate her and whatever. But, personally I'm against it. I don't think women belong in the jumper organization. I believe in equality for women, but there's certain things a man can't do and certain things a woman can't do. Physically... physically I don't think they're up to the task although I would say there are some women that are certainly so, but you can't have... if you have a women... if you have a fire crew or jumper crew... 16 man crew or whatever on a project fire out for 5... 6... 7 days, the majority of the personnel on the fire are men and there's all these jokes going around and everything like this and I just don't... I don't see how the women can tolerate it, really. Personally I'm against it. I don't think women belong in the jumper organization.

DH Lately smokejumpers has become sort of a professional outfit... smokejumping has become a profession. It's a year to year job for guys. How do you feel about that?

FR Each to his own. Personally I look back, I don't regret one year I spent jumping and it helped me to become independent, gave me more self confidence about myself due to the nature of the job because many times it was... you were in potentially dangerous, you know, with situations. I, personally myself, I couldn't make

a career out of smokejumping. I'm my own person. I'm very independent. I started my own business. At this point in time, I couldn't work for anybody else, even to go back to jumping. But, like I said, my philosophy, each to his own, you know, I'm not going to knock it.

DH Do you feel that smokejumpers... or did you ever see a smokejumper that you thought was kind of superstitious? Carried a good luck piece for example.

FR I can't recollect... there was a probably few guys or so that used to wear a little rabbits foot or what around their neck... I think one guy, I can't remember his name. But as far as being superstitious or rubbing a pet rock before they jumped out the door, what... no, I can't... I couldn't recollect anything like that, no.

DH Now, during the fire season, were you on call 24 hours a day?

FR When I jumped we were on call, yeah, basically 24 hours a day. '67 was our worst year. I started jumping in Silver City, New Mexico. They shipped us down the beginning of May. I worked then... after the New Mexico season was over, we came up to Missoula and I probably jumped until the end of September or first part of October and during that period of May, June, July, August, September, span of 4 1/2 [or] 5 months, I got, if I remember, about 2 or 3 days off. I lived in Missoula then, and I remember on 3 or 4 occasions we would get a call at 3... 4 o'clock in the morning to come on out to the base. That was basically, I would say, on call about 24 hours a day and we had to go to the base... naturally at that time, the crew I jumped with had a... kind of an infamous reputation. We played hard but we also worked hard. I remember on many an occasions, some of the guys used to come out to the base at 5 [or] 6 in the morning, be on the fire suited up within the hour... 2 hours later, [they] still hadn't even sobered up yet from the night before.

DH If you got a call, how long would it take from the moment you put the phone down until you're in the air?

FR You mean when I got a call at my house here in Missoula?

DH Yeah, uh huh.

FR I didn't have that many of them. Usually, when I got a fire call I was on duty at the base, OK. I would say... there were maybe 5... in the years I was jumping out of Missoula probably 5 or 6 different occasions. As soon as I would get the call I'd be in the car, out to the base, it'd take say, what... 20... 25 minutes to drive out there from my home. As soon as we'd get out to the base, it depended what order we were on the list. Sometimes they would call you out... like they only had about 20 guys left on the base... sometimes I'd be out right away in the airplane. So, as soon as I got out to the base, there were

sometimes I'd suit right up. I was on that plane in about 15 minutes. Sometimes... other times I'd have to wait probably an hour or what... You know, it was just that they were having lightning activity in Idaho, certain area of Montana and they'd just have us standby and wait for a call.

DH Did you ever suit up and be out in a plane, only to return because it was too rough to jump?

FR Yeah. Probably the one I remember most vividly was in '66. There was 16 of us in a DC-3. We were headed down to, I think in the Moose Creek area, down the Selway Bitterroot Wilderness Area, Idaho. We were about between... we were in the air between Hamilton and Darby, Montana and we were right in the edge of the thunderstorm. It got so rough, I frankly thought the wings were going to come off. It was pilot judgement. He turned right around... I mean it was really rough air. He turned right around and aborted the jump and landed in Missoula. That was probably the roughest air I've ever been in.

DH Is it usually the pilots decision to turn around and come back?

FR Ah, I would say in this case, what I just mentioned previously, we hadn't even got to the fire. I would say we were only... maybe not even about a third of the way there. It was basically flying conditions. I think that was a pilot decision. Once we're over the fire or near it, it's up to the spotter whether to abort the jump or not, not the pilot. And that can be due... it's usually due to the winds too strong or whatever which would make the jump too dangerous. I've been in probably 6 or 7 of these situations where we did return to Missoula and didn't jump the fire because the winds were too erratic... just too fast to jump in. Ah, by that I mean, if you went out the door and you had a good wind... sometimes 20 [or] 30 mile an hour, it wouldn't even matter if you faced into the wind, you'd just scream into the ground. You'd hit hard and your chance of injuries would be far greater and no fire is worth a personal injury to anybody. I do recollect one fire in '67, we flew out of Missoula up to, ah, near Thompson Falls... 16 of us. We put 4 guys out the door in 2 man sticks. That is... a stick is 2 men jumped at one time, OK. The fourth man went out... the winds picked up on the second stick, when the third and the fourth man jumped and I think they were about 20 [or] 25 mile an hour. Jump spot was pretty open. It was on a steep hillside but not that much timber. But, they all faced into the wind and they were just screaming in. The guy busted his... if I remember, his thigh bone pretty bad. We called the jump off. There was a helicopter in the area. They choppered him out to the hospital and we returned to Missoula. We didn't jump that... drop that fire.

DH Why do you try and avoid, facing into the wind?

FR Pardon?

DH Why do you try to avoid facing into the wind in a situation like that?

FR No... no, you always face into the wind. You don't run with the wind. If you run with the wind, I mean, you can run with the wind when you're higher up to hit your jump spot, but when you get down near the jump spot, always face into the wind. If there is a wind blowing, it will slow you down. If you run with the wind, it's the way... I wasn't a rigger, I don't understand the mechanics of parachutes, but running with the wind, you're going to go faster. You get more forward speed, OK.

DH You were a jumper and yet you didn't rig chutes?

FR When I jumped, I'd say probably... the option was open if we wanted to become a rigger. Anybody could become a rigger, which I think the training period was 4 to 6 weeks, whatever, and you had to pass a FAA or federal exam. No, when I jumped, probably 70% of the guys were not riggers.

DH Do you feel that there is some kind of advantage to being a rigger... a jumper being a rigger?

FR Well, there's an advantage... as far as jumping goes... no. I didn't want to become a rigger because I didn't want to rig chutes in loft all day. It was too tedious for me. That's basically what the rigger did was mainly eight pack cargo chutes, pack the main chutes we jumped with, or many cases repair them... the holes in them or whatever. When we landed in the timber, you'd rip a lot of slots or, you know, the canopies out of the chutes, tears in them. That's basically... they learn how to sew and how to pack chutes. I just... that just wasn't my cup of tea.

DH Tree landings pretty common?

FR I would say so. When I jumped, ah, we naturally tried to avoid... the spotter would always try to put us in a clear spot, but I did make some fire jumps where there was no clear openings for at least a mile or two around and they just had to drop us in the timber. But, due to the nature of the training and the equipment and the jump suits we use, ah, tree landings are... I would say a lot of cases, easier than landing on the ground although you have to be careful of. I've seen some tree landings where the guys will hit the tree, get spun upside down or if they don't hit the tree right... if you know you're going to land in the trees, try to land in good where you can get that chute right over the tree and you'll hang up good. I've seen some where guys will try to miss the trees, but they haven't got enough room to play with... maybe a couple of hundred of feet from the ground and they'll catch the edge of the tree and their chute... maybe 1 or 2 lines will hang up momentarily. The chute will collapse and they're still not hung in the tree and I've seen a couple of them, freefall right down to the ground... another 30 or 40 feet.

DH How do you get your chute out of a tree after you're hung up?

FR Have to climb up and get it out, usually. It all depends how high up it is. I never had a... I think there's probably only 2 occasions I can remember that I was hung up high enough to climb up to get my parachute out. That can be an arduous task because if you're really hung up in a high tree, you have to have somebody on the ground to give you a hand at pulling the let down rope which is tied into the harness and you have to go out and cut it out. It took probably 2 or 3 hours. You have to cut all the limbs out and all the shroud lines over the tree. But, in some cases, if I did hang up in a tree, a small one... maybe I was only 10...15 feet off the ground and the tree was small, 4 or 5... 6 inches in diameter, you just cut the tree down. Just cut her down and take your chute off. That was the easiest way, not unless you were hung high up in a big tree.

DH If you're hung up high in a tree, how do you get down to the ground?

FR Well, we had a let down rope. Basically, what you do is, ah, we had a let down rope... out of Missoula, it was 100 feet long. We carried it in our leg... right hand leg pocket and you would, ah... we had some D-rings on our harness. You would slot it through the D-rings, if I remember, 2 times and then tie into your harness. You could do either 2 letdowns... you could make a harness let down or a capewell let down. Capewells are the metal slots or hinges which your parachute fits into, OK. I usually made capewell let downs. Harness let downs you had to unbuckle your complete harness but I liked the capewell let downs. It was a little easier... tied into the risers of the parachute with your let down, popped the capewells... opened them up and then let yourself down similar to like a mountain climber. You'd hold the rope in your left hand like a brake and you'd guide it with your right hand. You'd just sort of rappel right out of the tree.

DH Is 100 foot of rope enough rope?

FR Jumping here in Missoula, yeah. Ah, the jumpers in Winthrop, Washington, and I think in Redmond when I was jumping, ah, there were stories that they used 150... 200 feet. I heard one story... guy jumped a fire on the Olympic Peninsula... the Olympic National Park over in Washington... western Washington... where he hung up 170... 180 feet and he barely... I think he only had 150 feet. He was still about 20 or 30 feet off the ground. He had everybody come up and toss him another rope, tie it to that and come down. But, a 100 feet was ample for the Missoula jumpers in Region One, yes. I've never had a case, personally happen to myself where I haven't had enough rope to get down on.

DH What's the first thing you do after you get down on the ground?

FR First thing, what I do when I get down on the ground is get out of my gear. Leave the chute there. We always got, ah... rolled parachutes up or whatever, after the fire was out or contained or controlled. The first thing that we do is get the cargo. Get the Pulaskis or the hand tools and go check the fire out... dig a fire line around it. More or less, the first thing you do when you get out is get right on the fire. That's what I did.

DH Did you ever have to make any long pack outs?

FR Oh, probably the longest pack out I had was in the Bob Marshall Wilderness area and, ah, it was, if I remember right, in September. We were supposed to get a helicopter ride out, but they had inclement weather. It got real foggy, low ceiling and they couldn't bring any choppers in for us. We had to pack the gear out to a trail. I think it was about 4 or 5 miles. We left the gear on the trail... flagged it well for the packer to come in and get it later on and then we had to walk out about 30 [or] 35 mile walkout. That's about the longest one I had.

DH How do you feel about using helicopters to fight fires? Is it a good tool?

FR I think it's a good tool. I think any... any tool the government has to reduce the spread of forest fire... sure, I have no... there is no negative reaction on my part against helicopters fighting fire, no.

DH Did you jump out of helicopters?

FR Never jumped out of helicopters, no.

DH Is that becoming more and more common?

FR I do not know. I hear that in Washington... I live in Seattle now... that the Forest Service did have a program, I don't know if they're still continuing it, where they would rappel out of helicopters. The helicopter would hover 100...150 feet above a spot and they'd rappel out of the helicopter but not jump out of it. I don't think... I don't know now if they are being used to jump out of or not. I don't think so... certainly not in Region 1.

DH Did you feel that when you returned from the war, pilots that were flying at that time, who had flown in the war, did you feel they took a few more chances and were a little more risky with the things they were flying than...?

FR Well, a good example of that, basically when I came back, a lot of the pilots that flew the fixed wing aircraft, to my knowledge, a lot of them were, lets say, Korean or WW II vets... real old timers flying DC-3's or Twin Otters. I can't recollect any of them being pilots who had flown at Vietnam. Now, helicopter pilots, that was a different story. A lot of the

chopper jockeys were ex-servicemen or ex-chopper pilots out of the Vietnam War, OK. I think a lot of them, they're basically young, mid [to] late 20's, whatever. I felt a lot of them... well, they were fairly safe, but maybe did take a little more risk than if they was and older guy flying the machine. Now, one case and point I want to point out a prime example of this is what happened to me in 1967 out of Silver City, New Mexico. We got a fire call one day, I think it was the end of May... beginning of June... me and a jumper named Art Cranmer [Arthur H.], and we jumped a 2 man fire over on Springer Mountain on the Gila National Forest. Springer Mountain was about, if I remember right, 8000 [to] 8500 feet elevation. We jumped it about 11:00 [or] 11:30 in the morning if I remember right and it was pretty hot at that time... probably 85... pushing 90 degrees plus the high altitude. In other words, the higher you get the thinner the air is. So, anyway, we jumped on the fire, got the fire out. Next day we cleared a chopper spot. Had a chopper come pick us up and they sent in a Bell helicopter to get us. He picked us up about 1 [or] 2 in the afternoon and it was hot that day, about 95 degrees and clear. The chopper pilot come in, young guy. I found out later he was a Vietnam jockey, too, OK. But, this is prior to going in the service... anyway, he loaded us up with the gear. We had a chainsaw. It had rained a little that night. We had had thunderstorms, so, our parachutes were wet. Art Cranmer weighed probably... he weighed about 200 [or] 210 pounds... a big guy. I told the pilot, I said... he only had to carry us out about 10 [to] 15 miles away, I said, "You better make 2 trips," because I weighed at that time about 185... Art Cranmer, 2... 210, the chainsaw, the chutes, all our gear, the parachutes were a little wet... I figured it was too heavy for the density of the altitude for that chopper and I told the pilot this. He said, "No sweat." "Hop in," he said, I'm only making 1 trip. "You want to walk?" All right, so we got in the chopper and he really revved her up. He got the RPM's going and shot up. There were 2 big ponderosa pine a little down the slope from us... he shot up over them. I remember clearing that. We were off the deck maybe about 100 [or] 150 feet. The next thing I knew, it was like being in a elevator. He just said, "We're going in." And, he didn't have enough altitude to do an auto rotation or anything, but he managed to flare a little where the tail hit first. We hit in a steep clear section. The tail hit first... disintegrated. Then we kind of slammed forward... rotor blades are still turning and went to flip over head first, ah, that time the bubble... the complete bubble shattered. There was no bubble left. Rotor blades kicked us back. I think we bounced and spun down that mountain side probably for about a couple 100 yards and finally came to stop in front of a... oh, a little grove of big trees there. Luckily nobody was hurt. I was amazed, nobody was hurt. Undid the seatbelts quick and just ran out the front of that son of a bitch. And that was it... it was just totaled. It was completely totaled. Why nobody got killed... that was the worst probably experience I had, you know, in choppers.

DH How did you feel after you realized you were going down?

FR You didn't have time to react. You didn't have time to react. It just happened [snapped his fingers], that quick. You didn't have time to be scared or nothing. All we did, we got out, Art had a couple beers... popped a can of beer. Had a beer. Talked to the pilot... I mean there was no animosity, you know, because he did the best he could do to control the crash. Ah, I had a beer and the pilot said, "Well, that's number 7." I guess he had been shot down 5 or 6 times in Nam, too. He'd been all through it. So, we got on the radio. We told them what happened and they flew in another chopper for us about an hour and a half later and flew us out. Went right on back to jumping again, sure.

[END OF SIDE A]

[BEGIN SIDE B]

DH How did you feel about having to do project work?

FR Project work, I don't know how the opinion is now with the jumpers, but in my era, everybody disdained project work. Nobody liked it. Jumpers were there... our concept was when I jumped, we only wanted to jump the aggressive fires. As soon as a fire was contained or brought under control... let the ground pounders come in and mop it up. Jumpers did not like project work. We did not like mopping up fires... we just liked knocking them down and getting on the next fire.

DH Was there any particular type of project work that you really disliked?

FR Just about all types of project work because... the main reason, I guess, why jumpers didn't like project work, they could truck us out to like to Thompson Falls... 50 [or] 100 miles away and we could possibly miss fire jumps. We were away from the base, you know, we felt lost. You know, the base was our home. That was... I would say a I disliked all types of project work because I didn't like the chance of getting aced over or jumped over by guys at the base even though we had a jump list where when you jumped, you went to the bottom of the list and usually the guys who were near the bottom of the list they'd send off on project work. Then if you got, you know, there was other people jumped, your name came up the list, they would bring you back into town. Sometimes they didn't even do that. You got jumped over... hell, I've been jumped over probably, you know, on 1... 2... 3 different occasions, I remember.

DH How many times do they go through the list in a year?

FR In a year?

DH Yeah.

FR It all depends on how many fires there are. When I started in '65, there were 185 jumpers and I think each jumper averaged

only 2 fire jumps. I, myself, only had 2 fire jumps, so, the list only rotated twice. In '67, I think I got in the high 20's... 27... 28 fire jumps. The list rotated quite frequently. Many times... fact is, in 1967, I'd get back to the base, there was never at any given time a full compliment of jumpers. You'd get in the base, there'd be maybe 10 jumpers there, or 15, or 20, or 30 jumpers maybe at the most sometimes. You'd be in the base maybe half a day or day or a couple of days and you'd be out on the fire right away.

DH The guys who were at other bases, do you think they got more jumps in a season because their bases were smaller?

FR Oh, definitely. Why, the best... probably where I picked a lot of jumps was when I was on in Silver City, New Mexico. I think I got 15 or 16 jumps, if I remember, that season because we only had a crew down there, I think it was 16 or 18 guys counting the overhead... sure you get more jumps. Missoula, we had 185 and it would take quite a while. You had to have some real lightning activity to get that whole roster jumped through.

DH Why were there so many more jumpers here in Missoula than elsewhere?

FR Well, this is the... Missoula's the headquarters... is the main smokejumper base here and it was the headquarters for Region One. That's the way the Forest Service is set up, I guess.

DH Did you ever get to sit down with the guys from the other base and shoot the breeze while you were stationed at another base?

FR Oh, yeah. When I jumped with the BLM, we were stationed at LaGrande, ah, they were from a different region, sure, yeah. Basically, jumpers are jumpers... all the same personnel. Where it differs is the base policy... how the overhead run it or how it's run. Some bases I felt were more strac or more stricter in their standards in readiness, ah, than other bases... or more petty bullshit to put up with than other bases.

DH Were there points of pride between guys from different bases?

FR Oh, definitely. Each base was better than the other. I mean, the Missoula jumpers when I jumped in Missoula, we were supposedly better than McCall jumpers or the Winthrop jumpers or the BLM jumpers or whatever. Naturally, when I jumped my last season up on the BLM, [chuckle], there was a lot of rumors about the BLM... we knew it at that time that BLM jumpers were over the hill, lazy, lackadaisical, but when they sent us down to lower 48, you know, we got together amongst ourselves and I do remember this quite clearly. All the fires that the BLM jumpers were on at that time, we were going to show the lower 48 jumpers how we could work so you could call it definitely a source of pride, yes.

DH Do you feel that the smokejumper organization is going to go the way of the dinosaurs?

FR I hope not. Personally I don't think so. As long as you have roadless areas within the National Forest system... wilderness areas, ah, you're always going to need smokejumpers. There's a lot of areas you can't put helicopters or helitack crews into. And, it depends on the policy of the Forest Service. Within the last 10 years or so, I hear that the policy is in some areas... of wilderness areas, on the high alpine areas of National Parks, they let the fires run wild to, ah, burn the slash or the accumulation of heavy slash on the ground. But, I think there will always be a need for smokejumpers in inaccessible areas, yeah. Also, by the fact too that they're highly trained. They're like the Marine Corp of the Department of Agriculture or the U.S. Forest Service.

DH You think that they'll atrophy down to one base? Will there be a couple of bases here and there. Will it stay the same as it is?

FR I think it will probably, again that's up to government policy... I think it will probably stay the same. Missoula will be here. Whether it gets down in size, gets under a hundred people... 50... 60 people, that remains to be seen. You know, the coming years, BLM, the Alaska jumpers will be there because Alaska's primarily roadless. They'll always need the jumpers up there. I think the BLM could possibly increase in size up in Alaska. Other small bases like Winthrop, Washington, which I think now is only 20... 30 people, whether that will continue or not, I don't know. Probably some of these smaller bases could go, like... since I stopped jumping, they used to have a small base at Cave Junction... over at Cave Junction, Oregon, that's closed now. LaGrande, Oregon, closed now. Ah, the smokejumpers won't go the way of the way of the dinosaur but they might consolidate and possibly have less bases, true.

DH When you had free time during the fire season, what would you do?

FR Usually when I had free time, if I wasn't on project work, which I abhorred or... we were usually out at the base, ah, mowing the lawns, busy work, loading retardants, ah, sweeping the apron... just so called busy work... picking up cigarette butts, [chuckle], making firepacks up, things like that. But, when you had a crew of 185 guys, it's kind of tough to keep them busy when you have all the firepacks ready and, you know, it's just basically busy work. Nobody liked that kind of work at all.

DH What about after all this is done. You're done, like say, 5 o'clock at night, and you want to go out and raise some hell, was that pretty common?

FR Oh, definitely. My years we... I told you our crew was infamous. We raised a lot of hell. In '65 we only had 2 fires

so we definitely kept the bars in business here in Missoula. But, during the busy years like 1967, you didn't have much time because you needed your rest. You'd get in off a fire, you might go down have a few beers and go to sleep because probably the next day or so, you'd be out on a fire, but on a slack fire season, the era I jumped in, ah, a lot of the guys partied quite hard. We played hard and we worked hard.

DH Do you feel that there was a higher rate than normal of alcoholism among smokejumpers because of this attitude... work hard, play hard?

FR In the crew I trained with, ah, I don't know of any... statistically speaking, alcoholism... I can't say a high rate at all. I don't think I know of anybody who is a real hard core alcoholic. I used to drink quite a bit when I went to college, I mean, it's quite normal and when I jumped, like everybody else did, but now I'm a businessman I rarely touch a beer... rarely have a drop.

DH What would you do after the fire seasons over? Were you a student all those years you jumped?

FR Primarily I was a student. After the fire season was over, sometimes I'd go back to school. I didn't go to school full time, ah, in other words I could go 1 or 2 quarters, stay out a quarter or... probably go down to California. I went down to California on some of the fire crews down there and worked brush fires up until November... December... until the California fire season was over. Then went back to school in January through the end of May.

DH What about other jumpers, were they mostly students going back to school?

FR When I jumped, a lot of them would go back to school, a lot of them would bum around, collect unemployment or go down to California, whatever, logging... primarily that was it.

DH How do you look back at your experiences as a smokejumper? Was it a favorable one?

FR Very favorable. There was a lot of good times. There was a lot of comradery, I felt. It was a neat organization. Like I said before, it taught me a lot of self confidence. I worked hard. I always had pride in my work with them. Very favorable, ah, very favorable experience.

DH Well, I think I've exhausted my list of questions, is there anything that you want to add that I've missed or that you want to say?

FR Basically Dan, I think you've pretty well covered it. That's, ah... you know, I hope there's always a smokejumper organization around [chuckle], but, ah, I would like to say, ah,

the organization as I was in it and as it is now... like all government organizations, be it civilian or military, probably the only negative aspect I have to say about the jumper organization, but I can't pinpoint them, I mean, you could say it about any government organization, it's too bureaucratic... too much politics on the job. And, ah, I think if the government was in business like I am now... if you have to run it on your own and not rely of tax money to support it, you've got to run a viable operation. In other words, not losing money so to speak. I think it could have been run in a more efficient manner... less bureaucratic manner and less politics. That's probably the only negative aspect I would say about the jumper organization.

DH Well, if that's everything you have to say, I would like to say, thanks for the interview.

FR Sure Dan... good enough.

[END OF INTERVIEW]