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Oral History Number: 133-093

Interviewee: Hal Samsel

Interviewer: Dan Hall

Date of Interview: June 21, 1984

Project: Smokejumpers 1984 Reunion Oral History Project

Dan Hall: —Polson, Montana June 21, 1984. I'd like to start the interview by asking how you got started with smokejumping?

Hal Samsel: Well, I was raised at Seeley Lake and my dad was a ranger up there in '39, '40, and along in there when they first started training the jumpers and that's how I got interested in it. And then I was always out around a District, we always lived at a ranger station and then I started working as soon as I was old enough. Worked on the Plains District and I had buddies that had worked with me and stuff and had already started jumping. And then we used to hike into fires and there'd be jumpers jumped on them, and, you know, it was something I wanted to do.

DH: Where did you do your training at?

HS: Nine Mile. The Missoula base, but Nine Mile Training Camp.

DH: What were the training facilities like?

HS: Well, they was a crude version of what they got now, pretty much. They had shock towers instead of the kind of tower where you'd jump out and slide down the cable. You just jumped out and fell straight down and hit the end of the rope, you know. And it was for exiting—exit training—and then to get you used to the opening shock of the parachute. And then they didn't have some of the sophisticated landing trainers, you know, they didn't have the Canadian Swinger, them big landing trainers that pull them up and let them slide down. We used to swing off a rope and turn loose and roll, things like that. But it was basically the same program, same kind of a training program, it's just a little cruder equipment.

DH: What about your living facilities?

HS: We just had...we had the old...It had been an old CCC camp, you know, Nine Mile Station, had been an old CCC camp and we had three barracks and they were just regular old CCC barracks, just like the old Army-style barracks, you know, just big wide, open rooms and then instead of...Then the head, you know, the latrines and stuff was a separate building with showers and stuff like that. And the mess hall was another separate building, it was just a regular old, you know, CCC camp with all the things. But instead of one great big building like they got now with separate rooms and stuff, it was a...just old open bunk houses and barracks type thing.

DH: How did your family react when you told them you were gonna be a smokejumper?

HS: Oh, they'd known it for a long time. My dad was a ranger and, you know, I'd been...that's what I was gonna do as soon as I got old enough and got enough experience, and so, it didn't really surprise them any.

DH: Did your mom take any reaction on that?

HS: No. She never said nothing that I can remember. It didn't really worry her or anything. She'd been around it, you know, since it started, knew pretty much what the program was like.

DH: What was the training like?

HS: Just about like it is now. There was a lot of running and a lot of stuff like that, you know. And all your units and a lot of cold lining, you know, fire training—digging and stuff. And, of course, we didn't have chainsaws then, you know, that was before chainsaws or anything, so you did a lot of crosscut saw work and axe work—stuff like that.

DH: How much training had you had before you finally made your first jump?

HS: Weeks?

DH: Yeah.

HS: I don't know. It was basically the same as it is now. I think we trained for, I think our whole training period was a month, or something. I think we trained for 2 weeks or 2 and a half weeks before we started jumping, before we made the first one.

DH: So how many training jumps did you make then, before you made your first fire jump?

HS: Seven, I think. I'm pretty sure it was seven.

DH: Was that a pretty standard number?

HS: I think that's still about what they give them, yeah.

DH: Do you remember your first fire jump?

HS: Yeah.

DH: Do you know where it was at?

HS: Yeah, it was in Yellowstone Park. We'd jumped in there...Me and another kid jumped in

there the day before the Mann Gulch Fire. We flew all the way down there in the Ford and it took us about 5 or 6 hours to get there, it seemed like. And then we jumped it and there was supposed to have been four two-manners and we jumped on the third one, and they never could find the other one, and so they...and they...No, I think they only found two of them. Yeah, because they left two guys at West Yellowstone. We landed there and picked up a Park Ranger who was gonna show us where the fires were. And we flew out there and they dropped the first fire and then they dropped me and this other guy, Short Hall his name was, and they dropped us on the second fire, and then they couldn't find the third one, so they had two guys left in the plane and they went back to West Yellowstone, picked up the other two and all four of them and the spotter jumped into Mann Gulch the next morning and got gobbled up.

DH: Were you still in Yellowstone when the Mann Gulch went up?

HS: Yeah, we was still on our fire. We didn't know about it until we got off the fire. We got off the fire about the day after the Mann Gulch Fire.

DH: How did you feel about that?

HS: It was kind of spooky because about half of the guys—me and the kid that was with me had been on project down on Sullivan Lake, Washington, all spring. And there was about four or five of the guys that got burned up that had been on project down there with us, you know, and it was like about...there was only about eight of us down there, you know. And when we got back, we, you know, when...come out...we come out at Livingston and seen...heard these guys talking at the counter, you know, about parachutes burning up in trees and everything, you know, and we got to wondering what the hell was going on, you know. So we got...seen a newspaper and then it told about it, you know. And I think they even had some of the names, but they hadn't identified everybody yet, you know, so it was pretty spooky. Even when we got back to Missoula. Well, you'd walk around there, every time you seen someone that was a buddy of yours, you know, well, it was a big relief that he wasn't one of them that got burned up. Because they didn't release a bunch of the names, you know, until the parents had been notified. So, it was like, even us, after we got back, it was 2 or 3 days before we knew, you know, who'd been in it and who hadn't.

DH: Did you ever think about the Mann Gulch Fire when you were fighting other fires?

HS: Yeah. [laughs] I always did, especially if they was the same kind of fires. Because the Mann Gulch Fire was in the...It was mostly just open, dry grass, you know. And I never had worried about that kind of fire before, you know. It always seemed to me that a grass fire was nothing, you know, you could run right through it if you had to. You know, just run right back into the burning, and you'd be all right. And it just, you know, it really was an eye opener to find out that, you know, 12 guys could get burned up on a fire that you know, you'd think, you know, that you'd never worried about that type of fire. From then on, whenever I was on any—like the Salmon River or that kind of country that's the same kind of steep country covered with

grass, well, needless to say, I was thinking about it and I always had my eyes open and had rockslides picked out and everything else [laughs] to head for.

DH: Why would you pick out rockslides?

HS: Well, just a, you know, safe place to get into. You know, the fire couldn't get you.

DH: Did you ever get hurt jumping?

HS: Not really. Not what you'd call...I sprained an ankle one time and was laid up for about a week hobbling around with that thing. You know, sitting around with it and hobbling around for another 2, 3.

DH: How'd that happen?

HS: It was in the winter and we was making train...not training jumps, but test jumps and it was all snow, you know. And it was kind of a grey-white day and we had a...They had a big orange spot laid out. I think it was a forward speed test and we was supposed to see how far we could go, you know. We was supposed to just jump out and head towards that spot and get as far as we could, you know. And I overshot...I run clear over the top of it. And as long as I was watching that spot, I could see, you know, how high I was off the ground—how I was doing. As soon as I overshot the spot, well you was supposed to keep right on going, see, and see how far you could go. Everything was just white, you know, all at once. Didn't have any depth perception or nothing. And so I burrowed in. You know, I wasn't ready to hit, you know, I didn't...you know, I was trying to look you know, find something in the snow to figure out where I was, you know, and I run into the ground before I was ready [laughs] and twisted my ankle.

DH: Did you do a lot of jumping in the winter?

HS: We used to do quite a bit, yeah. Mostly test jumps like that and stuff. And then in the last, oh, you know, probably 10 to 15 years, we started making monthly refresher jumps, you know. For years they'd cut you off as soon as summer was over, and you didn't jump until spring. But oh, along in the middle '50s or so, they started letting us, you know, keep refresh year-round, mainly because we might have to jump rescues or stuff like that in the winter. We was supposed to be current all the time, so—

DH: Is it any more difficult to jump in the winter?

HS: No. Except that, you know, just like everything else is in the winter, you have to stuff a bunch of cloths under your jumpsuit to keep from freezing and try to put a stocking hat under your helmet and that kind of stuff.

DH: What kind of project work did you work on?

HS: Oh mostly it was trail maintenance, and telephone line maintenance, and brush piling, and stuff like that.

DH: How did you feel about having to do it?

HS: I liked it. We used to really, you know, it was...It beat hell out of hanging around that base all summer and, you know, unless there was a big fire bust going. If we heard they was all jumping fires, then we was all antsy and wanted to get back, you know, and get on the jump list. But a lot of, usually the first part of the summer there wasn't much going on and if you was around that base, you know, with 100 guys, well you was digging dandelions and, you know, hunkering around there with all the Regional Office personnel and everybody else watching you. You know, it was pretty hard to keep that many guys doing something productive. And when you got out on the districts, you was working in the woods and, you know, a lot of them was real good projects, you know. Sometimes we'd camp on the trail, you know, just had our regular camp and we'd work trail for 4 or 5 miles and then the packer'd come up and move the camp ahead, you know. Maybe move it on up the trail 10 miles and then you'd work trail on up to it and then work, you know, out of there. And so, you was in the woods all summer, keeping in shape. You know, you didn't have to go around doing calisthenics and running up and down the black top trying to stay in shape and trying to look like you was doing something. You was out there, you know, actually doing the kind of work you was supposed to do.

DH: Did any of the other guys complain about project work?

HS: Oh, not really—that I can remember. I mean, guys complain, you know, no matter what you're doing. There's always guys that complain or, you know, maybe they don't like the guys they're working with or something, you know. But, you know, no more than they'd complain no matter where you work. Another good thing about projects was that they got you in contact with the forest people, you know. I mean, you got so you knew who the ranger was, who the...everybody on that district was. And in them days, most of the jumpers was, you know, they were pretty hard workers and when they got on a project, you know, they was, you know, pretty conscientious about trying to do a good job. So you got a lot of good feeling with the district people, you know. And whenever you'd jumped on that area and came out, you know, well they treated you like you was one of their own little boys, you know, and stuff. It was pretty good. You know, you got to know the country, you know, you got...They used to send us all over, from—I've worked project in Washington, Idaho, you know, all over. And so you got to see a lot of the country that you was gonna be working in.

DH: Did you ever have any project work that you didn't like?

HS: Oh, I suppose. You know, I mean there's always times that you get bored with things, you know. But I never really had any that, you know, that I really just disliked real bad. Unless it was like just little, you know, we'd...you'd use to get little details just out of the base where they'd

send you someplace for the day or something, and some of them things was kind of crappy, you know. Once and awhile, you know, send you down to the shops and have you clean out the grease pits or, you know, stuff like that.

DH: Do you remember the largest fire you ever jumped?

HS: Mm, I have to think on which one that'd be. I'm not really sure what the largest one I ever jumped was. I jumped...I jumped a couple where we had two or three Doug loads out of Missoula and a Doug load out of McCall.

DH: What's a "Doug load?"

HS: A C-47, DC-3. And, you know, down in the Salmon area. Probably the biggest one I ever jumped was we jumped one out of Boise one time—four of us. [laughs] They dropped—took four of us out in a Twin Beech and dropped us and when we jumped, you could look...you could look down and see it. It was in about 100-foot high spruce trees and it was just crowning, you know, all the way around. It was spreading every direction at once, you know. It just going out, and Jesus, [laughs] we knew there wasn't any use jumping, but you couldn't tell the spotter, you know, so they dumped us out. And we just kind of spent most of the first night just trying to keep from getting gobbled up and try to keep our gear from getting burned, you know. We jumped in a kind of a little clearing and piled our gear in the middle of the clearing so it wouldn't get burnt and just kind of stayed away from it until morning. Along towards morning it calmed down a little and so we started hacking away at it. And then...by that time, you know, when you'd get up on a little rise or anything and you could see, you could see that thing, you know, it looked like it was 2 miles already across it, you know. And about daylight, well, here come a dozer and about 50 ground pounders, you know, and all following this bulldozer, you know. And they come clunking in there and they told us they was gonna release us, so we got a big grin on our face and run—started gathering up our gear. And then they hauled us out to the fire camp, it was at a ranger station down there. And then they...when they got us there...By that time, they dropped two more, I think, Twin Beech loads of jumpers. There was about...I guess one more, there was eight of us—they had eight jumpers, you know. They just kind of dribbled four more guys out as a token, you know. I think they did that later on that night or something, because by the next...by the day we was supposed to be released, anyway, there was eight of us and went down there. And then they decided that they was gonna keep us for another day. And they kept deciding that for about 10 days—we stayed on that thing. By the time we got off of it, there was like 12 bulldozers and, you know, there was just a great big camp and they'd haul everybody back and forth in school buses every day. And there was like a couple thousand men on it, and, you know.

DH: Did you ever see anybody get hurt fighting a fire?

HS: Oh yeah. Yeah, I've seen a lot of guys get hurt fighting fires.

DH: Is there any one common mistake that seems to be made pretty often?

HS: Oh, no. I don't think so. It's just that it's pretty hard not to get hurt fighting fire, you know. Because you got all kinds of chances of getting burned or getting, you know, burning limbs dropping on you, or rocks rolling down and hitting you. Plus, you got people using chainsaws and the fire roaring; you know, you got all kinds of noise; you can't hear nothing about half the time. You know, guys could be screaming, "Look out" and, you know, you can't hear nothing, all you can hear is the equipment and the damn fire. And it's just a, you know, it's just...if you want to find a place to get hurt, a fire is a good place. There's just all kinds of things sitting around trying to get you. And then, usually you're on a steep hillside, you know, and guys are...stuff happens and guys start trying to run to get out of the way of something, you know, or something, and they'd trip and fall and roll. Or somebody drops a tree on somebody or something burns off, you know. Like a lot of times, you know, when you're working around the edge, there's always trees burning off and falling out across the line, you know, and if a guy's got his head down digging line and somebody isn't watching, well, I've seen several guys get hit with trees. And then the normal stuff like pulaski cuts and chainsaw cuts and, you know, all that kind of stuff.

DH: It's pretty physically demanding work, then?

HS: Yeah.

DH: Do you think a woman could handle a job like that?

HS: Nope. Definitely not. They can go out there, you know, they can go out there and get in with the crew and get their pulaski and fake it, you know. And there's, you know, I mean, I don't say there's not women that are hard workers or anything, but a woman just ain't built for that kind of work. And the thing I don't like about it is that...I've seen over the years we've washed out all kinds of men, you know, that I know were better physical, you know, a lot better physically than the women that they've got in now. And the only reason them women are in there is to prove their point—just to meet their quota and show that they're not prejudiced. And, in the meantime, by showing they're not prejudiced to women, you know, they've washed out all kinds of good men that's got all kinds of experience and that could outwork two of them women, you know.

DH: Did you ever jump with a woman?

HS: Nope. [laughs] No, I...that's one thing I'm glad of is [that] I got out of there before they started women.

DH: What would you do after you landed? What's the normal sequence of events?

HS: A fire jump?

DH: Yeah.

HS: Well, normally, the first thing you do is just get everybody together and take off for the fire. You know, I mean, normally you don't land, you know, right on the fire unless it just happens to be a little two-manner, that it's open right up next to it, you know. So, the first thing you usually do is get everybody together and if they drop the cargo where you jump, well then you pick up the cargo, you know, pick up your tools and equipment and stuff. And then just head on over to the fire and just lay into the fire. And then after that, you know, of course, then after the fire is out, you go back and gather up your chutes and all that kind of stuff—pack up you're gear, take off out of there.

DH: Did you ever have to make any long packouts?

HS: Yeah. [laughs] Yeah, I've had to make quite a few.

DH: What kind of gear would you be carrying when you'd jump?

HS: That you actually carry right on you?

DH: Yeah.

HS: Well, all you ever carry is just your letdown rope and your streamers and then we use to carry our hard hats with us, you know. And then in the later years they started a...Everybody started carrying these little PG bags, you know, we called them personal gear bags. And so then, of course, then you'd have whatever you wanted in there, you know. You couldn't carry a lot in there, but, you know, usually a change of underwear and some extra socks, you know. Guys would carry anything from just the basics to some guys would have collapsible fishing poles, six-pack of beer, and camera, and transistor radios, [laughs] have so much junk they could hardly get out the door, you know.

DH: What kind of equipment would be in the cargo load?

HS: Oh, then your cargo is your tools and then your food and sleeping bag and that kind of stuff.

DH: What was the food like?

HS: Well, it varied over the years. It was always some kind of...when I first started, we had...I always say that the best food was when I first started and the longer it went, the worse it got. But when I first started, we had what they called smokejumper rations. And each jumper had a sack—about a 25-pound, like a sugar sack, you know—and it was just full of canned goods, basically. You know, you had bea...pork and beans, and cans of potatoes, and cans of bullied beef, and brown bread, and, you know, just stuff like that. And so...and then you had like a little

boy scout mess kit, see, then you just cooked up whatever you wanted. And they had a lot of good stuff in them; they had these little Hormel ham butts and, you know, things like that that was pretty good.

Then, from that we went to, I think we went to K-rations for awhile, and they was really bad. They was just...they were little individual boxes and each one was supposed to be a meal. You know, each box was supposed to be a meal. And it was all dehydrated stuff, you know, and you just, you know, it was mostly just like old—tasted like dog biscuits, you know, crackers. And you chomp them things and drink a lot of water. And then they had little candy bars and, you know, junk, and they was terrible. You could hardly exist on them things. And then we went to C-rations, and they were quite a bit better. At least they had a few cans of, you know, meat, or beans, or something in there, you know, that you could eat. Then they went to the...what they called the...they was a...Well, they called them a GSA-ration. They was a kind of a copy of the Air Force in-flight rations. And they were all...they were like about half a C-ration. They was just one little box for each meal and they had breakfasts, and dinners, and lunches, you know. And they was pretty good. They wasn't too bad. And then, of course, they started going to the freeze-dried. About the time I quit, they were getting into that. Some of that stuff's all right, but the trouble with any rations is you get the same thing every day. And, you know, you always think it's good about the first two or three fires, and then it starts wearing thin.

DH: How long would it take you to respond to a fire?

HS: Depended on the base you was at and, you know, it would kind of waver, you know. You'd get the guys that were in charge, you know, sometimes they'd really get hot on quick get-a-ways, you know, and then it would start getting laxer, and laxer, and laxer. Maybe 5 or 6 years later, it'd be getting down to where it was taking them 10 to 15 minutes to get away. And then somebody, you know, people would get all excited about it. But, normally, over the years, it would run, say, between 5 and...I'd say it averaged between 5 and 10 minutes.

DH: What were the planes you used, like the first year you jumped?

HS: Fords and Travel Airs, mostly. We had...And then we had the Dougs, you know, the DC-3s. And...but they were kind of, you know, they were kind of a big spooky airplane that they kept down at the airport, and you only used them when you had a, you know, some big crew fires or something like that. But most of...most of the jumping was done out of the Fords and the old Travel Airs.

DH: How many men would be in a plane?

HS: I think a Ford would hold about eight and a Travel Air was...would hold up to four, yeah, I think about four.

DH: All of them jump?

HS: Pardon?

DH: Did they all jump?

HS: On one fire, you mean?

DH: Yeah, was there some that stayed on the plane for spotting or—

HS: Oh, well, you know, it...When I'm telling how many people, I'm talking about just the jumpers, you know. You always got a spotter that stays aboard, you know, above your jumpers, yeah. So, you know, like with a Travel Air, you'd probably have five people in there, you know, four jumpers and a spotter, well six, because you got a driver, too.

DH: How about altitude and air speed of a plane for a jump?

HS: It was always, and I think it still is, 1,200 feet minimum for jumping. And the old Fords, I think top speed on a Ford was—I don't think they could hit 100. You know, I think it was probably 90-some. [laughs] And so...and they cruised about 75, and they'd pulled them babies down to about 55 or 60 when you jumped. The same way with the Travel Air, they were, you know, they might have cruised, you know, 100 and they'd slow them down, you know. If you had a good pilot, they could pull them down, you know, about 50 or so when you jumped.

DH: How long would you be in the air?

HS: From 1,200 feet, you're in the air about a minute, roughly. Depending on, you know, depending on your weight and then when we went to the bigger chutes, you know, you hung up there a little longer and that type of thing.

DH: What do you think about as you're going out the plane?

HS: Oh, usually you're just...I don't know. Usually, I'm...would be concentrating on the spot, you know, and trying to see where I was in relation to the ground, you know, so I'd be oriented when I got out the door...and, you know.

DH: How did you steer yourself to a spot?

HS: Well, you got guidelines. The old chute—the old, original chutes that we had when I started, they just...the guideline was just a kind of a slack line that was hooked right onto the riser link. And you just grabbed it—they were the outside line on the two-front risers, and they just hung a little bit looser than the other ones. And then they started coloring them a different color, like they'd put a green—the guideline would be green, you know, and the rest of them would be white, or, you know, vice versa. If you had a camouflage chute, they'd put white guidelines on it

and you'd use them. And then, as we went along, finally they switched over to toggles, you know, just like the skydivers use on their chutes. You know, they still were guidelines, but instead of being hooked in with the rest of the lines, they came down on your risers and they had little toggles on them to steer with.

DH: You a licensed rigger?

HS: Yeah.

DH: Is there any reason why all the jumpers are riggers?

HS: Pardon?

DH: Is there a reason why jumpers are riggers?

HS: Why the riggers are all jumpers?

DH: Yeah.

HS: Yeah, just...mainly for...well, first of all, you don't have to hire a bunch of extra people, you know, and you've got something for part of your jumpers to do, you know, it's a job for them to be doing when they're not jumping. And then the other thing, it makes a— it's a safety factor. The jumpers themselves trust another jumper more than they would if, you know, you just had a loft full of women that they hired down at the employment agency, or something, you know. You know, because they know that guys is gonna have to jump that, you know, when he jumps, he's gonna have to jump that chute too, you know. So, you know, it's just a better feeling, and, you know, the guy's got more interest in it, you know, they're jumping that stuff and they want it to be good and that type of thing.

DH: What was rigging like?

HS: Well, it was just another job. That's what I did for about...I was a loft foreman for about the last, oh, from '66 until I retired in '80, I ran the parachute loft, yeah.

DH: How did you like it?

HS: Good. You know, if a guy's gotta have a job and he's gotta work 8 hours a day, I'd just as soon be doing that as anything else.

DH: Why'd you quit jumping?

HS: I retired. I got old enough to punch out, so I did. [laughs] And besides, it...the outfit, as far as I was concerned, was starting to go downhill rapidly. It just wasn't the same. It just wasn't the

same feeling or the same nothing as when I started, you know. They were starting to hire women and then get all this, you know, civil rights stuff all involved in it, you know. And they was letting the jumpers and stuff get away with things that, you know, in the old days, before they started really getting on all this stuff. If a guy was screwing up, the boss just called him in and fired him, you know. You know, I mean, you might think it's unfair if you're the guy getting fired, but man you eliminated a lot of dead wood, and freeloaders, and guys that was just kind of embarrassing the outfit, or, you know, causing trouble for everybody else, or you know, I mean, there wasn't any problem. You know, you just got rid of them and...because there was all kinds of other people wanted the job, and you know, you just didn't have to put up with nothing.

And the last...the longer it went...Well, it got so, you know, you just had to accept everything. You know, we used to have all kinds of little, you know, we used to have a lot of regulations that I always thought made the outfit look better, like, sort of dress codes and things. You know, not real dress codes, but, you know, they wouldn't let guys run around, all over the area without shirts and with shorts on and junk all around, up front where the people could see them. And they made everybody have a haircut and a shave and, you know, it...The people that came in contact with the jumpers around the districts and stuff, thought they was a pretty squared away bunch. And the longer it went, it got so anything went, you know. They could wear anything, or do anything, or...and it just, you know...I don't know. By the time I got ready to retire, it just didn't even, you know, it didn't even seem like the jumpers anymore. Just kind of a [laughs] conglomeration of I don't know what, you know.

DH: Was there a lot of guys that washed out in that first year that you went through training?

HS: I just...I wouldn't even guess at the percentage, you know. There was guys washed out, but I don't know how many or what the percentage was.

DH: What about over the years, how many...number of guys that showed up, how many would wash out and not make it?

HS: God! I used to know...I was the parachute training officer for awhile and I used to know, you know, what the average percentage was, but it was like, you know, 10 percent. Like, if we wanted...if we was gonna try to keep 20 guys, say, well we'd probable hire 25 or 26, figuring that you was gonna have to wash out that many.

DH: Why'd they wash out?

HS: Well, just, you know, couldn't cut the physical stuff or, you know, all kinds of reasons, you know. Some of them, most of them, I'd say the biggest percentage just couldn't make the physical requirements. You know, they just couldn't hack her. And in the last few years they've got so they'd give them a test, you know, a physical test the day they showed up, because we used to drag them clear through training, you know, and keep...try to give them a chance to

catch up. Well, by the time training was over, if they did make it, most of them had just barely qualified, you know. And so we finally decided after years of that kind of stuff that the best thing to do was to tell them that they had to meet a minimum physical test the day they showed up. And if they didn't, that was it, they was going home. And in that way, they got in shape before they got there. And they knew what they had to do: they knew how many push-ups they had to do, and how many pull-ups, and how far they had to run. And so, if they showed up and couldn't do it, well it was their own fault, you know, they knew what they had to do. And so, you know, we saved ourselves a lot of problems that way, you know. Because we used to drag them guys along, some of them would make it a week and you'd wash them out and some of them would make it clear up until the day before their first jump and then you'd wash them out, you know.

DH: Did you ever have some of your buddies try jumping?

HS: You mean guys that weren't jumpers?

DH: Yeah. Ever talk into jumping or—

HS: Talk them into joining the jumpers, or just going out and making a jump—into joining the jumpers. Yeah, I guess so. I talked my one little brother, maybe two of them, into jumping. My one brother, especially, I talked him into jumping. I think the other one just decided he'd try it on his own after there was two of us jumping there for awhile. And...but I never really, you know, I mean, if guys...you used to get these guys, you know, that'd start [unintelligible] at you about what a good deal the jumpers had and everything, and I'd say, "Well, hell. If you think it's so good, why don't you come down and try it?" you know "It's open to everybody. [laughs] If you can qualify."

DH: What would you do during the off season, like during the winter?

HS: Oh, I used to mostly work in the sawmills. I worked in sawmills, and power line construction, and junk like that, you know. The first few years I just did whatever I could, and finally I got to working out at Bonner, out at the sawmill out there, and so they kind of rehired me about every winter, you know, they got so they knew me. And I'd done that for about, oh, quite awhile. And then...I finally...then I got on year around in '57. So then I just worked year around, you know, working the loft in the winter.

DH: During the summer months, were you on call 24 hours a day, 7 days a week?

HS: Well, I guess you could say you was. I mean, you weren't required to be all the time, you know. I mean...but if it was, you know, if it was a hot fire season, once the fire season was on, they used to tell you that, you know, 'okay, you had to stay by your phone,' and that type of thing. And sometimes they'd have you on...like they'd turn you loose, and they'd say, 'okay, you can take the day off, but you got to call back in every 2 hours or every 4 hours, or something

like that and find out if anything is going on," and that kind of stuff.

DH: What would you do with your free time?

HS: Mostly, in the summer I used to come up here. I've had this, you know, I've had this place here—had the old cabin over there since about, I think '59 or something. And so when I had that, I spent most of it up here. If I, you know, if they let me leave, otherwise there wasn't much you could do: hang around the house and mow the lawn and wait to see if you were gonna get called.

DH: Do you think the Depression had any effect on your attitudes towards jumping?

HS: Yeah. The Depression had—on my attitude towards a government job, I guess, because my dad was a ranger and he had a government job. And we lived up at Seeley Lake and all the kids that went to school with me and everything were...was most of them was poorer than church mice, you know. Their old man was trapping or, you know, try to do anything they could, you know, on some kind of government relief or something and just barely making it. And we lived pretty high on the hog, you know, for...compared to the rest of them, you know, I mean, we wasn't...I think the old man used to make 200 bucks a month in them days, but that was 200 bucks that came in every month, and so I was always pretty impressed with a good steady job, like government job, you know, that had a little security attached to it. And so I...Once I started jumping, I tried to work every year as late as I could, you know, take every chance I could and try to work it into a full-time job.

DH: I think I'm gonna stop here and turn the tape over.

[Break in audio]

DH: Were tree landings pretty common?

HS: Yeah. When I first started, they...We used to intentionally land in the trees a lot more than we did later on, just because the chutes weren't, you know, we had the old 28-foot chutes and you came in a lot hotter, so if you were...if there was any good looking reproduction around, well...and if, you know, the altitude was higher, there was much wind, or looked like it was gonna be a tough landing, they'd...A lot of times they'd pick out a patch of trees and drop us in them, rather than, you know, drop you on the ground.

DH: What do you mean by "reproduction?"

HS: Small, you know, like small firs and...Mostly small fir trees and lodge pole and stuff like that, you know. Second growth stuff, you know, it's a...we used to try...The ideal stuff used to be like 35- or 40-foot high and, you know, real thick stuff, you know, "dog hair stuff" we used to call it. And in that way, you didn't...it was close together and so you didn't break out and go through,

you know, your chute would usually catch three or four trees and you'd just kind of land in it and hang there, you know. And then you'd only be, maybe, 6, 8, 10 feet off the ground, you know. So it made pretty good landings and they used to do that a lot. If we had high winds, you know, if you had high winds and it was too high—too much wind to jump on the ground, they'd go pick out a patch of reprod and drop you into it, you know, and just let you fly into it. [laughs] They finally...By the time I quit jumping, they'd kind of got out of that, you know, just kind of decided that throwing guys out in too much wind to land on the ground was a bad deal anyway, because no matter how thick the timber is, if you're trying to hit, somebody's gonna miss it, you know, somebody's gonna find a hole and go sailing through it and slam into the rocks or, you know, sometimes you'd go down into the stuff and...I was hanging in reprod one day and I'd just stopped, you know, and I heard somebody come crashing through and go: Whomp! And a big groan, you know, and I looks over and here's this guy came sailing through next to me and there was this great big old snag, you know, that was broke off at the top, you know, just about the...below the top of the reprod so you couldn't see it from the air or nothing until you came down through the trees. He just come flying through there and just slammed right into that thing, you know, just with his back, his full length and just knocked the breath and everything else [laughs] out of him. And he was just hanging there in his harness like he was dead, you know, but, you know, things like that. And so the whole...they finally got the picture that dropping guys in too much wind just wasn't a good idea, you know, that trees couldn't stop everything, you know.

DH: How do you avoid hitting a tree when you're going through?

HS: Avoid, like what I said happened to that guy?

DH: Yeah.

HS: Well, there wasn't much way he could avoid it, you know, because he didn't even see it 'til he hit it, hardly, you know. I mean, you go your guidelines, you know, if you know what's down there, well you can steer away from it, you know. I mean, you can steer one side or the other of it and get around it, you know, usually, if you can see what's under you. Something like that, where you can't see, where you don't know it's there, well, by the time you know it, it's too late.

DH: Is that pretty hard on the chutes?

HS: Oh, not real...not real hard. It's a...if they're...if they take care in getting the thing out of the tree, you know, and don't just start dropping the trees, you know, well you can get them out and a lot of times they're not even hurt, you know. And even if they're—

[INTERRUPTION]

—not usually real bad. What gets them is when you got them in one, great, big tree and you

drop the tree and it slides down the side of the mountain with the chute underneath it, or something. Boy, that sure could rip them to shreds that way.

DH: The boss kind of frown on that kind of stuff?

HS: Yeah. There's times when it just can't be avoided, though. You know, I mean, there's times when you got a, you know, got a chute way up in a great big, old, dead snag and you don't dare send a guy up there after it, you know, because the damn tree might break on you. You know, the snag could bust or things, and all you can do is cut it down and, you know, try to drop it some direction where it's not gonna slide, you know, if you can, but—

DH: Did you ever see any jumpers carry a good luck piece or—

HS: I guess so. You know, a lot of guys would have something hanging around their neck, you know, or, you know, like their old airborne wings, or some kind of a medal, you know, or some kind of religious deal, or something else. As a general rule, though, I don't think jumpers are very superstitious, you know, they never—most of them, you know.

DH: Do you think there's any kind of a special disposition it takes to be a jumper?

HS: Oh, not really. I mean, there might be a...There might be a tendency, you know, towards one kind of a disposition, but I've seen every kind of a guy in the outfit, you know, where you...you know, you'd see guys that you could never understand why they even came there, you know, because they didn't like the woods, and they hated fighting fire, and they was scared every time they jumped, you know, and you don't know...couldn't figure out why they even tried it, you know, unless they was just trying to prove that they could do it, or something. You know, but that's a minority, you know. Most of the guys are pretty much the same type of guys.

DH: Did you and any of the other jumpers go into town and sit around and swap stories about what you'd done?

HS: Oh, yeah.

DH: Did you ever get out of hand?

HS: You mean like getting in bar fights and all that kind of stuff?

DH: Getting in bars, yeah.

HS: Oh, yeah, things like that have happened. [laughs]

DH: Were you jumping here when they made the movie *Red Skies Over Montana*?

HS: Yeah, I was.

DH: Did you know anything at all about that?

HS: Yeah, yeah.

DH: Did you see them make the movie, or—

HS: Yeah, I worked on...I helped them work on the, you know, when they was setting up the stuff. They started that thing in '50—in the fall of '50. And we put in a...We built a burn area up by Lolo Hot Springs Lookout. And we went up there and they had us cutting down snags and then they'd hired a couple of logging trucks and we'd cut down these old snags and they'd load them up and haul them up there and then we'd dig these great big holes and plant these snags. Instead of going and finding a burn area, they made their own, you know. And then they took rocks—there was some rocks in there, you know, and they built frameworks out of them and put plaster all over them and made some big cliffs, you know, some big fake cliffs. And then they put a dozer line around the whole area and sprayed diesel fuel on it, you know, and touched it off and burnt the whole thing, you know, to get everything going so they'd have smoke in all the snags and the ground smoking and everything for their shots. But...so I got in on helping cut down snags, and dig holes to plant them in, and that kind of stuff.

DH: Were there any actual jumpers that jumped in that movie?

HS: Yeah, yeah. All the jumps were done by the jumpers—all the jumping. But they did all that in '51, and I was in the service in '51, so I didn't get in on any of the good stuff.

DH: What did you do when you were in the service?

HS: I was in the Marine Corps.

DH: How long were you in the service?

HS: About 2 years. I went in the fall of '50, and I got out in '52.

DH: Was there any doubt in your mind that you'd go back to smokejumping after you got out of the service?

HS: No. No, I couldn't hardly wait to get out of the service and go back to jumping.

DH: What about jumping while you were in the service? Did you do any of that?

HS: No, I tried to, but...I tried to get into it, but I couldn't. You know, I couldn't even find...couldn't even find how to get into any [laughs] of the jumping. The Marine Corps didn't

even have an airborne outfit. And I did work in the parachute loft for awhile, and I tried to get...I tried to get...find out how to get sent to El Centro, they had a parachute test outfit down there. And guys was always telling me about it and I was always...I'd go ask the sergeant major and he'd let me talk to the commanding officer of the company, and I'd go talk to him and he'd say, "We never heard of nothing like that." And that would be the end of that, I'd go back to work. So I never did ever get into anything like that.

DH: Did you ever have any experiences with loggers while you were jumping?

HS: Yeah, I worked with a lot of...you know, been a lot of fires where we had loggers.

DH: Did you ever jump into a logging camp, or anything like that?

HS: Yeah, I jumped right into the middle of a logging camp one time. We...it was down on the Clearwater and...Actually, it was the only place around that was fit to jump, you know, it was...without going into timber, you know. And there was a logging camp probably about 2 miles down the road from the fire and so we, you know, they had a nice clearing in between the buildings, and we decided that was the place. And so we just jumped in the middle of it and they had a generator with a little power system, you know. Some guys landed on the power lines and broke the power lines and one of them hit the side of a building and slid off. [laughs] Things like that, but it was a—

DH: What did the loggers thing about all that?

HS: The loggers themselves, most of them was out working, and the cooks, and some of the wives, and kids and, you know, the bull cook or whoever's around taking care of the camp was around. They thought it was about half-neat, you know, just to have a little excitement around the place, or something going on.

DH: As a whole, did you enjoy your smokejumping?

HS: Yeah, yeah. It was a pretty good way to make a living.

DH: Well, I think I've just about exhausted my list of questions. Is there anything that I've missed that you want to talk about?

HS: Nope, nothing I can think of.

DH: Is it the kind of a job that you'd recommend to your own son or someone else's kid?

HS: Yeah, I mean, I wouldn't want to force anybody into doing it or, you know, talk anybody into doing it if they didn't have an inclination to do it theirself, but I would never discourage anybody from it, you know. I mean, if somebody wanted to do it, well I'd, you know, I'd tell

them, "Have at it."

DH: Did you ever know any other guys that were dissatisfied with smokejumping?

HS: Oh, you...Yeah, I know, you know, you know guys that, you know, I've know all kinds of guys that quit or, you know, didn't like it after a few years. I think most of them...most of them that got dissatisfied with it, got dissatisfied with it after they started working year around. You know, because there's about 10 months of the year that there wasn't nothing much going on except just kind of tedious work. And then you'd get involved with the honchos, you know, with the...you'd get involved with the bureaucracy, you know and all the...every year you had somebody else that came in that had some kind of authority over the outfit and wanted to change everything. And you know, they'd come around and you'd have things that you'd been doing the same way for 20 years, you know, and you'd tried a dozen different things and you had the right...Figured, you know, you had the right system worked out. And some new guy'd come loping in and come out there and he'd immediately want to change all the stuff that took you 20 years to figure out, you know. And that's the kind of stuff that made, you know, I think that guys used to get discouraged with.

DH: Did you ever have any run-ins with the bureaucracy yourself?

HS: Yeah. But I always had the attitude that I had that job coming just as much as they did. I had just as much right to work for the government as anybody else, and they wasn't gonna spook me out, you know. They used to...if they had a guy they didn't like or, you know, somebody they wanted to get rid of, or something, they'd just keep pulling petty stuff on them, you know, and just, you know, try to make things as uncomfortable for a guy as they could. Because they really didn't have any reason to can him, you know, but they figured if they could make it miserable enough, you know, take the guy and send him on projects in the middle of the winter some place, you know, where, you know, the guy had a wife and kids right in town. And anything like that, you know, try and get him discouraged enough so they'd quit, you know. I used to hang in there and say, "The hell with them." You know, I figured, you know, hang in here long enough and I'll get my pension and the hell with them. And so I did. [laughs] Just toughed her out. Outlived a whole bunch of them that tried to make it tough on me.

DH: Did you ever get singled out because you were a jumper?

HS: You mean, in the Forest Service, among—

DH: Well, just anywhere, you know, somebody's say, 'Hey! This guy's a smokejumper.' You know.

HS: Oh, I don't know. Not that I can think of particularly, you know. Other than if you was in some kind of a bar engagement, you know, and there was some jumpers that, you know, jumpers with—stirring something up with somebody else or something. You know, you might

see a little bit of that, but...And then there used to be some resentment on the districts and stuff, you know. I mean, you use to get guys that figured that we was over-paid, and under-worked, and glorified, and you know, had all the fun and they— [laughs] And everything, and you use to have a little bit of that kind of stuff. Not much.

DH: Well, I think that just about wraps everything I've got to talk about.

HS: Okay.

DH: So I say, thanks for the interview.

HS: Yep.

[End of Interview]