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Oral History Number: 453-020

Interviewee: Bill Fordyce

Interviewers: Beth Hodder and Kjell Petersen

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Kjell Petersen: Okay, so we are back after a technical glitch on the part of the untechnical interviewer, and we're here with Bill Fordyce and Beth Hodder, and we're going to continue on. So, Bill, take it away when you're ready.

Bill Fordyce: Okay, we just kind of ended where I was responding to a medical emergency. When I started, it was an emergency, and then after I got down to the river and turned north, I was told it was no longer a medical emergency, but that I was needed there for communications. So, I assumed that it had turned into a fatality. And rightly so; I got there and there was this fellow laying dead on the side of the trail, no one else around, and his hat was over his face. I stopped and I said the 23rd Psalm, and then I stood up and yelled, "Anyone? Hello." And I heard a couple of voices from far away up on a knoll. It was the lead packer and a doctor. They were up there trying to get a good signal for their satellite phone. So, that started this whole long thing where Flight for Life turned down coming in because the patient had expired. They won't pick up somebody who's a fatality, least they didn't at the time. Malmstrom Air Force Base also would not pick him up. And there was a Forest Service helicopter down in Helena getting some work done on it. So, I just stood by while they were trying to figure out if they were going to get to it. If they were going to be able to get to it before it got dark. And my boss asked if we couldn't get a helicopter in, could we pack the body into Gates Park [Guard Station] for the night?

And I said, "Kirk, I think that's a little too western for the moment." And he said okay, because everybody was kind of shaken up. A tree had fallen, a very large tree, and hit him and his mule-- the very top of it--knocked him off and I think he might have been trampled. He was only thirty years old, and had just found his niche in life. His , his happiness, doing what he was doing. So that was very sad. We stayed around and chopped out a landing zone and they brought in the sheriff and the deputy sheriff, acting coroner, and examined everything and then they flew him out, and after that, the packer still had this huge string. It was a string of about ten to fifteen mules, all tied up in the trees. So, he got them and started back up north. I stood where the body had been laying, and they all kind of just sniffed and crow-hopped as they went by. , they could smell death those mules and like I said before, that was pretty good. everything was gone.

Now I'm all by myself. I have a few miles to go to get back to Gates Park. So, I started walking back and then I just stopped on this little knoll and just sat and tears came out of my eyes. I was

really sad for this whole situation and loss of a young life. And then I just went on. I got a radio call from the horse packer who had been bringing in my resupply and he was now at Gates Park and he wanted me to radio him when I was at the pack bridge which was about a mile away. I said, "Well, okay," and when I got there, it was dark. I guess it was dark by the time I got to the pack bridge. Then I got to Gates Park and Joe Woodhead, the packer, had a whole warm meal for me. I was so grateful. I had only had a pack of oatmeal that morning—one of those little paper packs--and I'd covered, I don't know, I figured ten, thirteen, sixteen miles on that. Anyway, I was really grateful. And then I went on up to Beartop.

So one of the questions was lightning: did you ever get struck by lightning? I had been told that when you see lightning, you start counting, the 1,000. When it gets within three miles or so of you, you undo your base radio, you disconnect the antenna, and you disconnect the power. And you get on the bed or get in the chair, put your feet on the insulated stool, and so forth. I had an old dog with me, so I told him to get in the bed. I turned on my hand-held and I watched the lightning storm come, and he just fell asleep. He just loved being on the bed. He didn't get on the bed very often. Most of the time he slept under it. So, I watched this lightning come and I mean it just slowly kept coming, coming, coming. Then all of a sudden it passed me by. Then it seemed to back up on the north ridge. It just went BOOM, then closer, BOOM, striking the ground--three down strikes, and then it hit the lookout. I'm telling you I instantly thought that I had gone blind and deaf and was bleeding from every orifice in my body. And I was sitting there in the chair with my feet on the bed, so I was perfectly okay. Then, in just that nanosecond, I realized that I was not deaf and I was not blind, and it was just my nose that was running. And outside there were these millions of these little three-inch wiggle worms of electricity just KKKZZZ like that. It just did it for a couple of seconds. It just flashed all around. I've never seen anything since--it was just absolutely amazing.

And I think you earlier asked me something about animals. I remembered on the north side of Beartop, there was a pretty significant drop off, and there was a bowl down below with grass. I would see elk sometimes down there grazing, and one afternoon I looked over the edge and there was something new, something I hadn't seen before. Kind of a brown bush or something. So, I got my binoculars and looked down. It was a grizzly bear and he was lying on his belly. He was stalking about eight or 10 cow elk. They had their heads down. They're just grazing totally oblivious. And then all of a sudden, I'd see him put out, a paw another paw, and wiggle forward and stop. I watched this for quite a while and then all of a sudden, the wind must have changed and those elk must have smelled it, because they raised their heads up, looked and ran away, ran right up into the timber, and he just lay there. Then he just got up walked away. It was the coolest thing. Really it was really cool to watch.

There's a joke I make all the time that in the Forest Service there's no such thing as an expiration date. My resupply didn't happen one year in a timely manner for whatever reason. I'm down to wanting fresh food. And [Kib] Mills worked for the forest, was down at Gates Park. The backcountry horsemen had been down there doing volunteer project work, and they had a lot of food. They were riding out; they were going to leave it behind. And I talked to Kib on the

radio, and he said "How you're you doing?" And I said "I'm okay. Last night I climbed up in the attic, I got a can of green chilies out. And it was like eleven years *past* the expiration date. And when I opened it, it wasn't chilies, it was just green paste. It didn't taste like chilies. And Kib said, "In the Forest Service, there's no such thing as an expiration date. And we'll just ship those cans down and put them in another cabin."

But really, the nicest thing was, the next day, those backcountry horsemen had left a lot of food. And he rode up with a pack horse and left that for me. That was great. That's the kind of place that was.

Another thing that I remembered was--things were pretty loose there on the radio, at least I was. I can't remember whose birthday I think it was. I think Isan's birthday was first. And so I got on the radio, and I wished her happy birthday. And then all of a sudden, people from around in the wilderness would jump in on their radios, saying happy birthday Isan. It just went around and around. And then all of a sudden, this voice came on that I didn't recognize. And he said happy birthday to her. And she said, "Well, who is this?" It was the big boss in Great Falls. It was really kind of funny.

And then Joe Woodhead, the horse packer, his birthday came up and the girls in the office after I wished him happy birthday all gathered around the microphone to sing happy birthday. It was just sweet. Really it just was a good place to be.

Up in the attic--this lookout, was an old lookout, and nobody really cleaned it up. , we did clean it up eventually. But there were things up there--there was a metal box that had once held the human remains, the ashes of Paul Havens, who'd been a longtime lookout. They sprinkled them out up there. And all that expired food--there were boxes of old cans and beans this and that. Finally we sent them to another cabin.

Then there was Henry, the guy that came in front of me a couple of people in front, I think. Henry, Israel then me maybe. And there was a metal box up there with all these letters from girls to him. And, , what do you do up there? You just pull them out and you read them right? They were really, really fun to read and enlightening, realizing that these were old girlfriends of his and a couple of them knew--well, one of them said she would wait for Henry after he got done with this one. I'll just never forget it. I really liked Beartop; it was a good place to be and good people to work for. I guess that about takes care of Beartop.

KP: It was nice of you to mention Henry. I'm sure he's resting especially peacefully after your story.

BF: There's more. Henry pops up again later.

KP: Okay. Okay, anything else for Beartop? Or shall we move on to a couple of seasons at Scalplock in Glacier Park?

BF: Yeah, let's just go on to Scalplock. I had taken the '13 season off and I'd ridden my bike from St. Louis to Polebridge. So '14 comes around I want to be a lookout again, and Beartop is full. Shelly had moved in there and she stayed there for quite a while, and I applied to the Park [Glacier] and I got Scalplock. Henry had staffed Scalplock for several years. He had tragically suffered the year before in September, came down early, went in and out of the hospital for depression and then took his own life. So I came in behind Henry to Scalplock and that was kind of a sad, really it was sad, because he was well liked.

I get to Scalplock, and I started hearing Henry stories. One of the stories was that Henry did not like to clean and that was the way it was. Scalplock was kind of dirty. And I don't think he had ever cleaned the stove. So, I really got down and scrubbed and scraped and cleaned, and I got it up pretty spiffy. There was a metal dust pan up there, , one of those, industrial dustpans. After I got the place clean, I could never find that dustpan again. It disappeared. I really figured that Henry had grabbed it, and said, "You're not going to do that again. It's unnecessary." I looked, I thought maybe I left it outside and it had blown off. So, I started walking big circles and bigger and bigger circles around the lookout trying to find it. I never did. And that was that.

Scalplock was my first experience in the Park. And all of a sudden one guy came up with his two sons and a Glacier Guide. There was this group of women, too, that hike together that I started seeing frequently at different Park lookouts. They're a Whitefish/Kalispell group of women hikers, they come up and they're all sitting on the north side of the catwalk in the shade. And this guy and his two sons—his sons were like twenty-eight or so—and a couple of friends and a Glacier Guide. I had a picnic table, little mini picnic table, out on the helipad. And they're out there. This was really sweet, too. It was his birthday. And the Glacier Guide had stashed a birthday cake in this pack and kept it from getting smashed. So, they're out there below the women on the picnic table. They pull out the birthday cake, saying happy birthday, just saying happy birthday. And these eight women sat there and sang happy birthday to that guy. It was really nice, with Mount St. Nick in the background. It was really, really a cool deal. Probably the biggest thing that happened.

Oh, and then, we didn't have woodstoves in the Park. Everywhere else in the Forest you generally had a wood stove. But in the Park they made the decision to put in these little cozy heaters that are propane fired, and the one in Scalplock really didn't work. That's when I learned this phrase. I learned it from Luke who was over at Loneman.

He said that he would talk to Henry and say, "What are you doing?"

And Henry would say, "Well, I'm baking a potato. And that meant that Henry was sitting there in his chair with his feet in the oven, reading a book staying warm on a cold day. So that phrase "baking a potato" has carried on since then; I made sure that I passed it on and now the other newer lookouts use it too. I always thought that was really great.

In 2015, there was a fire across the way, across the highway; I think it was the MacDonald Creek fire up above Essex, one drainage over from Essex. And they were worried about it jumping the highway. They stopped the trains for a couple of days and they closed the highway. The smoke was fairly bad. They used a pilot car to get cars through that valley. Then they came up and wrapped Scalplock. I got chased out. So, then the last thing I did after everybody left, I packed up some food because I was coming out and I was gonna go over to Cyclone and keep working. I had about fifty pounds of food and bad knees. And I'm hiking out and I'm supposed to sweep the mountain. I get just a couple hundred yards below the lookout, there's a guy coming up. And I have to tell him, "I'm sorry, but due to that fire over there that you can see, this mountain is closing, and you've got to come out with me." That could have been weird, but it turned out to be really a great hike down with this guy. He was a wildlife biologist. And he was over along the border in one of those Montana wind farms. It was his job to turn off the windmills when eagles and stuff came through. I thought that was pretty interesting. We just talked the whole way down. And then I came over and got the key and went up to staff Cyclone.

KP: Well, Bill in today's modern society, he probably would have just shot you and continued on.

BF: Yeah, well, he obviously cared about animals. So--I'm an animal.

I got over to Cyclone and that first night, , it's just a cold, stormy windy night. I'm sitting at that table and I've got my little thermos on the table. I'm talking to the Huckleberry Lookout, John Huxley. And I go, "WHOA." And he goes, "what?" and I go, "WHOA." The wind is shaking this tower so much that my thermos is dancing on the table. And then I go, "WHOA," like that. I just screamed, and it had bounced across the table and off on the floor.

Next day, I went down, I looked at all the legs for the tower, and I discovered that one of the crossbeams--they have crossbeams down at the bottom--was split all the way up. I called Leif Haugen up at Thoma and I said "Hey, is this thing safe? should I even be here?" Scared the--out of me. And he said, "Hey, you only need three legs to stand on." So I figured I was okay. I didn't want to be, , written up. "Fire lookout dies when tower collapses on mountain from high wind."

I did a hitch and a half there; then the fire was under control across McDonald's. Then, of course, everybody came back in. I restaffed at Scalplock; they took all the fire wrap off; and that began a hellacious project of removing all of those staples. It probably took two full seasons to remove those staples. I didn't have to; I just removed a bunch. Then next year I moved over to Numa Ridge Lookout. That was probably it for Scalplock.

KP: Okay, well then let's march into Numa.

BF: Numa was great. I really liked it. when I was at Beartop, it was in the wilderness. I could not see a single light. I couldn't hear any noises. When I was at Scalplock I could see some lights.

I could hear Harleys on the highway. I could hear the trains. So when I moved over to Numa up the North , overlooking Bowman Lake I couldn't see anything at night , even though there were lights out there I couldn't see them with a naked eye. But if I had binoculars I could maybe spot something.

I really liked it up there. It's very comfortable and I didn't have a heck of a lot of visitors. As things have happened, I understand it's just being swamped now.

I think the first year there weren't very many fires. I think I probably reported one. But the second year was a big fire year; that was 2017. And a lot went on that year, there was the Gibraltar fire over on the Kootenai, just due West. And I was totally in the smoke. It was really, really smoky. Visibility went down. The patrol plane would fly stuff. They could see directly below them. So, there was one day where I had a lot of lightning the night before. And I kind of figured that all things, fires had to have started. I couldn't see them because of the smoke. And the patrol plane flew north along the Whitefish Divide, went up to the border. I talked with Leif, a little bit, looked at what he wanted, then he asked me, "Is there anything you want me to look at?" And then I said, "Yeah, fly south of me, along the ridge, go down to the bottom of Quartz, hit the river, turn around, come back up the ridge between Quartz and Logging and to the top, and then up, and go down to Adair, and over towards Lake McDonald. I think there was something over there towards Lake McDonald."

I watched him through the spotting scope. I watched him follow my line, and he gets to the top of Adair and I see him start turning towards Lake McDonald. And I go, damn, I'm wrong. Then all of a sudden, he doesn't stop, he continues to circle, and he goes down. And he reported five or six fires on that whole route. That was really cool. That night, I got a call from dispatch and, I immediately think I've done something wrong. They don't call you, unless--well. Anyway, I thought I did something wrong. He just said "hey, the pilot just wanted to say good job. We might not have spotted them without some directions." That felt really good. So I liked it over there. We had a bunch of fires that year.

One 4th of July, this group of people came up, and I mean, a large group, and they're spread out on the rocks on the north and are eating lunch. I go out and I wave and I say "Hi, where are you guys from?---well, let's eat your lunch." And they said, Okay. And then I'm guess I'm sitting at the table eating mine. And I can't see them because I'm sitting down. All of a sudden they start singing; it turns out, they were a choral group. They sang three or four, really great Fourth of July songs--"America, the Beautiful"-- , like professional. Twelve or fourteen of them spread in a circle on the rocks and singing to the world. It was beautiful. It was really, really, really beautiful.

And, you get a lot of visitors, and you gotta bring them in, and nobody knows how to do the firefinder. You've got to explain math and all that stuff. There was this one group of about a dozen kids and a man, and it turns out it's a math camp. This guy takes students camping every year. So he took them to Bowman, and they hiked up and he asked if they could come up. I said

sure, but just come up four at a time. So they came up and I started explaining, the math, and this is a math camp. I didn't know it at the time that there was a math camp. So, I explained azimuth and how we work with another lookout and how we intersect things on the map and do really accurate locations of smokes and, and so forth. I quickly realized that it's a math, and I said, "The stuff you use, you're learning in your math class, you're going to use the rest of your life in some form or another." That was really pretty cool. Then they all went out on the rocks. Then the teacher pulled out one of these cedar flutes, like an Indian flute. And he played for about twenty minutes. It was just beautiful.

The best thing about being a lookout is the view--the sunrises and sunsets, the storms. And then you get some skipping little piece of happiness from another human being that has made the effort to hike in. I think it's pretty cool. Yeah. So that's, I think that's about it for Scalplock [meant Numa]. Plus, I reported a bunch of fires there.

Beth Hodder: So, Bill. Which fire was it? Was it Snyder, where that burned Sperry Chalet?

BF: That was that was from that same night When I told that guy about those fires, that was the Sprague Creek Fire.

KP: Sprague Creek.

BF: And it burned up! And I could not see it, but Huckleberry could. He watched that thing. It's so hard to tell what's going on. It's easier for us on the lookout because we've got maps, and we've got a firefinder, and you can shoot degrees on the head of a fire, the tail, or the north or the south, east, west, whatever. And you can locate that to a map and go oh, yeah, that's just an acre, or two acres. The guys that watched that fire from the overlook--I think they first saw it--they reported it at ten acres, and then it went to eighty-five during the night. And it really hadn't even hit ten by morning. So, you just can't tell.

BH: Oh, one thing one thing about that--I was at Cyclone during part of that time. And I could see the fire, not anything like Huckleberry could; they had a straight shot to the fire. But there was a fire that started on Adair Ridge at the same time. You called me one day and said, "Hey, Beth, I'm getting calls from Headquarters. And they want to know the size of the Adair Ridge Fire." And you said, "I can't see it. Can you help me?" So periodically, you would call me because you wanted to know if it was growing. And if it was growing, where it was growing. I think it stayed pretty much at about probably seven acres or something for a long, long time. I could not see the actual fire; it was down in a valley or something. There were a couple people who were up at--would the cabin have been Quartz?--they were sent in. And they were going to probably start to fight the fire until I think it started growing then. And you finally called Headquarters and said it was large enough that they needed to do something about it. But I remember talking with you and you calling up on the phone, "Hey, can you see it? What's happening? How big is it? Did it move? Is it over the ridge?"

BF: Yeah. Well, the winds come out of the southwest predominantly. So, it was pushing that Adair Ridge Fire up against kind of like an avalanche chute--a big rocky area. It kind of was stabilized for several days, like you said. And then there was that one night where all of a sudden, we had east winds gusting to forty miles an hour. And it picked up and pushed that thing down the south edge of Logging. It moved in fifteen minutes, moved a mile or so. And it looked pretty scary, and then all of a sudden, the wind stopped and I remember calling the Logging Creek Ranger on the radio and tried to give him a heads up that, this fire was burning and it was coming his way. And he said, "Well, how long do I have?" And I said, "Well, I really don't know. Just go take a look east." And he gets back on the radio and says, "I'm out of here. "Yeah. But then all of a sudden, the wind stopped and it just stopped in its tracks. That was it.

Then there was another thing that happened that year. I reported a fire on one side of Bowman Creek. And it just didn't do anything; it just went out. So that was that. So, I get a day off, and I'm hiking down. Mark Hufstetler was over at Cyclone. We had talked and I said, "Keep looking at this one particular place. There was a down strike there. Maybe I saw smoke, but it's been a while." But how these things are, they can be sleepers. And this was classic. But anyway, so I hike out, and as I'm walking along the trail, I hear Mark call it in--called in a smoke right there. And so, it turned out that one, it had come down. This is a great lesson for fires, I think. It had a downstrike, and then several days, later it started smoking enough that it could be reported again. And when the firefighters hiked in, of course, they all made jokes that--get a day off and you're out there lighting the fires for us, something like that. When they got out there, they discovered that the ground was burned--almost an acre--that fire had gotten down in the duff and just had a red edge all the way around it as it slowly accreted outward. It didn't put off any smoke, just kind of smoldering lightly, but slowly growing, growing, growing. Then it hit a snag, and then that snag caught fire and put up smoke. That was a real lesson.

Then of course there was the next time I got days off. I think it was Mark again, he reported another fire as I'm hiking down the trail. And then of course the joke is, well, if we want something to do, let's just give Fordyce a couple of days off. Yeah, that that was good. I'd forgotten about that.

Then there was one thing that happened at Numa--I had just gotten up there really, the day before. I'm still moving in. It's a nice day. I decide at 4:30 I'm going for a walk, and I'd already the previous year scoped out this old pack trail that made this huge kind of loop north to the east and then back up. And I was starting to get down to it, and I looked to my west and I went, "Oh, man. That looks evil. That was a storm. Dark clouds coming."

I went, "I think I better get back up," and I got back up there, and I watched some lightning and son of a gun it started a fire. I called in the Moose Creek Fire. Andy Huntzberger was the IC [incident commander] guy on that one. And I just have great respect for him. He really knows his stuff. And they got on that. It was a 65-degree slope and burned up to about seven acres but they corralled it. One girl on the hotshot crew from Alaska, dislocated her kneecap. What a painful thing that sounded like, having to hobble down that whole thing.

Anyway. It was pretty good at Numa. So, I think that's it for Numa.

KP: Okay, cool. Shall we move to Idaho?

BF: Okay, let's pack up and move to Idaho. I moved over to Corral Hill in Idaho--that was like a forty-foot tower. And I was only there for one season.

BH: Where in Idaho?

BF: It was out of Moose Creek off the Nez Perce [National Forest]. And Joe Schaefer was my FMO. And Joe Sullivan the AFMO. Looking to my west, I could see the agriculture ag lands. I could see a lot of lights; I could almost see Grangeville. Grangeville would have been south-southwest. And it was pretty good. I would get to it off the old Elk City Wagon Road. I got my water from a log on the uphill side of the road, kind of half cut, chiseled out, and that's where my water came from. I'd fill up my water cans there.

There was open range here. One night, it's dark. I don't know what time it was, but all of a sudden, the whole damn thing is shaking. Not like being hit by a truck or something. I got up and I grabbed my headlamp and I went out on the catwalk and I'm looking down. And there's a big ole Hereford cow scratching her ass on one of the cables that keeps that thing steady. I yell down and she looks up; she runs away. But that continued on for a while, periodically; I didn't worry about it, because I knew what was happening.

Then towards the end of the season they sent out some engineers to double check the tower, which was pretty interesting. They had some cables and their laptop, and they drive stakes in the ground and run current through and they wanted to see how good the lightning arrest system was. Since I have a kind of background in carpentry, one of the things that I noticed the very first day I got there was that there was a fair amount of dry rot on that catwalk. I didn't like that. There was one particular board right at the door, the first two by six out, that not only had some dry rot, but it had two knots right there. And I thought, boy, I'm gonna step through that one time. So, I did not step on that board the whole season. And so these engineers, after they do the electrical tests, they slowly work their way up, and they get up there and about ready to come through the door and the guy looks down he goes, "I would not step on that board." I said, "I hadn't stepped on it since the first day."

Yeah, that was a good place. That was my first real experience with Idaho. And just how up and down that land is, I mean, it's crazy, up and down, little wrinkles of land here and there. I was having a hard time figuring out the drainages. That's kind of how I work, you look at the peaks--but the peaks are the peaks. The things I'm trying to figure out to gain my frame of reference is the drainages. That gives me the ridges and everything else. One of the things about looking for fire is--especially when you get into that zone of where you have red flags and stuff like that--

you're looking every fifteen minutes. I walk around the catwalk clockwise looking out. I turn around I walk around counterclockwise.

It's kind of interesting, because after you've been there a while everything becomes kind of a familiar tapestry. You may not know the names of everything, but it's kind of like your desk. If you get up from your desk and your pencil's in one place and somebody comes in after you've left the room, and they sit down for a second, move the pencil, and then they get up leave and you come back, you don't know what's different, but something's different. And then you start really looking. And that's pretty much how I focus in on smokes; I have a feeling that something's not right, and I look until I feel right or see something. Sometimes it's pretty remarkable, you might see one tree burning ten, fifteen miles, but you notice it, so you call it in

And I think I reported two fires at Corral Hill, close to civilization, farms, ranches, stuff like that. Some of the fires were reported quickly by people that were closer. So I didn't feel too bad. The goal is to be part of the whole thing, not "the one". So that was Corral Hill. And then I had every intention of going back there. I really did. I liked the people. I liked everything.

But I had thrown my application to the wind through USA Jobs, and it was December. I get a form email from the AFMO for the Middle Fork Peak Lookout in on the Salmon/Challis. It says they just learned that lookout was not going to come back. And did I have a job or was I interested? And it was a form. So it must have gone out to a whole bunch of people that had applied. I had talked to Mark Hufstetler earlier that year. He'd grown up in Challis, and he was talking about lookouts. He told if you ever get a chance, he goes Middle Fork Peak is the lookout I'd like to be at. I remembered that. Well, here I'm being asked if I'm interested. So, I immediately looked up the phone number for the Salmon/Challis and tried to get in touch with this guy. And I got the weeds guy down in Challis. And he helped me out. He looked up Eric's number and I called Eric's number. He was not in the office, but if you need to call him call him on his cell phone. I left a long voicemail on his office phone. And then I called his cell phone and he was gone. I left a long message there telling him why I would be perfect for the job. And then I sent him a text message. And then I sent him an email. I really, I really wanted this; I'd heard a lot about it. It was perfect for me, I thought. So, he got in touch with me and we talked a little bit and then he hired me.

He's in the north zone of the Salmon/Challis. There's three of us, we're all same age. He says he likes the old guys because we're self-reliant. We don't ask for things, something breaks, we fix it. And we were responsible and he likes that. So that was the deal. In February, I went over to Great Falls to visit a friend of mine and do a snowshoe trip for the weekend. I stopped by Choteau to talk with my old boss Russ and we talked for a little bit. I had just committed to Middle Fork Peak on Monday. Apparently Shelly quit Beartop on Wednesday. I'm going to snowshoe on Friday. I talked to Russ and he offers me Beartop. And man, if I hadn't committed, I would have said yes, but you're only as good as what you say, right? so I stuck with it.

And I'm really glad because Middle Fork Peak is perfect. It's seventy-one miles of gravel at the end. The first forty are sort of like the North Fork Road, and then the next thirty-one are pretty much a bulldozer blade-wide ride through long creeks and over ridges and switchbacks and this and that and then it at the lookout. There's a spring that I can drive to three and a half miles away; that's where I get my water. And there's about one hundred feet in elevation, and one hundred fifty-foot trail that I have to hump everything up to the lookout, and it's really hard in the beginning. But by the end of the summer, it's pretty darn easy. I like it; I can't see another soul anywhere, another light nowhere. Planes—it's at 9100 plus—planes fly under it; you look for a plane and you realize you got to look down. That's great. There's nobody around. So, I see four sheep hunters in August. But that's pretty much it. It's pretty, pretty darn remote.

And a lot of fires. I've done this three years now, three seasons at Middle Fork Peak and probably within the first four days of each year, I've called in a fire. There's just so many of them that get called in. This is crazy up and down ground again. I call it the Idaho wrinkle. It's just wrinkled land, like an old Sharpei dog or something. And so, they have lots of repellors. That's how they deal with the fires; they drop people down. They jump on these things sometimes, and nobody hears about it. They hear about the big fires, the twenty thousand acres, a hundred thousand, whatever; nobody hears about all of the tenth of an acre fires that gets stabbed immediately. A couple, four people, get dropped down. They work on it, they spend the night, they work on it, it gets declared dead out, and then they hike out or they get picked up. They move on to the next fire; it goes along all summer long.

I guess the first big, not even big fire, was on Jenny Creek. As soon as they drop people on the fire, then they call dispatch with their size-up, and then they call their nearest lookout. Then you provide whatever for them, weather updates, blah, blah, blah. I'm listening to them talk and it's on a seventy percent slope, seventy-five degrees. They call in for bucket work and a Chinook comes over with that guy from Billings. I recognized his voice, which was kind of funny. He comes over and they direct him to make the bucket drops. And all of a sudden, soon as he's done, they say, "Well, we got we can't do this anymore. It's just driving everything down the slope; this whole thing's gonna all pile up down at the bottom." And that's that.

So, he says, "Oh, I can change. I can change that. I'll be back. Don't worry boys. I'll make it rain." So, I watch him; he goes out of sight around something he picks up, the Chinook is with propellers fore and aft—big sucker. I watched him; he comes back over the fire. He makes this big circle. Then he sweeps down and there's just rain coming out of this thing. It's not buckets, it's just raining. They sent me a video of this, and you can actually see. It like a guy standing off to the side of a rainstorm. It was really pretty impressive. They got that out in a couple of days.

I went out for days off—two days I had. I went out on a Tuesday night. I came back Monday night. That's right. So, Tuesday night after work, I left and I told them where I was going; and I went off at eight or so, and I start driving out. I told them to expect a storm in about two hours. I'm driving in my truck in about five minutes. and I see lightning and stuff off to the southwest of them and I got on the radio. I said "I'm sorry, I was wrong. It looks like you're gonna get

hammered in just a few minutes." And he said, "Okay, don't worry. We got our little spot all set up." Well, when I came back in, they were standing on the side of the road waiting to be picked up, because it had gone out because the rains had been so torrential. And that night he said it was raining through our tarp it was coming down so hard. But they were great. They had one of those

KP: So Bill, I want you to share your black bear story.

BF: Oh, yeah. Well, okay, this is last season. This never happened before. I am sound asleep. It is a stormy night. It's about 1:30, and I hear some clamoring. Some noise just woke me up, and I have this handheld spotlight that's on the side of my bed. I turn it on and look out the window. There about eighteen inches from my face is a black bear looking at me up on the doggone catwalk. I was so tired. It didn't even freak me out. All I wanted to do is get up, yell at the damn bear. Get him off my catwalk and go back to bed. And that's pretty much what happened. I grabbed my phone. I tried to take a picture, but I just got a picture of his ass on the catwalk. And then the next morning when I woke up there was bear scat on my catwalk where he left his mark. So it wasn't a dream.

BH: I take it that it's not a tower. It's just sitting on the ground.

BF: Yeah, that's a two-story building. It's an L-6. Those Idaho lookouts at least on the North Zone that we staff is {Stein} Mountain, Long , and Middle Fork Peak--we're all on cinder blocks on the first story. And then the second story, an L-6, and they're really very comfortable. They have windows that open on all four sides, at least mine does, and a four-foot screen door, and it's got a sink. We made Berkey Water Filters on two five-gallon food grade buckets and put the filters in there and put a spigot right into the sink. It's like you have running water up there. Pretty cool.

I got struck a couple of times up at Middle Fork Peak. And the second time it took out the two repeaters. So, they flew in radio tech, so I'm getting to be friends with now because this is the second time. The first time they flew in and fixed everything. So, you're on the second time; they repaired everything they could, and they told me "We'll be back tomorrow, between 10:00 and noon. We need a part we don't have. Do you want anything from town?" And I said "pizza" what else you gonna say, pizza. So that night, Mark Nelson, the radio tech, he calls me via FaceTime from the supermarket in Salmon. He's standing in front of the frozen pizza place and he starts holding up pizzas for me to choose from. He brought two pizzas the next day and they hung out. I had several fires where I have been at Middle Fork Peak we're up in the spot where the helicopters land. Then they can gather their data together and send it off. So I got to be reasonable friends with several of the crews, which is really nice.

I remember one of the questions I didn't talk about was how did you get your food at Beartop and all the Park lookouts, Scalplock and Numa. They all came with mule trains that bring your food, your water. At Beartop, we'd radio in our order, and then they'd bring it all. And at the

Park, everyone had a cell phone, and we could call it in. So cooking was great. I got into the habit of having a Friday night pizza, homemade pizza, that I would make. Sometimes I'd make a quiche. I like cooking. And I had the room to do it. I had some cookbooks, because I don't remember anything. Really, it seems like I can follow a recipe and I'm pretty good. So eating was pretty good.

KP: So I used to get questions from most of the visitors about don't you get lonely up here? And my response was almost always, this is one of the few places that I don't get lonely.

BF: Yeah, I'm pretty comfortable being alone. Yeah, I don't feel--like at Middle Fork Peak, there's no one around, there's just nobody around. When I do the drive in it's about thirty-eight miles from the nearest little house. But I never feel lonely. It is such an awesome place to be--and the vistas. Sitting in a regular house it is claustrophobic for a week. Sitting in a in a building that has glass everywhere, everywhere. Sunrises, sunsets, storms, really great. At Middle Fork Peak, I came in behind a guy who had three years there and then there was a couple. And they were there for five years. So, I couldn't believe this. I get there. And there's a bed big enough for two people at that lookout. All the rest of the lookouts had beds twenty-eight inches or thirty inches wide, this was four feet wide. It was great. Yeah, totally comfortable.

KP: So, explain to people who are not familiar with the lookout world, what it does to your DNA, your spirit, and your outlook on life having been in that capacity?

BF: Well it's changed a lot. When I was at Beartop, in '09 when I started, I basically had a phone that I wasn't allowed to use, except for business and the two-way radio. And I had a little transistor radio, and I could listen to NPR or something. It's really pretty isolated from the world. Really, and I liked it. But when I got out at the end of three plus months, it seemed like I need a little time to resocialize to human beings and society and noise and automobiles and stuff like that.

Isan, my good friend Isan, who was at Prairie Reef, got out early the first year--earlier than I--a couple of days earlier. And I had a phone now that worked. I called her folks and said that she was coming and she was getting out that day. They'd see her that night and they said "Oh great. We've got a pie ready for her, her favorite pie." Isan left and she's driving home to Whitefish from Choteau. she's got a cell signal, and she calls me. She says, "Bill, Bill, no matter what, don't let them bring you down. The world is full of crazy, fat people. They're all fat. I want to go back." Then I said, "Go home, your mother has baked you a pie."

It's kind of a weird deal; you come back and even though you think you're pretty normal, and you paid attention, maybe to the news, or maybe not depending. I read a lot. I read a ton. I mean, even when I was a Beartop and I got resupplied by mules, I had prepared six boxes of books. So, the horsepacker would just go to the back of my truck, take out box number two, put box number one in and bring it in. I read a lot. I still read, and I never get lonely. It sounds kind of crazy. But there's just a lot to do.

KP: I think people who have staffed a lookout whether full season or multiple seasons, or just volunteer gigs understand exactly what you're saying. Is it safe to assume that you probably will continue to do this until you're dust?

BF: Well, yeah.

KP: Okay, well, I think we're getting close to wrapping up here. Is there anything you want to say just before we turn the lights off?

BF: Well, what makes it great, too, you interact with repellers, smokejumpers, and hotshot crews, and regular wildland firefighters. The thing that I am totally impressed with is what great human beings they are. They're just great people to work with. very caring, very honest, very ethical. So that is one of the best parts, I actually I don't know what the best part is. Probably, the dawn and the dusk. Those are like stunning most days, just absolutely knock your socks off beautiful. And then if you're lucky, you get a storm. This past season--I have a weather station about three hundred yards away, and it beams up to a little console on my desk like an iPad and it gives you everything inside, outside, humidity, wind speed, gusts directions. So, one day, I'm getting a pretty big storm. It's kind of pelting sleet a little bit, kind of rainy sleety, and I look over and I'm gusting seventy, eighty miles an hour. And I'm going, well, if it gets any worse, I think I'll get on the downwind side of the firefinder, because the windows were bending. And so that was that; I waited out the storm. I ended up going to bed. I got up the next day and start scrolling through the highs and lows for the day before. And I hit one hundred ten mile-an-hour winds that afternoon but didn't even know it. The way that I knew something was really strong was because I could actually see the glass bend inward. That was really crazy. It was wonderful.

KP: Thanks, Bill for spending time with us and sharing your experiences. They were just wonderful. Beth, thanks for sitting in.

BH: That was great Bill.

BF: Okay, well, thanks. It was fun for me too. Definitely.

KP: This is Kjell Petersen saying 10-7 for the Northwest Montana Lookout Association, going out of service.

BF: Adios.

BH: Adios.

KP: Adios.