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Interviewee: Albert K. Rodman

Interviewer: Rosa Stone

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Rosa Stone: This is a historical interview. Rosa Stone, interviewing Albert Rodman. Ok, Al, this is for the Historical Society. And, first of all, how did you get into the conscientious objector status? Did you come from the Mennonite background where they had all this available for you, or did you kind of have to fight for it?

Albert Rodman: Neither.

RS: Neither.

AR: No, I'm not a member of any of the peace churches. My family was Congregationalist, and I did grow up in the Congregational Church in East Hartford, Connecticut, and went to Sunday school at an early age, taught Sunday school in my teen years, prior to the war. Was considered, looking back at it, people consider that it was a religious family. My father was quite religious, in the sense of dogmatic. Something that I rejected at an early age.

RS: And then how did you come to the peace stance?

AR: Philosophically, on my own entirely. I had no mentors or any friends that were COs [contentious objectors]. I didn't know anything about—

RS: You didn't know about the peace churches, when you came to this?

AR: No. Well I knew that were such things as Quakers and American Friends Service Committee and so forth and so on. Vaguely.

RS: Did you have trouble getting the 4-E classification?

AR: No. I wrote in my own defense early, before I was classified—I guess when I was notified that I'd been classified 1-A, and if I wanted to appeal or something—this is by the local town board.

RS: So you did that, then.

AR: And I wrote a long, many-page, what I call white paper, of my philosophy, where I was coming from, and my religious activities, and my beliefs. I did believe in God, if you leave that undefined, not too narrowly defined. I waited. And I got reclassified without any...it took by waiting. But I was prepared. In the paper, I had said that...I'd touched on everything from

politics to the scorched earth policy, I remember. And, oh, I had read a lot about Gandhi. Gandhi was my influence. I think my mother introduced me to that along the way. I'm not sure how I became aware of Gandhi, but I did read and follow his activities for a number of years before, at least five.

RS: Where did they assign you then, when you got your classification?

AR: Well, the closest camp was West Campton, New Hampshire, which was north 150 miles, or a couple hundred miles from my home.

RS: There you found some fellow believers.

AR: That was a Quaker camp, and there were a lot of professional people there. I wasn't a professional person at that time, but a very academic background for many. So much so that we started up a whole set of courses, and I took a course in Chinese, of all things.

RS: Very good! [laughs]

AR: Don't remember much of it right now, but so that was the kind of—

RS: Did you stay there very long?

AR: No. We were there only until, I think, about April. I was inducted January 7, I think it was—

RS: What year?

AR: '43.

RS: '43.

AR: And somewhere around April or May, we were shipped out to Coleville through Reno. But just before then, at Easter time, in April, I went home for furlough. Also another person that I met there went home on furlough at the same time and we both came back the same day, late at night on a Sunday or something like that, to find at midnight that the camp was all lit up and there was a lot of arguing going on. It was a big meeting, been going on for hours. We walked into it to see what it was all about. And everybody said, "Ah, here they are!"

AR: "What, what, what, what?"

AR: They were looking for volunteers. They were commanded by the selective service to find volunteers, a certain number—50 or something—to take the train west to fight fires next summer.

RS: This was smokejumpers.

AR: No, not for smokejumpers.

RS: Oh, for fighting fires in California.

AR: Fighting fires in California. And they couldn't get any volunteers. The camp was going on, they were trying to figure out how are you going to resolve this problem of people not wanting to volunteer but refusing to be coerced? That wasn't the Quaker way, to coerce people, to volunteer them. But so we were asked if—told where we were going and what we'd be doing and why they wanted us and so forth and so on, and how many, and the whole story. It was a hush over the whole crowd as we sat there thinking, the two of us, and we looked at each other and we said, yeah, sounds like great. A great adventure. We were the only two volunteers. The rest of the 50, or whatever went, had to be volunteered. And the service committee that was trying to do this, did that reluctantly, as a last resort. Because you only had one day—

RS: And then you went.

AR: One day to get packed up and shipped out.

RS: So you went to California, then, to Reno, [then to] California. And from there, you found out about smokejumpers?

AR: No I volunteered for several other projects out of Coleville, California, that would last a summer season, or something, and back. Ranger stations, I did surveying at Bridgeport Ranger Station.

RS: When did you come to smokejumpers then?

AR: Not until 1945, the last year.

RS: Oh, the last year. I see.

AR: A couple years later, you see.

RS: What made you sign up for smokejumpers?

AR: Well, we were on a beautiful project, Tom Summers and I, and Truman Toland, who was the other volunteer from West Campton camp, when we came back from Easter vacation. And we were on a mapping project in Reno. We were living in Reno, for about a year, making maps of the Lake Tahoe forest area. Beautiful area. By aerial photographs, we had all these aerial—it was a high technology. And it was fun to learn. It was something—I'm interested in

measurement and technology and instrumentation and aviation. That's where I got my pilot's license, as a matter of fact, in between. When I had days off, I would get some time.

RS: And you found out about smokejumpers while you were there?

AR: The announcement came to our attention—to Tom Summers' attention in particular. He said, "Hey fellows." There were a couple of other people from southern California where he came from, the Bruffs, [Jim and William] in particular. And he said to all of us, "Hey, this sounds like...this is pretty good stuff. How about let's see if it's not too late to volunteer." And we did. And he got accepted right away, for the early training, in April or whatever, or March, and Jim Bruff and his brother and I and somebody else got notified a little later on, a month later. So we drove up together in an old car with dozens of extra secondhand tires that we'd scrounged from the dump.

RS: This was during the war.

AR: During the war. And gasoline, we had to save up coupons that we scrounged from other people. We had a unique...did a unique thing for wartime, namely driving 500 miles, or whatever it is.

RS: And you came—

AR: From Reno.

RS: —you came on your own, from Reno? Up to Missoula. And where did you train then, when you got here?

AR: Missoula.

RS: You want to move this way a little, under the, yeah.

AR: I guess at Ninemile. Ninemile camp is I think what it was.

RS: Ninemile camp?

AR: I don't really remember.

RS: Oh that's fine, that's fine this is a 40-year perspective, and the details are not so important, you know, it doesn't have to be exact. It's kind of what you remember out of the whole thing.

AR: Well I inferred that from conversations that have taken place here, where it was.

RS: But you do remember where you trained, which was Ninemile. Do you remember your first jump?

AR: I wrote about it, years later. I went to college after I was returned from the war, and when we got back to the...that was my agenda, when I was inducted. I was saving up money, was working—

RS: To go to college.

AR: Saving money to go to college. And I'd gotten 1,000 dollars saved. And then I got inducted and it all dissipated, because it paid for my own clothes and whatnot, for the three years.

RS: While you were a smokejumper, and while you were in your other CPS experiences, you didn't get paid a great deal, did you?

AR: No. No, it was—The American Friends Service camps, let's see, what was it, five dollars a month or something, for toothpaste, that's what it amounted to. And I don't remember—it was more than that, like 15 or 25 a month when we got to Missoula, and at McCall.

RS: But you had to buy your own boots, your own equipment, your own clothing that you needed for this kind of winter.

AR: Yeah, pretty much. Some things were issued, and I don't remember.

RS: Ok.

AR: Some of the very essential special equipment was issued.

RS: How many jumps did you make?

AR: Fourteen, like many others. Seven training and seven during the summer, that one summer. It was actually only a couple of months of—

RS: Did you get any very interesting fires?

AR: I should have brought my aircraft log, my flying logbook. In the back of that, since I'm learning to fly, I used that to record my jump place and who the pilot was and who the spotter was, and what date and what time of day and what the name of the fire area. I brought that along with me and I just...I didn't put it in my pocket when I came over here. And I haven't read it. I just brought it along. I haven't even looked at it, except I did notice, in a quick opening it up last week before I packed it, that there were remarks at the end of each line about what kind of a jump it was. And I remember the last two, the next to last one it said, 'A most enjoyable fire.' And the last one it says, 'My most miserable fire.'

RS: Oh. They were right side by side.

AR: Right side by side.

RS: What made the last one so miserable?

AR: I don't remember. I would have to—

RS: Was it possibly a long time on the fire?

AR: Yeah. I don't remember. The name was called Ditch Creek, and I don't know where that is, or what that signifies. I don't remember which it belongs to. But I can recall a fire that was kind of miserable. We were there for several days—

RS: Working day and night pretty much?

AR: —in Wallowa County, in Oregon, near Enterprise, Oregon. Very strange landform, it looked like table land. It just stood on top of this flat place where we landed. But it was ribbed like a washboard with parallel V-cut valleys. So you couldn't walk across them, it'd take you forever. You could walk down the ridge, the flat topped ridge. In other words, it was a plain at one time, and these canyons eroded parallel for miles and miles into it. I'd never seen anything like that. But the thing that made it miserable was we couldn't seem to get the fire out. It was on the steep hillside, and it was late in the summer, maybe it was into September—I didn't look at the date—and it snowed two inches one night. And that's what made it miserable.

RS: But it didn't put the fire out.

AR: It didn't put the fire out right away, but it helped. We had to go around and dig down with our hands through the snow, all around the perimeter, and see if there were any hot spots and dig them up, and expose them. You could only tell by putting your hand down, and then you could take the shovel and start digging and mixing things up. So we were there two or three more days, putting it out.

RS: So you suffered from the cold as well as the heat from the fire.

RS: Chapped hands, split, you know, between the fingernails and the skin was split, and that sort of thing. Being chapped. Or putting your hands down in the soil. We didn't have any gloves that I remember. You couldn't feel the fire if you had gloves on.

RS: Oh right, right. And you had to be sure all the hot spots were out before you could leave the area.

AR: So of course we were covered with ash, smeared face, hands, and everything.

RS: And you had to wait until you got the fire over with and got back before you could clean up.

AR: Yeah. No place to take a shower.

RS: [laughs] It wasn't by a lake.

AR: No.

RS: So you couldn't go swimming.

AR: No, there wasn't any water there at all.

RS: Did you have to hike out, then?

AR: That was the other tough part about it. Because you couldn't go across country to get to a place where a truck could pick us up. We were told where we'd be picked up before we jumped, we had a map. And we had to walk down this long flat ridge, until we came to a cross bridge. And then walk along that. I don't know, it seemed like it took us a couple days to walk out, of hiking. And carrying all this—

RS: They didn't send a mule train in to pick up your things.

AR: Never saw a mule train. That was new, last night's film, seeing their talking about sending in a mule train the same time they sent the jumpers in because it would take the mule train quite a while to get there. And usually the fires were only one, two, three days. Small lightning strike in the tree, two people jump, that's probably the average fire. And contain it in a day or so, and watch it burn out or isolate enough so they could leave it.

RS: See, other fellows didn't have to bring their chutes or any of the things that were dropped for them to use, because the mule train came in—

AR: Yeah, we had to pack it all up.

RS: You had to—

AR: Well we couldn't...some things are expendable, we just left them there. But the parachute had to come. If it was salvageable.

RS: If it wasn't ruined.

AR: Also on that fire, I remember several people sprained their ankles. I almost did. That was the only time I...a little bit worried that. But we had found from the statistics that up to that point, that if you weighed 150 pounds or less, your chances of a sprained or ankle injury were considerably lower than if you were...every pound over 150, your chances of, somewhere along, getting hurt, getting an ankle injury increased. I kind of felt...I was right at 150.

RS: Did the food, the kind of food they had keep you at 150?

AR: No.

RS: Was it good food?

AR: No, at McCall. I was stationed at McCall, Idaho—Payette Lake—for those seven fire jumps. The food was so good that I went from 150 pounds in the beginning to 165 by the time I was sent back to Coleville, California.

RS: Because you were sent back to Coleville when the war was over and you were discharged from there?

AR: No. No, the war...Well, let's see, that's right, the bomb had been dropped. The war—I don't remember when the war was over.

But no, we wanted to go back to the mapping crew in Reno, but the forest service official who was in charge of that, Don Jackson, who was a very nice guy, we were surprised that he was angered of our leaving. We were a prime crew there, trained in doing that map making and so forth. And then suddenly up in the middle of it, after being there nine, ten months or whatever it was, four of us said, "Hey we're leaving for something better." And he didn't say anything but he was kind of cold to us when we tried to get back, after the end of the summer of jumping. Our way was barred. We had been replaced and we weren't needed anymore. So back to the base camp in Coleville, out in the sagebrush, a million miles from nowhere.

RS: And then did you fight fires there?

AR: Yeah. Go rushing out, packed in the back of a stake-side truck, 20 or us or something, in the middle of the night or whatever.

RS: Was it more interesting to jump than it was just to be carried in by truck to firefighting?

AR: Oh, yeah. Oh, sure. It was misery, misery every time, every fire, going by truck. Bouncing around for 100 miles, in the wind, in the back, middle of the night half the time. Or very hot day, in the middle of the day.

RS: What was that excitement, of the parachute aspect, the jumping? Did that—

AR: Well I was interested in aviation, as I mentioned. I had always wanted to get a pilot's license, and I was in the process of doing that at Reno. Because things came together. It was convenient. And when I got to McCall, Idaho, where we were jumping, I had opportunity there—there was a Piper Cub. The Johnson Flying Service had a Piper Cub also, in the hanger. And there were two of us, I don't remember who the other person was at the camp, that were taking lessons...had already taken their lessons, to the point where we were soloing. We just had to pilot 40 solo hours before we could take our flight test and examination to get our license. So we were putting in solo hours. And we'd race out after supper, if we weren't on call for jumping, and try to put in an hour. It cost \$8. But we would put the \$8 in the till, drag the airplane out ourselves, all alone, just one of us would be there, and start it, hand prop it, no self-starter on it, get in and go fly for an hour, and then put it away at the end, close the barn door, so to speak, and walk across country about half a mile, three quarters of a mile, through the woods back to the camp at McCall.

RS: Did you get your 40 hours in?

AR: Well I got quite a few of them. I don't remember how many. Unless I looked at the logbook, but that was a nice free-running, informal system. I like to be on my own, completely independent. I'd developed, even before that, a need to be completely independent in everything. And I pursued that to great lengths during my life.

RS: Let me do my own thing, don't put restrictions on me. Is that what you're saying?

AR: Well, not only do my own thing, but, I'll do it all myself, thank you. I'll learn how to do whatever it is, whether it's fix a car, so I don't have to wait on somebody else to be open on Monday morning to fix it, I fix my own televisions—

RS: Fly my own plane.

AR: Fly my own plane. Experience all these things. I'm a grand do-it-everything kind of guy, you know. Tried to. And succeeded to a great extent. However, the flip side of that is a very negative thing. I'm so, I'm fighting off that independence and trying to be more sociable and delegate things to other people. I have had to learn that some years ago in order to get anywhere in some of the projects that I've worked, in the commercial world.

RS: This didn't give you any problems in getting along with your fellow smokejumpers and mapmakers.

AR: Oh no, not there. It's in personal relations that people feel that I'm kind of, don't need them, and that I'm...the impression they get is that I don't want any intimacy with anybody else. I can do it all myself. Or that I don't think that anybody else can do it well enough. Or that

I'm a perfectionist. There is a streak of that. Which comes in handy...which has gotten me some good jobs, because I can—

RS: It has its good side as well as its flip side, you bet.

AR: It has its good side. The bad side is in relationships with people. So I was very late in developing, maturing for social...I got married late, and had two children. Not too late, but I had only had one chance to get married. She wasn't the ideal partner, but I realized my situation. So I also believe that one can always, by communication and working things out, one can ameliorate the complex that occur from different lifestyles or different value systems or different ways of thinking. You have to work at it all the time and you have to have mutual respect. And so it worked out.

RS: You never had injuries, and you never were too close to the fellows who got seriously injured.

[pause]

RS: Did you have to help carry anyone out, any time?

AR: No. No, I never saw anybody seriously injured, more than just sprained ankle.

RS: You would remember if they had been.

AR: Oh yeah, for sure. The jumping experiences, almost all my jumps were with just one or two other people except for two fires, I'm guessing. Now, I didn't look at my log. I remember at least two that were 20 or more people.

RS: Oh, big ones.

AR: Big ones. And we were there a week. Maybe that was the one that—

RS: Was the miserable one?

AR: I don't think that was the last one, so then I don't think it came under the most miserable. When there were a lot of people it didn't tend to be most miserable, but it could have been, I suppose.

RS: You were headed for college before you went into the CPS.

AR: Yeah. That was my goal. I was trying to earn enough money to get there.

RS: And then when you left the smokejumper and CPS experience, you finished your college then.

AR: Yeah. There's a little story there, in how...during CPS I'd used up all my money that I'd saved for college, hard-earned money on a 22 dollars a week salary, pre-war. I was a self-trained technician, in electronics. I had a fairly good job, considering. Managing and doing the work for the repair service for Triplett Electrical Instrument Company, for the whole eastern seaboard. It was quite a responsibility and I had to learn how to do a lot of things that nobody knew how to do. With no textbook or manual to follow, it was just, "Here, you think you can handle it? Give it a try." People would send in these oscilloscopes and wope (?) meters and I'd take them apart and recalibrate them and put them back together and ship them back out. But that was something that I liked to do, learn on my own. Just give me the tools, the objective and the materials—

RS: And let me figure it out.

AR: —or where I might get the materials, and I'll be out behind the garage. Leave me alone, and I'll figure out how to do this thing. But I used up all my money in the first couple of years of CPS, and then I became cynical. And then when they came...I became cynical about college, about education. Even doubting my own ability as a...whether I was college material. When the Friends Service Committee representative came around, a few months before we were to be released, spring of '46, and interviewed me, and I took an aptitude profile test, and a whole lot of things like that. And I got a better revelation of what my capabilities [were], by this profile. It was a very worthwhile thing. And then they offered 300 dollars Get Started scholarship, for the first semester. And I said, well, I don't know if I'm college material. And they said, oh yeah, but we're convinced the test showed that. And I said, "Well, I have to take college entrance examinations." I wasn't very confident in myself, by this time. My golden dream of putting myself through college had evaporated, and I'm bitter, actually.

RS: Discouraged, really discouraged.

AR: And discouraged. So they kept prodding, and I said, well, I'll try one semester. And they handed me the 300 dollars, and said, "You'll do it." I took the exams, when I got back home, for that fall—I guess I took them in the summer or something like that. And I got 99th percentile on all of them. Mathematics, language. I never thought of myself as a language student, although during the war, in camp, a couple of us learned some Spanish. With some cards we'd stuck in our pocket when we were on the job. We'd take five every hour, take them out and review the vocabulary. But anyway. And I surprised myself. And all the rest, this is a big class. Matter of fact...returning veterans. People on the GI Bill. I didn't have the GI Bill, but I had the 300 dollars. It was a fierce competition, I thought. I had disdain for the rest of them. They looked stupid. It turned out that that was true. I sailed through at the top of the class all of the way. But they were large classes, and they were weeding out people by one mechanism or another, because there wasn't room in the university.

I went for the first two years in Hartford, the University of Connecticut is in Storrs, in the eastern part of the state. I went to a branch...they established branches in the big cities, in the western part, or the middle of the state. And I went there for the first two years, until people got thinned out, you see. And then when we got on campus, to give you an example of how they were weeding out people from the classes, I was in engineering, taking engineering path, electrical engineering. The first day, I walked into my first electrical engineering course in electromagnetic wave. The board, three sides of this big room...There were about 50 or 60 students in the class, at least. Paper was passed out and we were told, this is an examination, a one-hour examination.

RS: The first day.

AR: First day. We were being...and the questions were engineering questions that you would answer at the end of your tour. And I couldn't...there were ten. I looked at them all and I got frightened to death. I knew I couldn't get the numerical answer on any of them. So, to save something, and I knew that there wasn't anybody else that was going to do any better, or I thought that might be, coming right off of vacation, they probably fiddled away their vacation all summer. I had actually been studying a little bit over the summer, on my own, as I was always doing. So I wrote down how I would attack some of these problems. The procedure, and I said, now I don't know the formula, I know it's something is proportional is something else, but I'm not sure of the factor. So I can't get the answer. I can't do the mathematics, but here's how I would do it if I had these things. I wrote it out in English. Well, I got the highest mark. I got 13 out of 100. And that was the highest mark. The next highest was eight. I didn't know that. I had gotten my paper in the next day or two, or whatever, was a 13 on it. No comments. And I thought, I knew I wasn't college material.

RS: Again you thought that!

AR: Again. I went in to the instructor, whom I got to know and love, eventually, for the rest of the two years. I had several courses with him. But I went in to him and I said, "I know I'm not going to make the grade. Now the question is, when do I quit? Where do I go from here? I need some help in deciding my future path, and career, and I guess my heart's desire is out of reach."

And he said, "What in hell are you talking about?" And I showed him my exam with a 13. He says, "I know you got 13; I know you got the highest in the class."

And I said, "Don't trifle with me. I'm despondent."

He says, "I'm gonna get you out of that, because there's no need for it. You're my prize student. And I'm not going to let you leave or quit." I'm still getting goose pimples just as I did then.

RS: Yes, yes, thinking about that.

AR: I just...I mean the perspective of my relationship to the rest.

RS: They must have introduced Earl Cooley. Do you want to just tell me what you're doing now? You're at the Massachusetts Institute—

AR: I just retired eight months ago, on my 65th birthday.

RS: From?

AR: From the Radio Astronomy Observatory Group at the University of Massachusetts, where for 17 years I came out as a crew of seven, at that time, to build this world-class radio-astronomy observatory, as an antenna engineer.

RS: Oh, that's marvelous.

AR: I'd gotten to the place I wanted to be, an antenna engineer.

RS: That's marvelous. That is very marvelous.

AR: And I am quite satisfied at my accomplishments. Everything was in good hands. I had written up lots of descriptions of how to do the things that I had to figure out how to do, over the years. Very tricky, very difficult calibration procedures and whatnot. And I left that in good hands, and I thought it was a good time to bow out.

RS: And you're enjoying retirement.

AR: I am enjoying playing.

RS: Good.

AR: I call it play. I don't have any serious purpose. Oh, I do some serious things, but I don't dwell on them as being my main objective.

RS: And smokejumping was a good segment of your overall life?

AR: Well I felt that it was something satisfying to do. Worthwhile. One of the struggles all the way through CPS, all through the war, was to do something, and alternative service that was really service. And always feeling frustrated. Here was something that felt a little bit more like, not everybody would take to it. Endure the—

RS: Rigors.

AR: Difficulties and the dangers. I have an adventurous streak and I will take limited risks, hence my flying and sail-planing, and all those. Not without careful consideration in how I can minimize them, of course, but that's part of the challenge.

RS: Thank you very much. Thank you, this has been a really interesting interview.

AR: Thank you. It's fun to—

RS: Think back over it.

AR: Think back and dump out some of these things. It's kind of a catharsis.

RS: And you'll be at the next reunion.

AR: Don't know.

RS: Hope so.

AR: [laughs]

[End of Interview]