

Oral History Number: 163-014

Interviewee: Frank E. Neufeld

Interviewer: Rosa Stone

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Rosa Stone: —to run through. Okay, this is Rosa Stone, interviewing—

Frank Neufeld: Frank Neufeld.

RS: —for the Historical Society. And we're starting out here with, Frank, could you give us some of your religious background and how you got to get a 4-E classification?

FN: I grew up near Fresno, California, and I belonged to the Mennonite Brethren Church. Since they'd had seminars and information concerning the drafting and 4-E classification, and since my grandparents had both come from Russia to America for religious reasons, it just seemed like was natural for me to apply for a 4-E classification. I was assigned in November even before Pearl Harbor, 1941, I was assigned to Cascade Locks in Oregon and I was there six months. And then I was transferred to Camino, near Placerville, California. I was there for six months, and then I applied for the smokejumper—I applied for the position as business manager. Since they were organizing, and this seemed like they needed somebody, and so they approved that transfer, and I went to Missoula and worked in the office, as business manager in purchasing, with Roy and Florence (?), the first year, 1943. Then I met so many wonderful fellows, and I saw what they were doing, I saw what they were doing out there in fighting fires. I felt that I should go in and do that. So I talked to the Forest Service personnel Earl Cooley [one of the first men to jump from a plane into a forest fire and who later trained smokejumpers], and I went through their training program, and became a smokejumper after seven practice jumps. I was assigned to the summer that year to Big Prairie Spy Camp. We had about seven, six jumps. Seven practice jumps and six fire jumps and most of them were out of Big Prairie. Usually three, four, five in a group [unintelligible]. Most of my jumps were successful and I was able to land in open fields and open areas. Some of my group landed in trees, and we had to help them get out of the trees to come down here. And so after two or three days of building a fire line and fighting fires, we hiked out—luckily we weren't too far from the road—and so we hiked out and the Forest Service picked us up and brought us back again, and we were ready for another jump.

RS: You were never injured, seriously?

FN: One of my practice jumps—our last practice jump was at Big Prairie, and I landed on my shoulder, on my back, and I dislocated my shoulder quite severely. But after two or three days, within a week, it was healed. I was happy about that. I was afraid I was going to be laid low or something. So that healed quickly and I was able to continue the—. After the fire season in 1944, I applied to work in a Mennonite mental hospital in Providence, Rhode Island, and from there I transferred to Poughkeepsie, a Mennonite State Hospital where they were training a

group for special relief work in China. That was before the Revolution. I was interested. I thought that I wanted to go over there.

RS: Did you get to go to China?

FN: No, I never got to. The war ended—

RS: What happened to their...?

FN: I don't know, I guess there was rumblings of things that are happening in China, and the doors were closed, and the war ended. And I left and I went back to California and finished my education and I became a teacher, an elementary school teacher. I was a principal of the school, I was superintendent of the schools in that area for 28 years. That was about eight years ago, then I found out about a Christian book organization called Successful Living, and I formed my own company, a book company. The last eight years I have been selling religious paperback books to supermarkets in California.

RS: Do you feel like the smokejumping experience, in particular, had an effect on where you went vocationally?

FN: Yes. Very definitely. Before the war, here I was working for JC Penney Company and I was in their managerial training program, and I was going to be a manager, and I had high hopes. They really look terrific, that program that I was going in to. But the CPS [Civilian Public Service], the smokejumping experience changed my life. I wanted to do something of service, and this is one of the reasons I went into teaching. It was a turning point in my life.

RS: Very good. The excitement and the thrill of jumping out of the plane and fighting fires, that intrigued you to begin with. That brought you into it.

FB: Oh yes, very definitely. Intrigued me very much. The training program and the jumping out of the plane and jumping on fires was tremendously exciting. I look back on it now, I said I don't realize how I ever psyched myself into jumping out of a plane, but it seemed to be quite easy. After the strenuous training that they gave me here, it was just secondary. The first time out of the plane it was very easy. I just jumped out there, and I heard the snap of the parachute, and I looked down there and it was so quiet here and I was just sailing down there, and I almost felt like shouting.

RS: It's exhilarating.

FN: Exhilaration.

RS: And then pretty soon the earth came toward you.

FN: The Earth came up a little bit too fast, and there again there was my training. The Earth came mighty fast. But I was able to roll, and my training took over then.

RS: Did you do a lot of guiding of your chute?

FN: Yeah there's some guiding. They had circled around pretty much in here, and we knew which reins...there was slits in the parachute. I able to move them around here, guide it around here, heading for that. There was always a target area that we were looking for, especially in practice jumps there was a circle. And then, fighting a fire, they had a clearing.

RS: And there were certain things you were trying to avoid as you came down?

FN: Well, yes. I would say we would try to avoid water, the river or creek. Try to avoid burnt trees. There's skeletons in here with spikes in there—

RS: Snags.

FN: And that's what here. You try to avoid that as much as possible. But some, they landed in there and they were able to loosen themselves and they slid down the tree.

RS: But you always manage to get on a nice spot.

FN: I always landed into the spot. I was lucky in that part.

RS: Very good.

FN: And then we waited and we saw—the plane kept on circling and first they would drop by parachute all the firefighting tools, and then they'd [drop] out another chute with the food. So we were on K-rations in here. Usually we would be dropped at daybreak, because they figure that fire would—if it's going to get out of control, it would be after 4 o'clock in the afternoon. So they said the critical time this in the morning until about 4 or 5 o'clock in afternoon. So we worked hard in doing this out here, and usually, if the fire was small enough, we could control it. So usually, maybe we stayed over one night and the next day we were on our way out again. That's the value of the smokejumping. The money they saved.

RS: Did you ever have to set backfires on your—

FN: No. We just circled, and we were lucky on that too I guess.

RS: The fires were small enough.

FN: Fires were small enough. They were real small, really small.

RS: But they wouldn't have stayed that way if it hadn't been for the smokejumpers.

FN: No, that's right. That's the value of the smokejumper. See, that's one of the reasons why I wanted to do something of real value for my country. I wanted to do something, the most hazardous duty that I could think of as a C.O. And it definitely was—I have a great deal of satisfaction of that experience.

RS: Just sitting here under these pines, you realize these are worth saving.

FN: Yes.

RS: Really worth saving.

FN: And also we had rumors during that time here that the Japanese were sending over subs. They were going to send missiles, phosphate missiles, and they were going to project them into the forests. We don't know. They said they had sighted Japanese submarines. We had no evidence that they actually had started fires, but that was a possibility.

RS: And you were on call there to take care of that.

FN: We were on call.

RS: You bet, you bet. What was the most interesting fire you were ever on?

FN: Well, I don't know. That one fire—the first fire, I guess, that we jumped on.

RS: Is that right?

FN: It was impressive, and my co-jumper, he landed in a tree and we had to go climb up the tree and get him unharnessed so he could fly down the rope. We thought that was quite interesting. [laughs]

RS: Yes!

FN: But otherwise, routine. Just building a trail. It was a wonderful experience to actually do it instead of reading about it, actually building—

RS: You had to build trails, was that part of the projects that you did?

FN: No, building a fire trail around the fire.

RS: Oh yes, okay.

FN: I never got into the winter program. In the off hours we would be building trails. Hiking trails in Big Prairie where we were, and then the rest of time we were on call. So at night, like last night here, we had lightning flashes out here.

RS: Yes.

FN: We knew, then. We were already psyching ourselves in this matter, that possibly tomorrow morning, we would be jumping on fires. And usually it was. So we usually knew the night before, the chance that we would be out there the next day.

RS: How did you get along with the food out there on the fires?

FN: Oh, it was all right. It was tremendous, and they had K-rations, the food up in here. The K-rations they had. Here again, I knew that in the armed forces that they were using K-rations down here. I felt that this was tremendous.

RS: Very appropriate.

FN: That I could experience the same thing, you know. And when they talked to me about their experiences when they were overseas, I can tell him about my experience as a smokejumper, and I usually get great respect for my part or what we were doing.

RS: Yeah. You felt that your service was equal to their service.

FN: Yes. My service was equal to their service in this manner. And I was risking my life. I had no guarantee that I was going to come out of this whole.

RS: Because there was a lot of risk, a lot of danger.

FN: Oh, yes.

RS: Probably compares to being an astronaut today.

FN: I would think so. And it seemed like this more to me now, when I think back in this matter. When I was doing that program, I really didn't feel the risk as much, but now when I think back on the matter, then I realize there was great risk. I talked to Ed Nafzinger and he said the same thing. He really wasn't aware of that. He realized that later on—the facts, the danger aspect of the thing.

RS: That's why the army takes the men this age, is because they kind of have that fearless attitude. It happens to someone else and not to me.

FN: Yes. And I think it was a wonderful opportunity for the CPS, I think for the Mennonite Church—the young men of the Mennonite Church up here. Because I met some wonderful guys here. Had nothing to do with their looks or their size or their physique. That was immaterial. It was the inner person. I just think that the Forest Service was very much amazed when they saw what these kids were doing, going out there. And they didn't protest, they didn't bellyache, they worked long hours and they were always willing to help. Nobody hesitated, nobody shirked—when time came to jump they were ready go.

RS: They always jumped.

FN: Always jumped.

RS: Would you say that these were young men of deep conviction and deep courage?

FN: Yes, I would say—

RS: That combination.

FN: I would say there was a deep conviction and deep courage. This is one of the reasons why, when I came as a business manager and I saw the conviction of these young men, I wanted to be part of that. And that changed me, when I went into that program.

RS: There's something that was there for these men that brings them back to the reunions.

FN: Yes, there's something. That's right. There's something about this, because—there was something about the companionship between the men that were here, that they will never forget. It's part of their life; it will be with them until they die. That's why they come back here.

RS: Was part of the ambience, the nature setting too, being in the mountains, being with these trees?

FN: Yes. I guess I didn't realize that I enjoyed being in the wilderness area. On Saturdays on time off, we would go fishing. And we'd go hiking. We would hike up to the mountains on the side there. We were close to the Continental Divide. I realized then that after I—I was athletic before, I played basketball and baseball and did all the sports in high school and college, and so I guess it was just a natural outgrowth that I enjoy doing those things.

RS: You haven't become an inveterate packer into wilderness like we heard of last night?

FN: No, but I think I would enjoy doing it sometime.

RS: [You'd] be glad to go along sometime.

FN: Yeah, sometime. Your life gets so busy that you don't have time for a lot of things that you would like to do.

RS: What was the high point of your experience in smokejumpers, would you say?

FN: I think it's the companionship that I had with the men, the spiritual deep convictions. I remember in Big Prairie, there'd be some of our group—on Sunday morning we would go by the riverside. There's a stream going down right near the camp, and it's beautiful in the morning there. And we would have devotions. I remember Dan, Daniel Deal, who I miss very much, led the service and I really felt close to God.

RS: Isn't it amazing that this has been 40 years now and it's still very vivid for you?

FN: Oh yes. But it became much more vivid by coming back here and by talking here, and as I we talked—and that's what others are doing—then a lot of these things came back to me much more clearly. I realized—and that's the reason I brought my wife—and I asked her this morning, I said, "What do you think?" and she said, "I wouldn't have missed this for the world." There's something here.

RS: How do you feel about the fact that so many of the smokejumpers now have already passed on, and we've come to this age in life? Have any words of wisdom here?

FN: No, I think you just have to live the best you can. I think you have to accept that you're getting older and eventually we are going to leave this earth, we're going to pass away ourselves. I just have to be ready. My philosophy that I have to be with my Lord, I have to be ready. If my time comes, I'll be ready to go. That's probably what I would say.

RS: How, is there anything, any experience, or anything in this whole thing that we've missed that you'd like to speak to?

FN: No, I think we covered it pretty well.

RS: Thank you very much for sharing here, of your experience as a smokejumper. An exciting part of your life.

FN: Yes. [laughs]

RS: Okay. Thanks a lot.

[End of Interview]