

Maureen and Mike

Mansfield Library

UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

Archives and Special Collections

Mansfield Library, University of Montana

Missoula MT 59812-9936

Email: library.archives@umontana.edu

Telephone: (406) 243-2053

The following transcript is a scan of the original that has been converted to text and has not been edited. Because of this, transcript may not match audio recording exactly.

Please bear in mind that you are reading the spoken word rather than the written word.

For additional assistance, please contact Archives and Special Collections.

Oral History Number: 133-008

Interviewee: Watson "Java" Bradley

Interviewer: Bev Buckner

Date of Interview: July 22, 1984

Project: Smokejumpers 1984 Reunion Oral History Project

Bev Buckner: This is Bev Buckner talking to Watson "Java" Bradley on July 22, 1984 for the Smokejumper Oral History Project.

So, let me get this straight, you started jumping in 1974 and jumped until 1977?

Java Bradley: Yes. That's the years I jumped.

BB: Why don't you give me a little background history of work you did prior to jumping and then after jumping?

JB: Okay. I started out on the Gila, down in New Mexico just west of a small town called Truth or Consequences. It's way out in the middle of nowhere, about 90 miles north of Silver City. And a place called Beaverhead Ranger District. What it was it was a program they gave on the Reservation where they sent young kids off to work up in the forests. And I was interested so I got into that, and I remember they shipped a whole bus load of us down there and dropped us off at various different towns to go to different ranger districts, and I got to go to the Beaverhead. And that's how I got into fighting forest fires. It just kind of—I was just a kid, 18 years old and went on a few fires and learned what they were all about and had a few get away from me. [laughs] And I stayed the whole summer, and the following year I got back on there at the same place and stayed there at that Beaverhead for a long time.

BB: What year did you start with start with Gila?

JB: In '70. 1970 I remember that. And then I went back the following year. I missed a year sometime between there. Anyway, and that's when I noticed a bunch of smokejumpers flying around. You know, I'd go on a fire and watch them from afar. Watch a plane circle and I'd—you know, we'd sit there and watch and watch and they'd continue circling, circling. Wondering if they'd ever jump, and pretty soon, finally, you'd see a couple chutes pop out. But we'd sit there for a long time and just watch these guys and I thought wow! You know [laughs] that's generally how I, you know, got to see these guys, really. Jumping fires on our district. And sometimes when they'd be on a fire and they'd be walking out—packing out or something. I'd go—another character and I would go out and pick them up by vehicle—by truck. And pick up these real grungy looking guys, and I remember one particular time...In fact, these two guys were still jumping when I got on, but that's the first time I met—I remember seeing them down...it was on the Gila. Phil Difani and John Fields, I picked both of them up at the edge of the woods, and then brought them back to our ranger station. They kind of waited around and then we took them up to the airfield and the jump plane landed there and they got on. And I

remember looking inside the plane, seeing all these guys with their helmets on with beards and I said, "God! What a rough looking crew." [laughs]

BB: So, you think John Fields is someone that got you really interested in going into—

JB: Let's say he's one of the first people—smokejumpers I've seen—him and Phil Difani. I remember Phil because he was short with a beard, and John Fields is a huge guy—a big, humongous guy. Those two were probably the first two people that got it planted in my mind when I picked them up.

BB: Where were they based out of? Do you know?

JB: They were out of here—out of Missoula. And they'd go down—they were detailed down in Silver City, like, the first part of the fire season. I remember we'd have an early fire season that would get started around April and play hell with us about back in the middle of May, June and July. That's when they'd send about—I can't remember, about 25 or so down to Silver City.

BB: Is that more a brush fire terrain? Is it more brush fires?

JB: No. We have timber. It's some good-sized timber. It's not like here where, oh, some areas are pretty dense, pretty thick. Mostly you'd run into a lot of juniper and cedar and stuff like that. That stuff still burns. [laughs]

BB: So, what did you do after—later on? Did you continue working for the Forest Service after you jumped? Or—

JB: After I jumped? I quit. I got away from the Forest Service. I went back to school, and while I was in school, I had to do an internship for what I was going to school for. And I got on there for—during the summer for a coal mining company down in Farmington [New Mexico]. Well, well, between Farmington [and] Ship Rock called Navajo Mine. It's run by Utah International out of San Francisco and worked there for the Land Reclamation Program and got into that. Did that for one whole—one whole summer, and then the following year I got back on after I graduated.

BB: When did you decide you wanted to be a smokejumper?

JB: Probably in '73, the year before I applied here. I didn't really—I kind of had negative thoughts about even trying to come up here because—I don't know, people down there were saying, oh, you don't want to get up there. People, they think that jumpers are just too, you know, too big. They act too big or whatever, you know. And they're kind of too gung-ho and all that. I thought, oh, you know, that's...I wouldn't be...wouldn't mind trying it. If I got on, I'll get on; if I don't, I don't.

BB: Well, what about it exactly—it means you wanted to keep going for it?

BB: Well, what about it exactly—going for it?

JB: Curiosity. See if I could make it. And just to meet—just to get away from, I guess, New Mexico for a while. I wouldn't mind coming back up here now. In fact, I—I think what really changed it was I came up here on a fire crew the year—in '73.

BB: What crew was that?

JB: They scrounged up a whole bunch of us there on the Gila from different ranger stations. This was late in the year, everybody was going back to school, a lot of guys had quite. And we got together there and they formed a crew. They pulled in people from all different ranger stations—districts. And I got on from the Gila, from the wilderness area there and I got to come along up here on the crew.

BB: What fire did you go on? Do you remember?

JB: Shoot. I remember it was one up there by Kalispell. It was a state fire. We were on that one.

BB: In '73.

JB: Right. It was—I can't remember what month. It was late in the year. And then after that, we went up north of Seeley Lake. There was a fire on Goat Creek, I remember that one particularly because we worked fairly hard. [laughs] And then we came back here to the base. We spent about two weeks up here, I think. And then after the fires were out, we came back down here to the base. And we used to sit out front, and we ate there, and I'd see all these pictures on the walls. And then—you know, so it was ten million people, you know, all firefighters. They weren't all jumpers, you know, they were just different crews like us being fed. And I kind of walked around, looked around. It was interesting. Saw pictures, saw where these guys lived, you know. [laughs] And that's—that kind of turned, I guess, turned my mind around, coming up here.

BB: Did they drop jumpers on that Goat—is it Goat Creek Fire?

JB: Goat Creek Fire? I think they had some spot fires. This was a huge fire, really on steep terrain. I knew we had some spot fires off of that large one, and those spot fires were jumped on. They were big enough to be jumped on.

BB: And that was at Seeley Lake?

JB: North of there. A place called Gold Creek. I can't really recall the name of that area up there—north of there. It's a...I remember it's...come down Kalispell and go around towards the east of the Lake and—

BB: Big Fork? Condon, up in that area?

JB: Condon, yeah. Yeah, that's what it was.

BB: So then, after that fire then is that when you decided to become a smokejumper and try, or just try to apply?

JB: Oh, it got my curiosity. And nothing—well, here it is. I know where it is now." [laughs] And that year we went back—we went back down on the Gila and we worked late. And it was hunting season, is what it was—we were getting hunter fires. And...Let me back up a minute, I went from Beaverhead and down to the Gila Wilderness Area. There's a Heli tack base there called Gila Center. And I was there, ah, it must have been the latter part of '73, and that's when I got on that crew to come up here. Anyway, while I was there at Gila Center, our crew really thinned out because they had to go back to school. Anyway, we only had about six or seven people left, and we started getting all these fires. And I was out all the time—out on fires as a Heli tack. And we got some back-up from here—from Missoula—and they brought, I think, about seven...about seven...eight people down to help us out as Heli tack. They weren't jumping. These were all jumpers. And I can still remember these guys being pals in a different trailer and we were in our own different quarters there. And I got on a fire with these guys there. I was the only Heli tack guy, in fact there was only about three of us there, Heli tack. And these guys were called to fire and they wanted so many people, and I just happened to be the last number there. [laughs] So I got on, we went out there and I got to know these guys: Jack Deeds, Dave Boyd, Tom Morgan, Frank Sanders, Jerry Lebsack, Jerry—I can't recall his last name, but anyway, these guys were all there. I must have impressed them, because they started talking to me about signing up. And I said, well, okay. I'll do it.

And, you know, they were really going for it, maybe because I was dark, or whatever. [laughs] Made the government quota. But, you know, I had worked with them—worked on that fire—and then we packed out with them. And it was a long walk, I remember that. And, you know, we talked and I got to know these guys, you know, really well. And they said that they'd try to get me on up here. And I didn't give it much thought. So, okay. Fine, you know. Then I remember that year ended, and I went back up to Farmington and then I got a letter from here from Frank Sanders and Dave Boyd. It said, "You better put in an application. We're waiting for your application up here." [laughs] And I thought, oh, okay. Like, this was the first part of February and the deadline was the 15th. That was my birthday, too, I remember that. February 15th came around and I got—I finally filled out the whole government form. Jeez, it's—what—about several sheets long. I filled that thing out and I put it in the mail and sent it off. I got a letter back saying, "Your chances of getting on are really slim. If you happen to come onto another job, you better take it." That's what they told me in the letter. I think it's probably sent to everybody that applied. [laughs] But anyway, I did. I got on with the power plant there, and I was working as the janitor, kind of labor type job. It was paying fairly well, and I worked there two months before I got this little packet in the mail saying that I was accept—considered. And that all this—packet contained physical examination forms that I needed to get filled out by a doctor. So we did that. So [I] went ahead and went through all that, got examined and got all

my paperwork done and I sent it back up here. And that's the beginning. [laughs]

BB: So then you got picked up?

JB: So I got selected, yes.

BB: Good. So when did you come up for training?

JB: I came up in June. I think it was like June 10, or something like that, in '74. I quit my job down there about two weeks prior to that, stayed home. I was going to drive up here, but I was too chicken. I got on a plane; I flew up here and got up here to the base.

BB: The Aerial Fire Depot?

JB: Yeah, out to the airport. And I didn't have any wheels to get around so I called the base, talked to the grounds keeper. His name's John, he's kind of old man—janitor, or whatever—John Meyers. And he came out and picked me up, brought my suitcase and everything else. Took me back to the base, and he signed me up in the base. And I was walking down the hall and I heard somebody holler my name, it was Bob Cunningham, I don't know if you've interviewed him or not. I worked with him on that same crew on the Gila—Heli tack base. And we came on that fire crew up here to Montana--the one I was telling you about-- together, and I was really surprised to see him. I says, "Bob! All right!"

BB: So you felt right at home.

JB: I felt real comfortable. Didn't know a soul, just Bob, and the guys that helped get me on up here. I was looking for them, but they weren't around. I figured I'd run into them here or there.

BB: Why don't you tell me a little bit about the training then.

JB: The training? It was hot. Boy, it was hot. I remember that particular year. I can't recall the number of people that started out, but something like only 28 of us made it. You start...People...Some of the guys...Oh, we had about 40 people and only 28 of us made it. So they say. I don't recall the numbers, of course.

BB: Why—what was making them not make it?

JB: Your first—well, a bunch of them didn't make it because your first day you have to do push-ups, sit-ups, and do time requirements—running and all that. Many of them couldn't make it for pull-ups, or whatever, or sit-ups, running. I was—was pretty small, you know, and I could do all that stuff, no problems. I got through, and I was surprised to see some of these people who couldn't do it. It really kind of disappointed me, but anyway we went through training there behind the base there—the units. And we got divided up into squads. And the thing that sticks in my mind is in my squad, I think we started out with seven and only four of us made it.

BB: Out of your squad?

JB: Right.

BB: What else did you go through then after the sit-ups and push-ups and that?

JB: Well, we ran, we did a lot of running. Then you'd go into the units. You get—you get trained on each one of the units, you know—your shock tower, your...You do your let-downs, PL lifts, you know, when they hoist you up there and bring you down to the ground. You learn how to roll on your landing. We had an obstacle course, which always killed me. [laughs] Ah, shoot, climbing poles, I remember that, too, that was kind of neat; and that's pretty much about it.

BB: So were you pretty excited about the whole thing, once you started actually training?

JB: Yeah. I remember, boy, I was sore. I'd be dead tired. They had a bunch of Green Berets or something like that back from the New England states. They came down and they went through the training with us. These guys were all military guys, and on that crew there was this Navajo [Diné] on there. He was from Arizona, his name was Larry Watts, and he was in that squad. And it was good to talk to him, it was good to see him back. It was good to see him here. We talked in our—we speak Navajo all the time. And I watched him go through the units, and then I'd do the same thing. They'd do practice jumps way before we were even ready, you know. But I remember him particularly because we—all these guys would get really dressed up really sharp in their military uniform, their berets and polished boots, and get ready to go to town, and there's old Larry Watts in his Levi's, boots, and [laughs] hat—cowboy hat. He's the only oddball walking with these guys. We trained with them. It was pretty hot, I remember that. That really sticks out in my mind. You know, you got your suit on, your hot, your sweaty, and pretty near exhausted.

BB: Did you have any trouble during your training being a Native American? Did people hassle you, or give you a bad time, or—

JB: Oh, yeah. We got our usual share of shit here and there. Not—nothing really to get really up-riled about, but I guess to make you feel at home. I was—I was surprised, you know, the guys around here really, their humor was what really stuck in my mind. You know, they'll always kid around with you, and laugh with you. They don't laugh at you; they [unintelligible] which is good.

BB: Did it lighten up after training, do you think, or—?

JB: I think—you know, me being a Navajo really doesn't stick too much in their mind. It's just being a new man and can I hack it was—and was I good enough to go through this whole thing. After I work—they were gonna wait until after I worked with them, see if I could really qualify. If I could meet up to what they thought I should be. I think. After that, after I went on a few

fires with them, after I worked with them, then, you know, things really start to settle down. First, it was kind of tight, you know, the atmosphere was kind of tight. You know, we'd talk. I talked with people I trained with; we were all in the same boat. I didn't feel like race really had any great input on it. That's the way I felt, anyway.

BB: Do you think there's a pretty tight comradery between everybody after training?

JB: Yeah.

BB: Do you have buddies that you've stuck with a lot, or—

JB: Yeah, you...You generally start...I guess year after year you know these guys and work with them, and you get to know some people really close. And George Jackson sticks in my mind. I trained with him, he was on my first fire jump, in fact. He didn't jump, but he saw me go out the door, anyway. [laughs] And Rob Putzker is another guy I worked with. Bob Cunningham, he's the same guy that was, like, from New Mexico, I came up here and trained with. He's still jumping, George and Bob are still here.

BB: Why don't you tell me a little bit about your first jump? What was that like?

JB: That was a practice jump, I remember that. They...We trained two—two weeks on the ground, you know, both inside on first aid and outside in the units and jumping out of the tower and all that. You know, they had us pretty well prepared as to how to react, I guess, almost automatically when we went for the real thing up there. And that Friday came along at the end of the second week. We knew our first jump was Monday, and it was really quiet and people didn't really talk that much about it. And kind of a sense in the air, you know, a kind of a little uneasiness, I think. [laughs] And I remember we went down—a bunch of guys downtown and sat around drinking beer and pretty soon, people started breaking out, you know, started to talk about it. Say, wonder how it's gonna be, you know, first jump. You know, I didn't think about it that much. I thought, oh, I was kind of shaking in the back—not really shaking, I was just kind of hesitant. The big day's coming. Well, that Monday, we went to work and the first thing they did was they briefed us on—I guess, maybe our last briefing before the real thing. I talked to my squad leader, [Terry] Jorgenson is his name, I says, "What does it feel like to go out the door your first time? Do you remember your first time?" And I was trying to get a feel for what it would feel like.

And he says, "It was great," you know, "you go out the door, everything's so automatic and you go through all these different positions. And it's really no problem." So I kind of felt—made me feel a lot better. And we...I remember we suited up, I got check out—parachutes, my reserves are all checked out and made sure we had our harnesses on right. [laughs]

And we got on the plane. It was quiet. It was really quiet. I remember they took—they took these Green Berets out there first and they jumped. And I think they took the first group up there—it was a small plane. I was on a big plane, a DC-3. And I was on the—you know, we had

our squad leaders with us, too, and they'd be the first guys out the door when it—they'd be the first guys to jump. So I had two guys in front of me and I was the third guy, and a whole bunch of guys behind me, you know, all sitting there just quiet. Squad leaders and spotters are really laughing around, you know, yee-haw! You know, with all these new guys here. [laughs] Clairmont—I remember Steve Clairmont, you know, he's really yap—you know, yelling around. We got up there, we started flying, we left—the plane coasted out there to the runway and it lifted off the ground. I was looking down at the ground, I was thinking, I'm not back in this airplane." [laughs] So we flew up there. They told us there's a big meadow out here behind—somewhere out towards the south end of town. And we flew there, and I could see the other plane circling. And, you know, they jumped—they dropped some people. And we got into that same pattern, and then I was watching the spotter and he had the...he's telling...he's talking to the pilot, and I could feel the plane shifting back and forth. And I was sitting there, and he'd throw the streamers. And then the plane all of a sudden would take off and he'd circle around and be watching the streamers. Everybody would be looking out there, seeing what they're doing. Hell, I didn't know what the streamers were doing. You know, I'd just watch them. I'd lose track of it and everybody was looking out there. And I didn't know what the streamers would do, if it was blowing one way, I wouldn't have known. So he finally gets ready and he says, "Okay. Jumpers!" So the first two guys get there and they hooked up. And I was sitting there look—just sitting there. And we start going in circles, start going in our last—on that pattern. And he, Steve, had his face out the door and he had his—you know, looking out the door, looking down. Had his feet on the boot, and he was talking to the pilot and could feel the plane shift back and forth, you know, trying to get to the right spot.

All of a sudden, Steve pulls his head in, and he hits the guy on the calf, and the guy just—he jumps. All he just—goes out the door, all of a sudden [whistles], he's gone. That was amazing. Just as soon as he's gone there, he whips them around and he's gone. And the second guy gets in the door, and he jumps. [whistles] He's gone. It was that quick. I thought, jeez, you know, that's not like the shock tower. We were up there, and you jump up there and you barely swing down. You're counting to four, and you're kind of swinging down there. This was for—this was different. As soon as you left there, the slip stream on the side of the airplane just whipped you around and you were gone. I remember that. And I looked out the door and you could see their chutes down there. Hooo! [laughs] Looked down there and said, damn, that's a long ways down there. [laughs] So I got up in the door. He said, "Okay! Next two!" We got up there and hooked up there and I remember Steve was telling us, "Yeah, you got wings this way, that way, and face this way, and watch your chute, and see how they do." And I was looking at him and I seen one guy turn one way and the other guy turn the other way, and shit, I didn't know how to go about it. It was a big field, there's one lonely tree, and I see a bunch of guys down there. They're supposed to be hollering at me through a mic, you know, telling us how to—you know, coming down how to guide our chutes, which way to turn. And so there's a bunch of vehicles down there and a bunch of foremen down there and we were all up there in plane. We were circling around. And we started to circle, and I was watching these two guys going down, and kept on watching them. And then Steve, he's been talking around, he's telling me what the winds were doing, and it was going out my other ear. I didn't know what the hell he was saying. Got up in the door and was just standing there. There's a guy behind me, he started pushing me just a

little bit to try and get to the handlebar up here so he can hold it, and he's kind of nudging me forward. [laughs] The doors right there and the guys standing there.

And I got to the door and Steve, all of a sudden says—you can feel it, you know, the actual position from which you're gonna be jumping off of. You're getting closer and closer, and pretty soon Steve sticks his head out the door and he starts talking in the radio. And, you know, you can feel the plane shifting back and forth, and your up there in the door. And I'm all ready to go, you know, got all ready and in position. He's got my—his hand on my left foot, you know. And I could just look down there and I could see it getting closer and closer. And all of a sudden, he pulls his head in there, he slaps my—I could feel a slap on my leg, calf here. And I just jumped. It just whipped me around. The next thing you knew my feet were right on top. I was upside-down coming down like that. I could—all of a sudden my chute opened, and everything was quiet. Beautiful! [laughs] Great! I looked around me and here's my other partner, he's swinging down behind me, and we were going down. And it was a big field, and I started messing around with my toggles—my steering. Turning around 360s and trying to see what it would feel like. And everybody was looking down there and past my boot, and I could see myself drifting away. I turned around the other way. It was a big field, and I was having a great time. All of a sudden I thought, jeez, the ground's getting awful close. I better start thinking about landing here. All this time the guide with the mike was yelling at me to turn left. I couldn't hear him; I was too much in my own world at the time. And I went over the hill, I saw the ground coming up and I landed smack into the ground. And I got up, I said, Java, okay! You know, we use to yell that after we got to the ground. Jumped up, couldn't see anybody. There was a hill between me and where the rest of the crew. [laughs] I was way out there. Those were the days. That was my first jump.

BB: So, where'd you get the nickname Java?

JB: I got it when I was a kid.

BB: Okay. So it came along—a long ways.

JB: Yeah. Yeah, I got it when I was a kid.

BB: So, tell me a little bit about your first fire jump, then.

JB: Okay. That was the end of our three weeks, our practice jumps. And we got our—got our wings. Little bitty wings, saying were ready—were smokejumpers now. Larry Eisenman shook our hand, I guess that meant we were smokejumpers.

BB: Who's Larry—who is Larry Eisenman?

JB: He's a—he was the foreman then. I know that he's—he holds a pretty high title out there at the base now. But at that time he really was a gung-ho guy and well to be respected. And people were kind of—they talked kind of, god! I hope he's not our foreman on this fire. You

know he's just, he'd lead a charge. It was great. He's great. Well anyway, he talked to us and gave us a little pepstalk—pep talk. Got back to the base and they already had the jump list of all the old jumpers there. These guys were going out on fires, coming in already while we were in training. They put us into the jump list every so many people. I got on, and I was way down there, like 35 or so, like that. And that evening they had a fire call for two crews to go down to Utah. So, they called off all the names and they stopped one name short of me.

BB: First call?

JB: So these guys left. They went down to Vernal, Utah and then they went down to Silver City after that. And here I was, number two on the jump list with a guy named Bob McKeen. That night those military guys were there I was telling you about, Larry Watts, it was his final night there and I was—we were gonna go out there and have a good time. So we went out there bar hopping and went to the park, I remember that. And I came in something like 4:00 in the morning. He dropped me off. That's the last time I seen Larry. He was out there—these girls brought us back and dropped us off. I went upstairs because I know I need my sleep. And I was up there looking out the window, and I seen Larry still outside talking to these girls. That's the last time I seen him. And he had to leave something like 7:00 in the morning, fly back to New York—New England, wherever, Massachusetts, or something—with the rest of his gang. And I just died. I went to sleep. I got up at breakfast time, my head was hurting. Half ate my breakfast and then I went to the loft.

Being number two on the jump list I had my boots and everything ready. And I got—I was all prepared. I was feeling really shitty. And I knew that first fire call I'd be gone. I was thinking, maybe...I wonder if it gonna be today? Maybe not. Ten o'clock rolls around, I was really thirsty. Didn't feel right, really, just like what I feel right now, I guess. [laughs] I don't know, not that bad. And then we went in for lunch and we were eating, and the siren goes off. I'm eating a steak, halfway through my steak, and I jump up. We had a bunch of Heli tack guys that were in there eating. I go running out the door and this guy he's walking in line, and I hit him. I go rush past him, I bumped him. I didn't know I bumped him that well. He almost fell over. And I ran outside, got to the loft there, and suited up and was ready to go. There's four people, he said, "Okay, the two-manner over on the Bitterroot-Selway over in Idaho, both two kickers." So Bob and I suited up—Bob McKeen and George Jackson, my friend I'm staying with. We're really close guys I got [inaudible] he was on that plane. He was a new man, too. And I can't recall the third, er, fourth guy's name. Well anyway, we all flew out there in this Beech—twin Beeches is what it's called—jumped out of it one at a time. And we got there to location. I remember I was laying back there just taking in all the bumps. We started—we got to the area, and then I remember Clairmont—Steve Clairmont was on there too. And he said, "Well, it should be down there somewhere." So, we started circling this area, and they were in touch with a lookout tower and the tower would say, it's right beneath you. I can see it. We couldn't see it.

We circled and we circled and circle, and I was there in the back of the plane and I was getting sick and goll—half way hung over and the plane bouncing up and down and the flying in circles. And you're—I remember, "Get back by that door!" Getting in the doorway, because I was back

there getting the cold air blowing through my face. And I remember we were circling forever. And then finally, and I remember Bob was looking around everywhere for it. He was really excited; he wanted to go. I didn't care. And he—then I remember Clairmont said, "Well, two more passes around. If we don't find it, we're going home. We're going low on fuel." So we're going around and all of a sudden Bob said, "There it is! There it is!" He's really excited, jumping around. It's a snag. I could see it; it looked like a matchstick burning up on top. Great. [laughs] At least I'm leaving the plane.

So he gets up...We get all—everything going, and he gets up in the plane and he jumps. I could see him open up and I was watching him, and I was next up. So I hooked up there and Clairmont was telling me, "Yeah, see those little—there are some big trees down there. Them sons-of-bitches are about 250, 300 feet tall, so stay out of them!" And there was no clear spot. There was just little open areas between these humongous trees down there. Up there they don't look big. I said okay. I'd seen Bob, he made it through between the trees, and I was sitting up there and I got all ready. I remember Steve was looking down there, and all of a sudden, he said, "Okay, get ready." And I got in the door, and pretty soon I felt the slap on my shoulder. And I just went. I was out and started going down. I was looking down and started guiding my chute. I didn't know how to guide a chute that well at that time. And I could see these trees get bigger and bigger and bigger. [laughs] I don't remember how I made it through between these trees, but I landed at the base of one. I smacked into the ground. By the time landed and got all packed up and got up to the top where the fire was, they dropped the cargo on us. And it went over into the hill and into some fresh reproduct—reprod is what we call these young trees, and we lost it. We didn't have our fire tools, and the water, and every—went over too. So we got to the fire and it wasn't doing anything so we went over the hill and started going back and forth looking for our fire pack. And I guess he threw some spurs, too, I don't know. Those free-fell—we didn't find those. We never found those. But we started going back and forth looking for our fire pack. We couldn't find it, we had a search plane come over and try and find the chute for us, and they couldn't see the chute on the trees. We walked and we found it. That's when I puked my guts out. [laughs]

BB: You got real sick then?

JB: Yeah, that was my first jump. We nearly died. We lost—we lost our water. We lost one—container of water busted. And the other one we had just for—2 or 3 gallons is all we had. And we started rationing it.

BB: So how long did it take you to put it out and—

JB: We stayed on that two days. That tall matchstick was not a matchstick. It was a tree probably about five foot in diameter and it was straight across, and out crosscut—you only had so much room to move that thing, about 3 or 4 inches on each side. And it was straight up. It was burning up on top. The top of it was broken off, it was down there. That's no problem. We put all that stuff—we put everything out but that snag. I said, "Okay. Now, Bob, what should do we do?"

"So, okay. Undercut it on the top side and make it fall uphill. We don't want to make it fall downhill; it's gonna roll down the hill, and we'll have more work here. We put an undercut on this side."

It was hot, and we were short on water. And being miserable didn't help things any. And we put an undercut on this side. We put a back cut on the tree hoping we'd make it fall up hill. It didn't fall. "Okay. What do we do?"

"Cut the side." We cut the side and it didn't fall. "So, hell, let's put an undercut on the downhill side and make it fall downhill then." You know, we were just really exhausted swinging back and forth, and it was tired. And we notched it out. The thing still didn't fall. And it was straight up, really well balanced. We cut it down from the other side, and nothing happened. And this was like 2:00 in the morning. God. We worked on her all day. We finally went to bed, the hell with it. The next morning got up, looked at it again and said, okay, let's try it again. We cut it down on it side. By that time, we started cutting it again, we could see down the core, ashes falling down from where we made the cut. It burned all the way from the top right down to the center. It was dropping out right where we had cut—made our cuts. So we started sawing again and—the other side. And finally the, you know—shoot, we must have had about maybe 5 inches, all the way. Just the core maybe holding it but wasn't burning anyway. And it wouldn't fall. We had two notches out on both sides. We tried to push it and it would just weave back and forth. And finally, it fell over, and it rolled down the hill. Two trees caught it, and then it just blew up. It just started burning. It was just like a chimney, just the whole center core of it started burning up. We had our work cut out there. That—chop off the top, saw the top open. Finally split it open, that took another day. And I died on that fire. Our water was really low. [laughs]

BB: So then you hiked out?

JB: We hiked out, yeah. We finally got everything all done and time to pack out. Got all my gear together and packed it all up. Got ready. So okay, here's a map. We can go up the hill. There's a trail up there maybe three quarters of a mile away. So okay, we got all our gear and packed it up and got it on my back. I couldn't get up, it was so heavy. I was trying to figure out a way to get up. There I was just sitting there. I couldn't lean forward, it was—gee, talk about 100 to 120 pounds or something like that on your back. McKeen barely got it with his and his legs were wobbly. And finally, I managed somehow to get up. I think I was hugging a small tree as I was getting up—pulled myself up like that. I was exhausted. And we start walking. We walked up hill. And we'd walk 20 feet and had to catch our breath. That was some pack-out. We—brushy, and, this is like in the evening of our third day. And we had tried to get up to the trail and it took us forever. Our water supply was down to about half a canteen, between the both of us. And we'd stop, Bob would get a capful, and he would give it to me and I'd sip it, and he'd pour himself up. And I think he's kind of stealing more drinks, since he had the canteen. [laughs] It didn't hurt me that much, though. Anyway, we got out, we were walking up there. It got dark on us, we still hadn't made the trail yet. On the ridge top, we were finally walking on a flat

surface. We sat down to rest, dropped out gear. Bob says, "I'm gonna run ahead and look for the trail." I said okay. So he goes on up there, and this was at night, pitch dark, and I got my flashlight. "You stay here with the pack." Okay. So he went and just a few yards ahead of me I could hear him say, "Hey! Here's the trail!"

I said, "Great!"

He said, "Okay, where are you at?"

He starts coming back at me, and I said, "Here, do you see my flashlight?" Sometimes I could catch a glimpse of his flashlight, he couldn't see mine. I could hear him moving, and the next thing I'd hear him way down the other side. I said, "Over here!" Finally, he comes over to where I was, it was that thick. And we got our equipment, all our gear and take it down to the road—down to the trail, dump it, and we just grab our personal gear bag, and our sleeping bag, and some freeze-dried food, and we start walking. This is at night. Bitterroot-Selway River is way down way down there. I can remember seeing a little stretch of water down there, and that was the river. We were way up on top of the mountain. We start walking down, it must have been about an eight-mile hike downhill and we were really running low on water. Just thirsty. I think Bob more so than I was. We start walking, he said, "When does this trail start heading down hill?" We were going around mountains like that trying to get down there. Finally we started getting down to the bottom. I could hear that water telling me that river—I could hear it. Bob must have been really hurting, he started going faster and faster. And we kept walking, So where is the river? I can hear it. [laughs] We kept walking and walking. And this was, like, 1:00 in the morning and finally we bottom out there at the bottom. And it's just a straight—kind of like a area, and then you got your river there. There's a huge bridge down there. I remember I got out to where the trail broke, and Bob was halfway across the little meadow running to the river. There I was, just kind of walking. And I got to the edge of that little meadow there and there's the river and there's Bob, he's running across the rocks and he almost dove into the water. [laughs] He was—and I got down there and we drank our water supply and we sat down there, and boy, it was wonderful. Went across that bridge. Walked that bridge to the other side and there's a trail and a little airstrip down there. We walked to there and they had some buildings there. I guess we were expected that night. We knocked on the door, nobody answered. So it was, okay, we'll just go out to the airstrip and go to sleep out there. So we walked out to the airstrip by the gate, they had the field fenced out, we went by the gate and laid our sleeping bags down there and ate some cereal. We were all—we stocked up on water. So we laid down, and went to sleep. Early the next morning we could hear the airplane coming up. "Ah, you better get up! Let's go!" And we jumped up and got all our stuff together and the plane landed. By that time these guys coming from that cabin, there's two guys and a girl, and they came over and we talked briefly. They told us that there's snakes in these rocks where we were sleeping in that night. [laughs] Oh, shoot. We didn't know that. We were all right, so we go on the plane and we flew back here to Missoula. Got back to the base, nobody at the base. We were one and two on the jump list again.

[Break in audio]

BB: So, where exactly were you based, then? Missoula?

JB: Here in Missoula.

BB: Were you ever—?

JB: Trained. I was out of here all the time.

BB: Did you ever get to go to Alaska?

JB: Oh, yes. We'd get detailed to go to different places. I think I traveled the most when I was here. I got to go back down to Silver City, Southern California, Redding—Northern California—there, Oregon. I remember I went down to Colorado, and West Yellowstone, back East, in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, I was on some fires there, and Washington, Alaska. You travel all over.

BB: What was it like jumping all that different kind of terrain?

JB: It was interesting. California, I remember it because it had huge, big trees and brushy. I remember that. And Redding was hot. And I don't like the city at all. It was too hot for me down there. But it sure is nice to get up in the mountains and stay up there. Kind of didn't want to leave these fires up there, have to get off these fires and go back down to the base. And I think the West Coast, I remember the tall trees, real tall trees. I remember they gave us extra long letdown ropes. You're talking about 300 feet, even though that might have been only have been halfway the distance of the tallest tree around there.

BB: Did you ever get hung up in one of those big ones, or—

JB: No. Nah, I never did. I'm glad I didn't. [laughs]

BB: Did you ever—Did you ever have any serious injuries of anything like that?

JB: Yes. It was on a practice jump up here, just north of Missoula. We have this place—a little jump spot up there. And I was on a Beech, I remember that, and they had a whole load of us. They took about two Doug loads up there. And they jumped these guys and—our turn, we got on the old Beech and we flew up there in this little Beech. We had to jump one at a time. And we got over this meadow—this little open meadow strip down there, not very wide. And see all these guys walking around down there, and I see all these buses they're supposed to pick us up with, and all these cars. Ten jillion people down there, everybody brought their family down there—wives, kids, and the whole works. It was a big show for them. And I was—I was up there in the plane and I remember the first guy that jumped, he was the squad leader, I think. And he went out the door, and I was watching him. I was the second guy to go, so I got in the door and they told me the winds and all that stuff. Okay! Great! Fine! This is my first year still. I was

getting to be pretty well seasoned. [laughs] Got there in the door and they did the usual things: slap me on the shoulder and I was out. And I started going down drifting—drifting backwards, and it was kind of windy. And making sure that I didn't want to get hung up in a trees or overshoot my landing area. I was in some pretty good steering. I was about, maybe, 400 feet in the air, looked down and saw all these people down there. I said, "Wow!" you know, "I get to put on a big show this afternoon." About, shoot, maybe 150 feet on top I let out a big scream, "Yee-haw!" It was great. I went over this final tree and I looked down like that, and I got my arms up on my risers, and getting ready to land—put my feet together. The next thing I knew it just slapped me right into the ground. I felt my leg hit, my butt hit, and my head hit. I just went backwards, and it just smacked me so hard. And I was laying there, I said, "God, are they usually like this?" [laughs]

I remember, my glasses had fallen off, they were over my mouth [demonstrates] like so. My helmet bounced off...No, the...Half of it was over my ears. The face mask was—it was on my forehead. My helmet was almost off of it. And I was laying back there, God, it just really thumped me into the ground. I remember, I was laying there, people were running up to me saying don't move! Don't move! I remember McKeen running up there—Bob McKeen, the guy on my two-manner. He said, "Don't move Java! Don't move!" And I was laying there, trying undo my capewells. And people rushed up to me, and I could just feel hands going all over me, taking off my harness, my chute, my jacket, they unzipped it, my pants—jump pants. And I was laying there and I thought, jeez! This just really dinged me. My mind was really groggy. And people were saying, are you all right?! Are you all right?! I thought I could hear them. I was half-way between gone and here. [laughs] And finally I said, oh, shit! I better sit up and let these guys know at least I'm alive. So I sat up, but everything was going kind of wavy. I got up there, and people were saying, are you okay?! Are you okay?! And I must have been still in shock, and then finally I—I got up and said, "Yeah, I think I'm okay." I got up. Got up there and people really helped me out then. Got all my gear together and threw my chute in the bag and got me all prepared. And I was sitting there—and I walked over, I remember some people asking me, are you okay?! You took a hell of a dive there. You really came down. And I said, oh, I feel okay. I got on the bus and sat down there and just laid back.

One of my classmates said, "That's the hardest landing I've ever seen anybody take. You bounced off the ground about a foot and a half after you hit the ground." I just—really slammed me into the ground. What happened was the wind—there's a meadow, right? The wind goes down; when it hits that meadow, it goes down like this, and then it goes across the meadow, and goes up the other side, and goes like that. I happened to come in where the wind goes downside. And I caught the downwind and it just really smacked me into the ground. What it was, when I was still sitting there really groggy, I'd see guys landing on the other side of the meadow and they could have stood up—did a stand-up landing, you know, didn't bother to roll or anything. And I thought, jeez, why me? [laughs] The next day, I was stiff. I couldn't move my head—turn my head—and my whole neck was stiff. My shoulder was stiff. My back was stiff. I went to work anyway. [laughs] Yeah, that was a hell of a big thing. I couldn't turn my whole head, and I was walking around like this, you know, like Frankenstein. I couldn't move or turn my neck. That was—

BB: Did you get checked out by a doctor or anything?

JB: I think I did, yeah. No, I didn't. I didn't get checked out. I didn't get checked out.

BB: Do you regret not getting checked out? Do you think you should've?

JB: Now?

BB: Yeah.

JB: Yeah, I think so. Uh, the middle of my back, I get this kind of a pain. I don't know what I did, but every once in a while I can still feel it from that fall. It's kind of a numbing...It's not numbing, it gets—feels like little needle pricking you right there in the middle of the back, and I just feel it. And I still feel it from that, and that's where I got it. But what the hell. I jumped for three more years after that. [laughs]

BB: Well, were you scared to jump after that?

JB: No! Hell, I was having a great time. I had the most jumps a new man ever had. Twenty-eight jumps. From here, anyway, that's what people tell me.

BB: In 1974?

JB: 1974.

BB: That's good.

JB: That was the extent of my injury list.

BB: Do you consider yourself a professional?

JB: When I was jumping?

BB: Yeah.

JB: I did. Yeah. I thought this was it. How much higher can I go? I'm at where I want to be, probably with the best group of firefighters in the whole world. Fire—forest firefighter, anyway. That was it, the top. And I was there. I knew about fires. I felt pretty professional. I've seen people run from fires that we'd go in there and we'd work on the line and not run away from it.

BB: What kind of person do you think it takes to be a smokejumper?

JB: There's many different types of people that I ran into here. Jeez, you know, attorneys,

physicians, Speaker of the House for the State of Montana, I remember that. Teachers, the whole—I think everybody's got their own—I don't know.

BB: What do you think it is that makes you do it?

JB: What made me do it? I think it's the guys that I worked with. They're the greatest guys that I've ever worked with. I felt like they were pretty level-headed. And I got along with them great. The job was good, but I enjoyed the people more than I did the job. Right now, that's why I'm back here. I miss seeing these guys and it's great to see these guys again. It's wonderful. I really enjoyed this. The job, I can—that 60-second joyride to the ground, that was the extent of it and then the rest of it was the same old thing, fighting fires. I can do without—but what I miss is the guys, really.

BB: Was there any time that you felt like you were in real danger or life-threatening situations, besides almost crashing pretty good there?

JB: I think—

BB: Anything on the ground happen to you?

JB: Yes. At the time, I didn't think it was a big crisis situation at the time we were occurring. You just kind of have to be level-headed and think through it. Okay, the fire's burning my way. What am I gonna do? Which way can I get out? You're always thinking like that. "What happened? What would I do if the fire turned on me and came up this way?" I guess at the time what some people would think would be really hazardous and critical, but at the time I was there, it didn't phase me like that. I was kind of—you think through it and do what I had to do to get out of it. Fire—like in Alaska, out on a fire we had our chutes burned up. It was racing towards us, so smoky we couldn't—we couldn't see, breath, or anything. Our chutes were out there, we drug what we could. We built a line ahead of us and we knew that the fire was coming our way. And smoky, we stacked all our gear that we could behind this line, and we built the line up really well, and then we laid down. Fire just came up around us, burned around the—burned around the fire line—the real small fire line we made and went on ahead. So smoky that we had lay on the ground trying to breath. You're talking—you're talking grass level there and you got your face in the ground trying to breath. You got your handkerchief over your face and just smoky. You can't see, your eyes are all teary. Your eyes are shut, and just hear the fire going around you. Just laying there. I didn't think I was in a real critical situation then. It was something you do. I guess at the time when it gets real critical, somebody gets hurt. I was pretty fortunate. I didn't think about it. I guess there were times like that, single, no responsibilities, no big problems, no big worries. That was great.

BB: Do you have any fires that you particularly remember as being the most memorable or any incidents that occurred that was something you'll never forget?

JB: I've got a couple that really stand out in my mind. One was on the—down on the Wyoming. I

was down there at West Yellowstone. There was about five of us that jumped a fire down there, it was a small—it was a hunter fire, I remember that. We jumped it and it started out from a campfire and there was two horses that were tied up there. One got away as the fire took off. The other horse was tied up with nylon rope, with a hackamore over its head. I don't know where the hunter was. One whole side of its face, poor horse, was completely scorched. Still alive, mind you. The horse was still alive. His eyes were just shut, and one whole side of his face was just burnt. And you know that sucker tried to get away from that tree where it was tied up. God! I was mad to see a horse burned up like that. We untied him and didn't know what to do with him. The hunter finally comes back. God! I was pissed. I was mad. The fire was going up the hill and [we] gave that horse back to that guy. It's just all I could do to keep from putting my Pulaski through that guy's skull. Everybody was mad. And he was off hunting somewhere; I think he just came back when he seen the smoke. That poor horse. It was a black horse, I remember that. He tried to get away from that fire, I know that. That nylon rope just wouldn't burn in half, or give, or something.

Well anyway, we stayed on that fire. We worked that night on it—chink line on it. Clairmont was on that same fire, too, Waring, a guy named Bill Waring, Putzker—Rob Putzker—Phil Hall, there was five of us. And we dug line all night long and finally we just, out of exhaustion, quit. The next morning, we started working on it again. It got warm, it jumped our line, it took off over the hill up the side of a mountain. It was really going. We called for reinforcements down on the radio. They didn't come in until about 10:00 and by that time the fire was pretty well on it's way. We found this little area kind of a little hole there—I mean, meadow. We sat down there, we ate. We were eating, we saw the jump plane come by and throw streamers, and we seen guys jumping out, disappearing over the tree line. They started to bring in different fire crews from different areas, all these Indian crews—Cheyennes and Crow. We sat there and ate and then all these guys start coming in from the 16-manner. They'd come by—I remember George Jackson was on there, I remember that. [John] Lammers, [Bertrand] Tanner, these guys. Hey! There you are. Where have you been? You know, haven't seen you around Missoula. I went down to West Yellowstone for a month and a half. So I was jumping out of there, and evidently I was missed up here. Everybody was surprised to see me down there. And we stayed—and the fire was gone, you couldn't do anything. Why try to fight it? You know, it was going away. And people were setting up camp and all that. We sat down there and ate, shot the shit with these guys, and pretty soon they took off and they started working. What we did is we went back...We worked on...We worked with them for a while, and we came back down to the base. And they split us up, those five guys. We were supposed to saw for these different firefighting crews. I was—they put me and Phil with the Cheyenne crew. We were kind of like sawyers for these guys. And the 16-man crew, the jumpers, they kind of stayed as a squad—as a crew—as a firefighting crew.

We worked with them off and on, but most of the time, you know, we'd saw for the different—Cheyenne firefighting crew. One time I—they called us, they said, okay. They flew us from the main camp up to this sub-camp way up on top, that's where a lot of the Indian crews were staying, too. Got up there and Phil and I—I remember—okay, you're gonna take these, go with this ranger here—forest ranger. And we got some spot fires on up ahead that we need you guys

to work on. So, okay, fine. So we start walking with this ranger, and he was really a dumb-shit, I remember that. We followed him anyway. [laughs] The Indian crew behind us—the Cheyennes—and Phil and I. I had my chaps, my chainsaw, and we got to the spot fires and it was really burning. It was really burning. And the base—there was a lot of dead trees in there, and if the base of it burned out, these trees burn out and they'd fall. And we tried to go in there and cut some of them down that we could. Finally, we said, aw, the hell with it! Let's go ahead and put a line around it.

So we split up the crew. Phil's crew would go one way, and my crew would go the other way. So okay, I started sawing for these guys and we really started going, showing these Indians how I can run this saw here. [laughs] I was sawing away and looking around. It was hot. Phil's crew went up the other way. All of a sudden, I heard a whomp! This—something hit my heel back here. I was standing over, sawing a log, I heard a big whomp! Hit my heel on my left foot here. I looked back down there and all the ash and stuff was flying up all over the place. The Indian crew was behind me. I looked down and there was this charred log, oh, about a foot and a half in diameter, laying right there on my back. Looked down there, it just landed that close. It hit my heel; I could still feel it. I turned around, I looked at the Indian crew, Cheyennes, their mouth—their eyes were that big. Huge. Their mouths were all open like that, looking at me. I looked around, and pretty soon, big old grins broke out on their faces. I said, "Let's get the hell out of here." [laughs] I got my chainsaw and we started going back to where we were. And I seen three more trees going in the direction Phil and his crew were going. Man, we were screaming, look out! You could just see those trees go whomp! falling down that way. And all of a sudden, we see half of the crew come running back out from there. Running up from there.

BB: What was the name of this fire?

JB: I can't recall the name of it. It was a huge one.

BB: In Wyoming?

JB: Yeah, I remember it was out of Cody.

BB: What year, do you know?

JB: This was in '74? Same year, '74. My new man year.

BB: Was that a pretty much a year of, like, fire busts?

JB: Yeah, that was my busiest season. Like I said, I got the most jumps that year, for a new man, anyway. I think I'll go back to what I was talking about. Those Indians come running out, Phil's crew, and I said, "Where's Phil?" There's no Phil. That was after the trees had landed. I walked down—started running down the, down the fire line to where he had been. Asked these guys, "Where's Phil?" They didn't answer me, they just looked back. And I ran down there, and I seen Phil walking out of there. His hard hat turned around, his mouth was down to—down to his

chest. His jaws were down to his chest. Holding a chainsaw in his right hand, just like that, walking, kind of dragging his feet. His eyes were that big. I said, "Phil, you all right?" He said yeah.

I said, "Well, how far did those trees miss you?"

"Oh, about three feet." Jeez! So we got that fat ranger, and we got out of there. But we went ahead and kind of got a little more organized, put that fire out. That little incident really stands out in my mind. Somebody was watching over me. [laughs]

BB: Certainly sounds like it.

JB: That other incident was up in Alaska with a black bear. They dropped four of us on this one fire, and this was out of a Twin Beech—no, it was a Twin Otter. We were on that fire, it wasn't really doing much of anything. There's—the fire was up in the timber area, and there was a meadow, and you got that tundra there and the tall grass, and then there's a lake way out there.

BB: Do you remember where that was, exactly? Or the lake or anything like that?

JB: There's so many lakes out there, that I don't recall. We were out of Galena, Alaska. We flew up to the fire—I remember that. They dropped us on that one. There's no sense in working with the fire tools, we just had to use backpack water pumps, is what they call them: piss pumps. We was using that, spraying around the edge of the fire. The fire wasn't doing anything, just kind of putting out smokes around the edge. And I ran out of water. Well, okay, I'll go down to the lake and replenish my supply here. So I got down there and I walked all the way across. And it was soft walking, you had to watch your step.

I got to the lake and there's a big bush there and I had a gallon can there to use to pick up water with. I took it out there and I filled up my water bag. I put that gallon container back on that bush and, you know, got that thing back on my shoulder, and I start walking back towards the fire. I was watching my foot and I was just walking along. And I had this real uneasy feeling somebody's watching me. I look up there, right in the tall grass between me and the fire and there's this bear standing there looking at me—black bear. Huge thing, and it was just standing there looking at me. And I said, oh, wow! [laughs] My heart started pacing. And I thought, okay, now, slow down. See, being Navajo the bear is related to me. We have clan systems. I'm *Táchii'nii* (?) / Red Running Into the Water Clan, and we're related to *Shash dine'é* / Bear Clan. So, I talked to this bear. I said, "Hello." I said, "I'm your friend." I'm talking to him in Navajo all this time. I was talking to him and saying to him, "I'm not here to bother you, I'm here for the fire behind you, to work on that, my brother or my sister, whichever you are." I told him that he was related to me and who I was. "I'm Navajo and I'm your brother." And our purpose for being there at the fire. And then I told him, "Okay, I'm going to walk around you, since you're between me and the fire. Okay?" [laughs] Logical thing. I walked around, oh, about three quarters, I told him I was gonna do that, and then go on back to the fire. And I told him, "I'm not

gonna to bother you. I'm not gonna touch you. I'm having nothing to do with you."

And I start walking real slow, and I—we had these little chopping knives, I can't remember the names of this knife, what you do is hack spruce boughs with it. I had that out. That was the only weapon I had. And I had that water pump on my back, so I start walking. I go about three quarters of the way and I look back at him every once and a while. All of a sudden, he gets down on his—all fours and he starts running at me. And I got this—I had this thing. I turned around and I stared at him. I'm talking about a distance of about 30 feet, really close. He starts running at me and I turned around there looking at him. And I figured if he comes real close, I'm gonna hit him in the nose with that knife. And he stops, and he stands up there again. And then we hold another conversation there, and I said, "Don't bother me, please." [laughs] I'm talking to him in Navajo all this time. I says, "[speaks in Navajo]" I told him that. I told him that we were related again and that I was gonna turn around real slow, I'm gonna go back up to the fire. Nobody's watching this. This is just between him and I. I turn around again real slow and I start walking. He's still standing there watching, and I walk up to the fire. I turn around, "Hey! Boys! There's a bear out here!" These guys come running out there and look out there in the meadow. That bear's still—he gets down on all fours, goes out to the lake where I got the water. My can—my gallon can I had it on the bush, he knocks it off, plays with it for a while, and then wanders off.

BB: What did...did you...you spoke some Navaho. What were you saying?

JB: Generally, what I told you in English, I told him. Here I won't bother you; I'm here for the fire, to put it out.

BB: You said the clan, and then you mentioned a Navaho word. What was it?

JB: Táchii'nii is my Navaho clan.

BB: Táchii'nii?

JB: Táchii'nii.

BB: Boy. You got me. And what's the bear called?

JB: The bear is called *Shash*.

BB: How do you spell that?

JB: S-H-U-S-H.

BB: Shush is the bear. Then there's a clan that the bear belongs to?

JB: Yeah, na-shusha (?). There's a Pueblo down in New Mexico named Na-shusha (?), too. So

anyway, I remember my mom telling me a long time ago—see, my people were taken from their present area and moved to across the state, to a place called Fort Sumner, and they spent about five years there. This was back in 1860s. And during that time many people got away from the prison and made it back across the state. Talking about three—shoot, 400, 500 miles walking. She was telling me about one of her aunts—would have been my great-great aunt, I guess, walking back and...from Fort Sumner. And how she ran into a pack of wolves that was walking behind her. She got some grass, she got it on—she started a fire. Started it on fire. Every time that they got close to her, she would shake it. And the—you know, the clump of grass she had, kind of like straws, they're all just burning at the tip and they kind of blew up and they kind of kept the coyote—the wolves away. She did that and finally they quit following her. And then she walked further, and she ran into some bears with cubs, and she spent the night there with the bears, being related and all that. She didn't really stay at the same camp, but around there. And they left her alone and she made it back to—back home, anyway. My mother was telling me this, and she had—she held a conversation with the bear, you know. They didn't bother her. And I remember my mother used to tell me that we were related to the bear. So anyway, that's what stuck in my mind. I always hear about jumpers running from bears; bears chasing. I think it's just like dogs: you run away from a dog, they'll chase you. And when that bear came—got down running—started running at me, I just turned around and I faced him. I didn't dare run. And he stopped. If I ran, he'd of probably tagged me.

BB: Is the bear considered kind of a great spirit, isn't it? Or just a brother or—

JB: The bear are people. They—the mother bear will almost cradle her cub like an adult will and feed it.

BB: So that's why—

JB: The bear are almost human. They'll stand up just like people do. We don't kill bears. It makes me mad to hear about somebody getting killed by a bear up there and then they go chasing the bear down and shoot it. That's all part of the life cycle around here. If you're there, the bear will eat you.

BB: What's this glass-key mean? Glass-shee?

JB: Táchii'nii. Táchii'nii. I get different interpretations of that. "Red bottom" is what it is.

BB: Red bottom?

JB: Yeah.

BB: And that represents you?

JB: My clan.

BB: Your clan. I think that's a great story.

JB: That always stays in my mind. This bear was close. He was close. [laughs]

BB: So, what did the guys do after that? Did they—

JB: We had a...The plane...The jump plane fly over again and we asked if they could drop us a rifle or something like that. They didn't have any, of course. We didn't have any weapons and those guys were afraid. I thought, oh, you know, I heard people—jumpers carrying pistols and stuff like that. You know, .45 magnums, whatever, .357. I had a .357, but I left it here in Missoula.

BB: That really wasn't for bears, though, was it?

JB: That was for self-protection.

BB: That's for—

JB: Grizzlies. That's for grizzly bears. I kind of wonder if I would have held a conversation with the grizzly bear. [laughs]

BB: So a grizzly's not in the same clan that you're in, then?

JB: Same thing.

BB: Really?

JB: I was just fortunate that it was a black bear. You won't—you generally run into more black bears up there.

BB: Would you have used a .357 to try to defend yourself from a grizzly, or would you have tried to have done exactly what you did with the black bear?

JB: I would have done the same thing. The only time I would have used that .357 is if he was two feet in front of me running full bore at me. If I had a gun, which I didn't at the time. [laughs]

BB: How would that have...Would that have reacted to you then if that—I'm just saying an "iffy" situation—if you would have killed a bear. If you had killed that bear out of self-defense, how would that have affected you and your beliefs?

JB: I think I would have regretted it—having to do it, but I would have had to do it. And it wouldn't probably really have bothered me that much, subconsciously—consciously. Maybe way down deep, you know, I say, okay, I shot a bear. It's—I shouldn't have done it, but at the time, in that situation, who wants to carry a dead jumper out of the woods? [laughs]

BB: Did you ever have any trouble with the—any serious injuries where somebody got killed or had to be carried out, or.

JB: We made a rescue jump up there—up around Libby [Montana] one time. One guy was up in the mountains, he was walking and got a staub of wood caught in his leg right here, right next to his artery, I guess. And they called us up there and we made a rescue jump. And primarily what I did on that one was I cut a helispot out for a helicopter to come in. We had EMTs on that fire, emergency medical technicians, they tended to the guy—wrapped him up, fixed him up. We just cut a helispot. A helicopter came in there, got the guy, and flew him out. That was the extent of my rescue jumps.

BB: Do you feel that the smokejumpers are an important part for rescue?

JB: Yes. They're not there just for fires, they're for rescue out in the woods. Now how else can somebody get out with a broken leg or maybe in plane crashes? There are plane crashes always going on in the mountains. That's one thing I didn't want, was to go on a plane crash. I remember that time, Lowell Hanson was the foreman up there and I was talking to him, I said to him, "I don't mind going on rescue jumps. I just don't want to handle dead people." And I told him, "I don't want to handle it, because—" especially white dead people, and that's a no-no. If I had to, I would have had to have gone through a ceremony back—it would have bothered me.

BB: What exactly is it about a white dead person? That's something in your religious beliefs?

JB: The enemy. They're the enemy. You handle them' they'll come back at you sometime down the line and make you ill, have some, maybe, effects on you, maybe mentally, maybe physically. And maybe you go to—I guess what I would say is a medicine man, and he would pretty much diagnose what your problem is. And he would say you need the ceremony. "The reason why you're like this is because you did this back then, and it's affecting you now." And I was—I've gone to them several times, and it's amazing how they're really correct. They don't know anything about you. They'll talk to you and say, okay, you're like this because back when you did this, you handled something wrong, or something like that. And then you got to have a ceremony or whatever they recommend to undo this. And that's just one of the things that I didn't want to go through.

BB: Well, how about fires? How do the medicine people feel about fires and what you were doing?

JB: Lightning fires. Lightning was a big no no. You don't handle lightning; lightning's sacred. You don't handle things that have been struck by lightning. In my case, I've put out fires that were started by lightning. I've chopped down trees that were struck by lightning. I've yet to get diagnosed for that yet. [laughs] But it bothered me. You don't cook with fires that were started with lightning. I've never cooked with fires off a forest fire. I always start...I always...If I want to

cook, I get my own wood, I get my own matches and start my own fire there, and I cook with that. When I'm on a fire, boil my water with it. I don't...I don't do...Cook with fires that were started with lightning. That's as far as I'll go. As far as I went, anyway. But I didn't have any choice. You're on a fire, you have to put it out, you have to work with it. You don't have to go both ways fighting the fire.

BB: So why did you leave smokejumping?

JB: Let's see. [pauses] I went back to school down in New Mexico State down at Las Cruces, New Mexico. I didn't really have any type of a trade or something to fall back on in case something happened—in case I got out of the jumping program. A lot of people, they had different degrees. They're teachers or different crafts that they were good in. Me, I didn't have anything. I went to school before that, but I didn't finish, so I figured, okay, I'll go back to school. Get me something I can fall back on, some type of a trade I can use. So that's why I went back. That was my third year of my jumping and my last year I jump...Well, I got married to Stacey. Her name is Stacey Bradley; it was Nafsinger (?). She was going to school here at the time. She's Assiniboine from Fort Belknap. We got married. You got—and then I guess what really had a lot to do with it was—for my schooling I had to take an internship during the summer. I got on down there on the same mine I'm working at a coal mine, doing reclamation work. And I got down there and did my summer work on that, and then I went back to school. I finished up. I applied for jobs. These guys got me right back on at that mine and I've been with it ever since then. I've worked in mine land reclamation, and it's a steady job, it pays real well, it's got really good benefits, and it's home sweet home.

BB: Yeah. Would a woman Navajo be able to jump? Would there have been any restrictions on that?

JB: I'd like to see it. I'd like to see it. I'd like to see more Navajos up here. As I know, I'm the only one. I have not heard of any others in any other base. Maybe there are, but I don't know.

BB: What would you recommend to them? I mean, what would you say to them to—

JB: To these women?

BB: To the women or men to—about smokejumping. What would you have to say?

JB: I would say go for it. Get away from the reservation. Get some experience. Work with these great people up here. You'll have a different attitude towards the enemy. [laughs] Towards the guys I worked with. Change your attitude, I get along great with these guys. I'd like to see more people, in fact, I—when I go up there and I see these young kids, I tell them, get away from here. Go out and do something. Get some experience away from the reservation. Go live in another state. Get out of here and get used to it. And get some experience, come back and it will broaden your whole scope of view, your attitude towards your job. I got a friend down there, his name is Barry Dixon, and he's—I went to school with him down in Las Cruces. And

right out of there he got a job there and he's been working that mine. He's come up here, he was my best man when I got married. Anyway, he—he doesn't have the outside experience. He's always been back downtown. There's a big difference, it's kind of narrowed down his view.

BB: Do you think that working outside has helped you spiritually?

JB: Yes. Working out here, it gave me a broader scope—a view of how the outside world. What it was like, what the people, what they were like, you know, different nationalities, and that's helped. Of course, I worked on the Gila. I worked with a bunch of [inaudible] Mexicans. I got to work with them, they are a great people, too. There's a few Indians down there that come up here to work with White and a few Mexicans, Spanish, and I get along with them great. I got along with them really well. [laughs]

BB: Well, we're getting kind of short. Is there anything that you want to say? Anything you want to add?

JB: Ah, shoot— [pauses]

BB: Anything you forgot or anything like that?

JB: Give me another question. [laughs]

BB: Give you another question. [laughs] Okay. How to you feel these days when you see smoke on a mountain? What does that stir up? Anything?

BB: It makes you think back. It makes you think back to the good old days, what you'd have done, what can be done.

BB: Like yesterday when the hill took off.

JB: Yeah. Yeah, I was looking at it, what's taking the so long to get up there?" [laughs] Aw shit, they're still sitting down there at the base taking about two hours to make a decision whether we should—what people we should take up there while the fire's going over the hill. Stuff like that. I was really disappointed to see the reaction time to that fire. And I seen it when it first started out, it was small. It wasn't even up to that road yet. It kept going, getting bigger. We were just watching it, pretty soon we see a tanker, said, all right! Finally! I thought back and people said, boy, you should be up on that mountain. You feel like—don't you wish you were back up there?

I said, "No. I don't want—I got away. I did my turn. [laughs] I'll just watch. I'm on vacation; I'll just sit back and watch." You kind of wonder what would happen. You know, I feel like I should come back sometime and try jumping again. But with the—I don't think I could do it now. Not—well, physically I probably can handle it. It's just that the economy's so bad around here. What will you do during the wintertime? I don't know. Things are so unsure up here that it's a nice

place to visit anymore. I'd like to move back here. My wife wants to come back up here.

BB: Well, it was nice talking to you. We got to go. [laughs]

JB: Oh, great. It's been nice.

[End of Interview]