

Maureen and Mike

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**Oral History Number: 133-009**

**Interviewee: Fred O. Brauer**

**Interviewer: Kathy Root**

**Date of Interview: June 27, 1984**

**Project: Smokejumpers 1984 Reunion Oral History Project**

Kathy Root: You worked from 1941, '42, and then 1945 to 1958.

Fred Brauer: Yes.

KR: What years did you jump?

FB: I jumped all of those years.

KR: You jumped all those years. Then did you make a career with the Forest Service?

FB: Yes, I worked 26 years for the Forest Service.

KR: What did you do from 1958 until you retired?

FB: In '58 I went into the regional office as Assistant Air Officer and I took over the helicopter and the retardant program. The retardant program is the dropping of slurry on fires that slow their progress, you know, slow their burning. All it does is really, it coat the fuels so that it lowers the kindling temperature of the fuel and has a tendency to hold it until people can get there to work on it.

KR: What got you interested in smokejumping, like in 1940?

FB: Well, I started fighting fires for the Forest Service in 1934 as a kid. Had to squabble a little about my age and stuff but we started in '34 and I worked in '34 and '35 and I, the BFPA, the Blackfoot [Forest] Protective Association, didn't have all the rules and stuff at that time on personnel and hiring firefighters that the Forest Service did. So we were able to get experience through the Blackfoot Protective Association. Then in '37 I went to work for the Forest Service regularly in the summer, when I graduated from high school. I started to work for them every summer and I stayed with it until, I resigned in—when was it, '65?

KR: '65. You were fighting fires then for a good five years before you were a smokejumper?

FB: Oh, yes. I was, spent part of 1937 season on two different lookouts. On Seeley Lake Ranger District and then I was a headquarters guard at Montour and then I was transferred in 1940 to Quartz Ranger District down there, which is now the Superior Ranger District, as headquarters guard and then I started jumping in '41.

KR: What got you interested in jumping? You had been fighting fires for five years.

FB: I don't know, it was just a challenge, it was something—I really believed in the concept. The back country was, we were getting about 30, on the average year we were burning 33,000 acres of forest land out of 32 or 33 million over Region 1. I really believed in the concept because I walked to fires at night and over terrible terrain and 10, 12 hours to get there and I just knew that we had to have some other way to speed that up, to get there. The concept of delivery of personnel by chute was intriguing. I wanted to try that, I wanted to do something about it.

KR: Of course, now it's only been going for '39 and '40, right? Two years before you started jumping.

FB: Yeah, well, '39 was a really—they hired Frank Derry and his brother Chet and Buster and Glenn Smith who were professional parachute jumpers. They were barn storming parachute jumpers, so they went—they decided through a man in Washington D.C. to go to the Okanogan on Chelan Forest in Washington, and there they picked up two forest employees who were not jumpers, had never jumped before. Derry had a connection with the Urban Parachute Manufacturing Company through his barn storming, and he was able to get them interested in developing the Eagle Chute for the delivery of personnel. Well now they, when they got to the Chelan on the Okanogan they picked up a fellow by the of name George Honey and another one by the name of Francis Lufkin. They were two forest employees and they joined them in the experimental jumping. Now the experiment was to take an Eagle Chute, which was a 30-foot chute, and like a half a baseball, and it had two ears on it that had guidelines and was steerable. So they knew they had to have control of the chute and a steerable chute. They took these two men who had never jumped, and they jumped them. They found out that the average fellow in good physical condition and mentally alert could handle a parachute under those circumstances.

So then Frank Derry started developing the equipment to go on. He was a real good man. He and his brother Chet were real good, and Glenn Smith, were real good at developing this equipment. Well in 1940 then they decided to make a small project out of it in region, they selected Region One, why I don't know, but the selection was made out of Washington, D.C. They selected a training site at Seeley Lake Ranger Station, and they put a man by the name of Merle Lundrigan in charge as the project leader. They selected one individual off of each forest in Region One which gave them ten people. Well, all of them didn't go ahead with it. I think seven of them did the experimental jumping. I think I could remember all of them, but anyway, you probably have their names anyway. But they did the experimental jumping, and it was all with the free-fall equipment. You had to pull your own rip cord, and some of them, of course, having never jumped didn't like that too well. And I think out of the group, the seven that trained—James Waite and Earl Cooley and Ruf Robinson and Dick Lynch and Jim Alexander plus the Derry, Chet Derry and Glenn Smith were professionals, were the ones then that made a nucleus to come to turn it into a project in 1941.

KR: And that's when you came?

FB: That's when I came then, when they decided that they would try it as a project for two years, why then we, that's when I came into the project. I was the alternate for the 1940 jumping, but they decided that they weren't—they didn't pull any alternates in. When the fellow that was selected by the Lolo National Forest didn't finish his training program up there, why they didn't pull in the alternates. It had gone too far to start new people. But then from that nucleus, why, they developed three squads the next year. One was located at Moose Creek and one at Big Prairie Ranger Station on the Flathead and the other one at Seeley Lake.

KR: What was that like that first year, I mean the training?

FB: Well, it was mostly training for jumping. Because we were all firefighters, we were all experienced firefighters, so the main emphasis was on equipment and jumping.

KR: Well, now they didn't have any of those jump towers that they have got now.

FB: We developed them, we built them.

KR: In '41?

FB: In '40.

KR: In '40 you built those?

FB: Yeah, they built them at Seeley Lake, and they were rough prototypes of what they have now. They still had them. They had big lines hung up there so that they could teach a fellow to let himself down out of his parachute if he got caught in a tree. All of these things were, it's amazing that they had the grasp of situation as well as they did. Because Frank Derry and Buster and Chet and Glenn Smith were all just, they'd never seen a fire. The other fellows had never seen a parachute, so it's just amazing that they did so well without any serious injuries or anything.

KR: So you trained with the towers and all that?

FB: Oh yes, yeah, they had the towers and the slack lines and—well what we did it with was on four pulleys. Pull yourself up and down and practice to let yourself down. Out of your harness, you had to get out of your harness and slide down a rope to get out of a tree. They were very good at developing techniques to answer the problems that were presented to the jumpers in the early stages. Then there's been very little change, really, there's been very little change. We toughened up the physical program considerably in '41, and I got a lot of help from Naseby Rinehart at the University [U of M] because I was on an athletic scholarship out there playing football. And when I started to jump, Naseby, I asked him about taking some of the things that we used, and he knew what we were doing. He come out and watched me jump a couple times, he knew what we were doing and he helped design knee exercises and back exercises and stuff

that we used in the jumpers for years. So oddly enough, Nas Rinehart was even, had a hand in developing the physical program for the jumpers.

KR: What was that first jump like?

FB: Oh I don't know, I like to, I can't, I was so anxious to get at it that I never—I never thought about it even. I just knew that that's the way that we were gonna have to do it, you know. And pert near, oh I would say in my experience—total experience in the program—we had very, very few fellows that couldn't jump. They just couldn't get out the door or anything like that. All of them could, some of them didn't like it and didn't return for more than one season. But the big percentage of them loved it and they stayed with the program as long as they could, a lot of them, until they graduated out of school.

KR: What is it about smokejumping that makes a person come back—that they love, that is there for them?

FB: It's individualism, I think. When you can teach a person everything in the world on the ground about it, but there's only one person that's up there on that step and gonna go out, you can't help him. Once he leaves that, steps off that step, he's on his own. That's what brings them back and that's what develops what I mentioned before. Why they turn into such good men. They are on their own, they have to make their own decisions, they have to make good decisions and they get their head cut in pretty fast. When it just 1,200 feet up there and—you're going down into the rocks and timber you better have your head cut in and you better be on your own and know that you know what you're doing, you know? And that's what makes good men out of them, that's why they love it, that's why it's a challenge all the time to them. And it develops real good fiber, real good character in a lot of people, you know. Now, I think is where you have to exert some control and say we don't want any monkey shines. All we want is to follow the rules and do it as we say and none of, taking swan dives out of the airplane and all that kind of stuff was taboo. We didn't put up with any of it because they did get feeling that they wanted to, we used to always tell them, okay, boys, go free-fall. If you want to pull shenanigans and have fun and do a lot of experimenting, go join the skydivers, you know? Don't pull that kind of stuff here. We've got a strait-laced program which has to go this way and we don't want any shenanigans. We don't want any injuries, any more than we have to have.

KR: Did you ever get that feeling that when you were jumping that you just liked being in the air and liked doing it so much that you wanted to experiment?

FB: So, you have, unless you jump you don't know how quiet it is up there when your chute opens and. It is absolutely, all you hear is the wind flicking that nylon parachute or silk parachute when you're jumping and that's all you hear. There's no other noise except when the airplane comes around again to jump somebody else. But it's so quiet and so serene that it's just different. It's a brand-new world once that chute opens and you're out there on your own, you know which way you're drifting and it's a challenge all the way, you see.

KR: You like that, I can see it in your eyes.

FB: Oh yes, oh yeah. It's a challenge every step of the way. You get out the door and the chute opens, you go to work because you've got a target that you've got to hit on the ground. The target's probably a little clearing in the trees next to the fire or somewhere close to it and you work to get in there. That's, all. You got to be thinking all the time, you know, you can't be goofing off, you got to be awake and thinking and it's such a challenge to them—that they always wanted to do better every time. It's just that kind of challenge to you that you try to do better each time. That's character development too. And I was very proud of those kids. A lot of them come in there, boy they were, they were just kids and in three or four years they were going away as real good thinking young men. They were, you could be proud of them, you know, they were really on the ball and doing a good job.

KR: What was 1941-'42, those two seasons like for fires?

FB: We didn't, we had a fairly good fire season in '41, as I remember. I think, well the Seeley Lake crew went over on the Moose Creek twice to help out that, those jumpers. We also went into the Flathead because I jumped on Dean Creek in '41 and I also jumped on Box Car Mountain in the Bitterroot. So we were backing up the crews and we didn't have too much of a fire situation on the Lalo for the crew that was based at the, we had two or we had a squad at Nine Mile. [unintelligible] But we were based at Nine Mile and then '42 we moved to Seeley Lake with two squads. Then there was a squad at Moose Creek too and one on the Flathead. But they got a pretty shake down really, enough to, to measure the efficiency of the program and decide that it was worthwhile. Now one of the funny things that happened in the early part of the year, we jumped with, the Eagle parachute was constructed of all silk. You jump in one those mountain meadows and if you didn't pick that chute up immediately and roll it up and get it in a bag, the grasshoppers would eat 400 holes in it before you could—they'd jump on there and spit that tobacco on. And everywhere they spit that tobacco and took a bite, there would be 400 holes in your parachute if you didn't get it rolled up in a hurry. So with the nylon chute, then when we converted more and more to nylon in '42 and after that, why, they didn't bother nylon or the nylon didn't mildew and become damaged. It could stay wet and so there was great progress between the old silk chute and the nylon chute. And like I say, Frank Derry was really kind of a genius at developing equipment. He developed the first static line chute that would deploy without a rip cord. General Lee came over from Helena, they were training airborne over there, and they pretty near copied what he was doing there, with the covers and stuff that he had developed on that old chute. So really, when you look at the progress of the project, Frank Derry deserved a lot of credit for what was done, equipment wise, and people like Merle Lundrigan and some of them. They're very patient and very constructive in what they were contributing to the—they were, they did some. Well, we felt the need of developing a piece of equipment that would give that downward and forward acceleration that you have in a parachute. So that we could teach them more how to land rather than swinging off of a rope and hitting the ground. And we developed a slack line, the very thing the Army developed, but we developed it with an old hay hook. We forgot one thing about it and injured a boy by the name of Dillon very badly. He came off of the tower and he jumped up and that released the hay hook of course, any

pressure off of it. As long as it had a load on it, it stayed cocked and then you, if it would trip when you would take the load off of it when you'd hit the ground. Which was an excellent thing for us and we had a slack line and it was working fine until Dillon happened to rare up off the step and unhook it. But it was a good piece of equipment and it did the job fine. But it was one of those that fell by the wayside too, because boy, they took a dim view of serious injury in the early development of the program, boy, they were scared to death of that type of thing. We had, oh—I think the program went through three crisis. Development of the equipment was one of them, in which they got by fine. Then after the war started and they went into the Conscientious Objector program and they jumped some military personnel too, on fires, why then it, that change over from the Conscientious Objector to hiring the veteran and. that thing was serious. Boy, it was a touch and go situation.

KR: How's that?

FB: Well, at that time the project was a parasite. It drew its money from the forest fire budgets. And it, there wasn't all that much sentiment out there to lose four or five ranger district and forest personnel to finance jumpers, and maybe not use them all summer. So there was a little bit of stigma there. Then they felt the jumpers were a bunch of prima donnas, and some of that. I don't think it was really deserved but they, you know there's just something that goes with pilots and specialist people that other people that are doing the same job the hard way, resent and there was that little resentment that went along with the '46 and '45 and '47 seasons. We had to work hard to gain respect and the faith of the supervisors on the forests on the ten forests. It was a touch and go proposition, I'll tell you it was close. We had military personnel, some of them had taken all the bologna that they wanted to take you know. They didn't take to being ordered around too much. They wanted their, they liked their freedom. Yet you had to get on them and supervise them because a lot of them weren't that good a professional firefighter—didn't do that good a job on firefighting. So there was that, it was a tough period. That '45-'46 year was a, boy I think we were real close to having the supervisors pull the rug and say no, you're not going to have our money to do this.

KR: And a lot of that came because of the returning vets?

FB: Well, I wouldn't say that. And just any personnel that you could hire. They were giving up their money for operating their ranger districts and their forests to a project they weren't all that sold on.

KR: Right. Still in the probation period.

FB: Yeah, more so then. Now if we hadn't had a war I don't think we'd have had that.

KR: How's that?

FB: Well, I think by '42 we were going along pretty well. I don't know, I don't know about the Conscientious Objector program. A lot of people told me those fellows did a darn good job, and

did a good job at firefighting. But it wasn't costing the ranger district or the forest anything.

KR: Right, because they had to do that?

FB: Yeah, they were doing that rather than serving as a litter bearer or something else. So it wasn't—that program wasn't costing the forest money. And the shock came when they found that they were going to have give part of their money into the project to finance it.

KR: After the conscientious objectors?

FB: I think...the conscientious objectors or any other personnel that cost the forest money, made a difference. That was where the difference came, I think.

KR: When is that? That conscientious objector time was a real sensitive time.

FB: If I understood correctly and Earl Cooley, if you talked to him about it—He was the project leader at the time. He and James Waite—Jim headed up the parachute training and Earl headed up the fire and personnel. They would be able to tell you better than I could about it. But they did have a nucleus of people that were either 4-F or in the service and injured or that were good people. There was some real good men. Al Cramer, Bill Wood, Anderson, and people like that were real good and served the project well after the war was over. That handled the conscientious objector and jumped them and stuff. But oh, I don't know they—they didn't seem to have the organization that we had in it later. I can understand why they wouldn't on a war time footing. They lost a lot of personnel off the forest, they were trying to fill in everywhere that they could.

KR: Short on supplies?

FB: Short on. If it hadn't been for the Johnson Flying Service having the type of aircraft they had, the Ford airplane and the old Travel Air, Curtiss Travel Air, that project would have probably folded.

KR: Isn't that amazing, what little things make a difference?

FB: Yeah, there again is someone that deserves a lot of credit toward the successful development of the program. The Johnson Flying Service personnel. They were extremely cooperative in anything that you wanted to do in training, and they trained their personnel the way you wanted them to. They contributed every way they could to the success of that program, and they deserved a lot of credit for the success of the program. There was a lot of people that turned wheels to make that program—a lot of good people that were very unselfish in their giving of their time and effort into that program.

KR: When you came back in '45, there were not conscientious objectors then?

FB: They was some still here, but they of course had to be replaced, should have been and. replaced by veterans and by personnel that had been here previously even though they weren't jumpers, that were forest personnel that wanted to be in the jump program. That was a little hitch there too, that was, because. I was on the grievance committee and the veterans of foreign wars and—I ran head on into the Forest Service and into the Postal Service two or three times through the committee and trying to see that they adhered to the 90-day law that the federal government had passed to protect the veteran.

KR: Which is hiring veterans' preference.

FB: Yes. They had 90 days in order to apply, and needless to say, some of those conscientious objectors turned out to be excellent riggers and parachute people and would have loved to have stayed in the program. I had no objection to that individual as a individual but the law, I felt was very important that that veteran get his rights and that's how I happened to wind up on the doggone VFW committee. I believed strongly that the veteran deserved the preference.

KF: So if a vet applied and was having trouble getting a job someplace, and he was within the law, the 90-day limit, then if they had a grievance, they asked for your help under VFW?

FB: Yes, either the American Legion or the VFW or other groups were organized to help.

KR: Is that the main reason that COs weren't around or weren't hired back in '45?

FB: Yes, I think it was the main reason. Now a couple of them were in Francis Lufkin had a couple down at Okanogan on the Chelan. I think one of them stayed throughout the program. They never did replace him. But evidently there no one raised the question of does that veteran had preference over him to have that job. And here the question was raised.

KR: Were there ill feeling against the COs because they were COs?

FB: I don't think so. I don't think so at all because I knew a couple of them. A fellow by the name of Carlson and a fellow, Phil Stanley's Color Lab here, he was a jumper during the war. I had no animosity toward those fellows at all. They had made their choice and they had to live with it. But on the other hand, living with it was part of getting out of there and letting that veteran have the job, because that's what the law required. I had nothing whatsoever, in fact Phil Stanley's my neighbor up at Flathead Lake.

KR: All right. I hear people talk about that, that period of time being a real emotional ti me.

FB: Some of the veterans wouldn't have worked with them. Oh, no, there was some real difficulty there. Some of, I think some of the veterans would have really put on a display if they had to—

KR: Had to work with them?

FB: Had to work with them. Now that didn't turn out to be true on the Chelan with Francis Lufkin's crew. He had a small organization there and I think he had one fellow that was a rigger and worked in the loft and jumped. I don't think it turned; they didn't have any difficulty there. But I think that was mostly Francis' ability to handle people that got him by. He had a real small organization that he could pretty well pick, hand-pick the people. Francis was an extremely capable man and I think he just was a good enough personnel man that he handled that situation. Where you got a larger organization, you're bound to have a wider variation of opinion and stuff that you can't control like you can in a smaller group.

KR: Sure. So you were in the service '43, '44, and you came back in '45?

FB: I came back November of '45. I didn't jump.

KR: That season.

FB: Well, I jumped a couple times in November, but it was just as a—demonstration for other regional personnel to show them that they could get out of an airplane with a chute if they had to.

KR: That first step could be taken.

FB: Yeah, that first step, if it were necessary it could be taken. And the old expression that used to be used so often around here, 'Ride the biggest piece down,' we tried to destroy that. Because we were getting into the air age in the region. More and more regional personnel were traveling in by air. Because of their expediency. It was just necessary. We tried to put on a training program and stuff to install in those people the thought that don't ride the biggest piece. Get out on that parachute, that's what you got it for. So that was one of the training programs that we had for the regional people.

KR: Did it take, did they believe you?

FB: I don't think so really. I think some of them would have had a real difficult time getting out. We never had to try.

KR: Never had to.

FB: No, we never had an occasion where a plain civilian person was not acquainted with the jump program had to jump. We never had that happen.

KR: That's great.

FB: Isn't it? Of all the air hours flown in this region, for the sake of inspections and tours and this being a regional office where it was necessary for these division chiefs to get out and get

around, never had. a chance where any of them had to jump.

KR: Good. So you were more active in '46 then?

FB: Oh yes.

KR: You were there for the whole season?

FB: We got back into the program and hired all, well we hired all, all veterans and non-veterans that were qualified, that had one year's fire experience. And like I say it was a rough, rough—it was a hard working year. To convince the supervisors and stuff on the forest that we were a viable outfit that could do the job for them. And really I was in sympathy with the regional or with the supervisors because at times they didn't do too good a job of fighting fires.

KR: How's that?

FB: Well, they didn't have that much experience. They just had a year maybe where they were out on one fire or something, and we hadn't got that much training into them in a month. They were veterans and we had some that were not burning up with energy. Kind of doping off on the—laying down on the job a little. Just goofing off. They were just like the military, you know. It was tough, it was really tough. I think it was a real critical period in the jumper program.

KR: Is there similarities between the military and the smokejumping?

FB: Well yes, in a way. You have a routined life, pretty much a routine. You are, regardless of if you want to look at it or not, you should, you are facing a certain amount of danger all the time in the flying and in the jumping and on the fire itself. So it had a good many aspects of the military with it. And of course, we had some pretty red-necked people like me that demanded a good deal out of them because I demanded a good deal of them because we were really at the threshold.

KR: What do you mean you demanded a good deal of them?

FB: I insisted on quality work and as much as a perfectionist as I could get out of them in jumping. Because we were in enough trouble with the supervisors and stuff without anymore.

KR: So '46 you were like a crew boss or something?

FB: Earl Cooley was the project leader and Jim Waite—and I was the fire suppression foreman and run the loft. The dispatching of the people and there wasn't, you have all the contact with the supervisors and stuff. And I was very aware of what they thought their needs were and what we were contributing to satisfy those needs. And that's why I demanded so much of the people, because I really felt—and I know it to be true—that we could have faded away as a project had we not performed well enough to get some of their confidence. We'd have gone under. Because

it was an expensive program compared to paying a man a \$105 a month. You not only had to pay these boys that kind of salary, GS-5, but then you had to fly them, and you had to train them and you had to keep them here in these quarters and stuff and it was expensive.

KR: And equipment.

FB: And equipment.

KR: Chutes.

FB: Chutes. Gee, chutes were running 200 and some dollars. And then. we. after the war, of course, we got a lot of Erving flat-type jump chutes and Frank Derry developed the slotted chute in '41. They were really easy to convert, put the slot in them and that cut the expense considerably because they was surplus by the thousands. And a lot of material came to us rather inexpensively at that juncture because of the military's—didn't have the need you know. We could buy a lot of equipment that way. Harnesses, back-packs, E3-B for personnel other than jump chutes.

KR: Did you jump in the service?

FB: No. No, I was a pilot in the service. But I was in a organization that. I was on seven different drops with the airborne. I dropped the airborne and had seven battle stars for, and they never dropped in Europe. So I was with the jumpers constantly, 82nd and the 101st and then—which is more satisfying than anything I was, I had a, oh, up to 19 airplanes. I used to take, and we'd go and pick them up at Nappes (?) or somewhere, they were wounded and then fell out if we had them in Paris. So the evacuation was very satisfying to pick up those boys and see that they were getting—

KR: Good care.

FB: Good care and as rapidly as possible, and the re-supply was good. It was much more satisfying than the bomber pilot and the fighter pilot, although I was trained as a fighter and a dive-bomb pilot, why I enjoyed the C-47 airplane. Because we did so much good, we weren't just damaging and killing people, we were saving people you know, it was very satisfying.

[Break in audio]

KR: Okay, '46 was a big fire here? A lot of fires?

FB: I don't think we had too hard a fire year in '46. I can't remember right offhand, but I don't think it was too severe. In fact, that might have been one of the rainiest, wettest years that we had. I can't remember right now. '49 and '55 were dry that year.

KR: '49 was.

FB: I don't remember any of them. We went all over, of course. We were the biggest organization. We had 125 to 130 jumpers, and we went all over. We went to California, Oregon, Washington, and had a crew that we sent to Silver City, New Mexico, every spring. We started the Bureau of Land Management out in Alaska on their smokejumper crew.

KR: Really, did the training here?

FB: Yes. We also trained a lot of doctors and military personnel. We started the rescue training for them. And that was a good program, in fact Dr. Amos Little over in Helena was one of the first [background noise interferes] there ever was.

KR: Did you ever jump with him?

FB: Yeah, I did jump with him one time. It was only a training jump but I never. I never did have to go out on a rescue with him. I went out on a rescue, oh, with a doctor that had the clinic, Western Montana Clinic. I should remember his name, but I can't recall his name right now. But we jumped a crew in—just out of Big Prairie Ranger Station on Graves Creek. A man that had been severely mauled by a female grizzly and we went in there and jumped on him. Bill Wood and I gave him first aid. The crew built a heliport, helispot, in heavy timber and they cribbed up a helispot so that we could evacuate him. The doctor came in on the helicopter and treated him and then flew out with him. His name was Lee I think, he was from Ronan. But that's the only doctor I ever jumped and then worked with. But we were trained, now Dr. Johnson came out from Washington, D.C. with the Department of Agriculture and spent two weeks with us. That was in—well, it was right after the Mann Gulch fire in '50. We convinced him of the need for better first aid training and more authorization out of Washington to give plasma and give blood transfusions, because we were the only ones there.

This leads back to my insistence on them as being proficient jumpers and stuff. You jump with two men on a fire, and you were unfortunate enough to fall out of that tree and break your back, or you're unfortunate enough to have a flare up in the fire and get burned badly, you are total at the mercy and dependent on that individual to keep you alive. For that reason, I was extremely—I just demanded that they be proficient, that's all. There wasn't room for the goof off, that's all. When you hear these fellows speak like Herbert did, it's because he also knew the meaning and believed that we had to do it that way. I've talked to newer jumpers out here [Missoula Base] and they've expressed the opinion they would like to see it that way now, which it isn't evidently. I shouldn't say that but that's what they've told me. I'm sure you can appreciate the fact that if you were out there with an individual, you'd want him to be proficient in case something happened. A chain saw cut you up badly or you break a leg badly or you get burned or you fall out of a tree and break your back, boy you would want him to know something.

Cause it might happen. If it happened in the evening, there's no prayer for you to, there was no helicopters in the beginning. You had to wait for the next morning before a litter crew could get in there to evacuate you. And we had a well-organized, well trained program of people that, any

jumper could fit into a litter crew and they could wheel you out of there. We had a wheel on a litter and boy, I mean we could wheel a guy out of there in a hurry. Even on the Forest Service trails we could make good time. So we were well trained and we could fill the bill but boy, the people had to be the type of individual that was ready for that occasion.

KF: I heard a story about you—that you demand a lot from the men that you worked with and for, but that you also backed them up.

FB: Yep, yep.

KR: And that if you got complaints about your men, if it meant hiking in 20 miles to see what they were up to, you'd do it.

FB: Yep. That built the confidence and faith I needed between the supervisor and the ground personnel on the forest and the jump crew. Right is right, truth is truth and let's find it out. No innuendo, no tales, let's go and see. I believed in that and that's the only policy I think that's worth a hoot. You've got to go and establish the facts in a case, in this project—because you couldn't let your men be blamed for something that wasn't true. On the other hand, you couldn't let your men get away with something that was detrimental to the forest people and to the project. So it behooved you to get off your duff and find out. We did her, you bet. We'd go anywhere to do it and that gradually subsided then. It's easy to say well the men didn't do a—worth a darn on that fire. But if they know damn well you' re gonna go in there and find out and look at it and see. Then they' re not so liable to say something in an off-hand way to downgrade the work of the jumpers if it isn't the truth.

On the other hand, if the jumpers know that you're gonna go in there and find out, they darn well aren't gonna lie to you when you come in. So it works both ways, you know. It still builds that esprit de corps in the organization where they want to do better and they want to dispel, they—my people that I supervised, I felt, wanted to do the very best job they could every time. And I wanted them to. And if we did we had no complaints. If we didn't, like in '46-'47, then Mann Gulch was a bad situation for us, an extremely bad situation for us. When we lost the 14 people over there in the fire you know, that burned. It brought a lot of, well, as all catastrophes do, it, they try to focus a light on you if it belongs there or not. Journalism isn't too good at times and too fair at times. They about it. And in doing so, why, it was tough to keep them away from fairy tales and on what the actual happenings were.

KR: Did you go out on that fire?

FB: No, I didn't ever go. I was so busy fighting other fires and trying to keep those boys' heads screwed on straight—that their buddies had burned up over there and the parents were calling and saying how about this, what's happening. And my god you know, I was, I never was busier in my life trying to keep the ship on an even keel so that we could go on and do our job.

KR: What did that do to morale?

FB: You know, amazingly enough. I don't know why. I never had one many quit. I never had one quit. In fact, both Rumsey and Sallee that survived the fire jumped within two weeks.

KR: That's amazing. That says a lot for those men.

FB: Rumsey really didn't want to but he told me, he said, "I know you're right Fred." He said, "I've got to face it' got to do it."

I said, "Well, it is not much of a fire, but you got to go for your sake. Now," I said, "if you want to turn it in when you get back, that's fine, but don't do it without going one more time."

KR: So his next jump was a small fire?

FB: Yeah. Yeah, boy that was a rough session, rough two weeks. Because we had really a lot of going fires, on-going fires and we had to sacrifice a lot of personnel. Cooley, the one that had spotted them and was the project leader at the time, had to go over there and identify bodies. I had to send some of my good foremen and squad leaders over to help with the rescue operation. People that you could depend on in a different way. You had to be extremely selective about who you sent because this wasn't just a fire, or this wasn't just a thing. It was something that—they had to be closed-mouthed individuals so that the journalists didn't get to them. They had to be—use their heads about what they were doing. They had to keep records of where the bodies were found. They had to—

KR: Herb Oerteli went over on that one.

FB: Yeah, Herb and Homer Stratton.

KR: What is it—some of the qualities of those men that, I mean, those are unusual people.

FB: They are unusual people. But I think it's—first of all it's believing in what you're doing, you know. That's the basis for all good work, no matter what it is. You've got to believe in what you're doing. That's why I always told everyone, even my grandchildren and everyone else, don't work at something you don't enjoy, because you're not gonna do a good job anyway. And you're gonna be miserable all the time you're trying to do it.

KR: That's true. I agree.

FB: So don't do that. The basis for all good work starts with believing in what you're doing.

KF: How long did that Mann Gulch, was that with everybody the whole season?

FB: Yeah, yeah we couldn't shake it the whole season because the fire went on and run for two weeks anyway. We were over there, got the bodies out and went through the identification.

Then we had to send representatives to all of this you know, of course. We had to answer the questions of all of the mothers and fathers across the country from wherever the kids were from to satisfy them that it wasn't, it was just a, something that happens. It wasn't due to the jumping, it wasn't due to, it was just one of those things, that they got caught in a ground fire. That's all. There wasn't anything that, the only thing that they could have done at all was listen to their foreman. I had many of them say, why didn't they listen to their foreman. Well, like I told them, I've been in many tough situations in the military and in the jumper program. You cannot demand of a man to substitute your judgement for his when he's laying his life on the line.

That's how simple it is. He's going to prevail, that's all. You can't beat 13 of them into submission to make them listen to you. They're not gonna. If they're laying their own life on the line, they're gonna do what they honestly believe in their opinion is what's gonna get them out of it, it's a tough situation. Now had they stayed with Wag Dodge, he was a competent, well trained, levelheaded foreman and he got out of it without a scratch. He burned his way out. If they'd a listened, they'd have all survived. How do you train people to do this? The military hasn't found a way. We sure didn't find a way, although I think we came about as close as any organization that faces this kind of, of quick decision thing that can.

KR: Do you think that Mann Gulch has been a lesson to those after that to listen?

FB: We tried to use it that way to some extent but. in our training, but we met a good deal of opposition from—I don't know what level it was from. The regional office or the, they wanted to forget that. We couldn't use it as much as we'd like, but I used it in all of my dealings, personal dealings with the jumpers after I took over the program in '51. I used it in my talking to the foremen and to the jumpers if there was any of them, I was always available. If a kid was having a problem and having difficulty jumping, I would go with him. I'd pick him up in a Travel Air or anything, to try to convince the boy that he could do it and that he should do it, you know, for his own sake. And then if he wanted to leave, fine. But I didn't want him to leave with that hanging over his head. I couldn't do that. Because he would never ever get rid of that the rest of his life.

So we've made many special efforts to take them up by themselves or go with them so that they would jump once and then they could forget it. If they didn't like it, fine, but they didn't have that hanging over their head the rest of their life saying, I didn't do that, and I should have, you know. I don't know what they go through but I've been told by people that it's a—that's a frightening experience they have to face something like that. That type of failure, challenge to you—it's tough, I guess.

Anyway, based on what information we had, I would go to any length to get that boy through one jump.

KR: So you said you took, you took over in '51?

FB: Yeah.

KR: So you were head of the smokejumpers?

FB: Yeah, I took over the project in '51 and stayed then until '58 when I was 40. I was suited up, ready to go jump on a fire on August 23—my 40th birthday and they wouldn't let me go.

KR: Really?

FB: Yeah.

KR: They wouldn't let you go?

FB: No, they wouldn't let me go, and it turned out just fine. I didn't. I objected to it, but like I say, I moved into the other two projects which I was extremely interested in, that helicopter and the retardant program. We blended the helicopter use into the smokejumper program and it got to be pretty expensive. I think they cut a lot of it out except for rescue and stuff like that. They don't haul all of their equipment back and they didn't replace the, they replaced the mule strings for a while, but they got so expensive it was prohibitive. So they went back to mules and they also did something else, they bundle tools now and they hang them in trees and when the pack strings are in there on other jobs when they bring them out, you know. It was cheaper to put a \$2.56 Pulaski hanging up in the tree where a porcupine couldn't eat the handle off of it and get it some other time than it was to send a pack string in there to pack it out. It was cheaper to buy a new one.

KR: Makes sense. So, what was it like? What kind of things happened between '51 and '58? You had New Mex in there, didn't you?

FB: Had what?

KR: New Mex. When you sent jumpers down to New Mexico.

FB: Oh yeah, yeah. We continued the Silver City project. We expanded the project some, we integrated the, some helicopter use in it. We started integrating in '51 as the first year we integrated Region Six or Region Four and Region One jumpers in the Silver City, New Mexico crew.

We were kind of the parent organization and we had always taken those projects. I thought it was time that we, there was a little animosity between Region 4 jumpers and Region 1 jumpers, you know. We thought we were better firefighters, better than they were. So I thought there was a real need and I knew Francis Lufkin down at Region 6 real well. Francis and I were real good friends, jumped together in the early years. I thought it was time that we tried to pull all of the organizations into a better overall organization and do as much as we could to standardize all the training. So that when the Region Four crew of 40 jumpers and the region crew, like on

Tumble Creek, I jumped on Tumble Creek with 65 men out of here. Region 4 already had 40 men on the fire, there was 105 jumpers on that fire. If we had similar training and very close to the same standards it was easier to integrate them and to, and there wasn't the feeling. What happened when I started picking two jumpers from 4 and one jumper from 6 and integrating them into that Silver City crew, they got over that feeling of—you're a so and so. Because you're Region 1 jumper and the, we're better because we're Region 4 and all of that bologna. So I integrated them into a closer outfit. When we dedicated the new buildings out here in '54, we invited Wayne Webb, who was the project leader in Region 4 to come up here and help dedicate the buildings. This picture in here on the wall [walks over to photo hanging on wall] of President Eisenhower and Wayne Webb and myself during the dedication.

KR: Yeah, yeah, great.

FB: That helped—that type of thing, you know, to bring them into it. So we were more of an organization than units standing around.

KR: That's important.

FB: It is important, and it turned out very good for us because we had jumpers that would apply here after talking to their project leader down there and say could we jump in Region 1 this year? And we traded some personnel, and it just brought the whole jump units into a better organization. They worked better together, and they did everything so much better together. That was a good move. I always felt that was very important and it worked out well, that worked out real well.

KR: Good. You mentioned one fire where you had 105 men on it?

FB: Yeah.

KR: Was there one big fire year, kind of, in there, or did you have a lot of big fire years?

FB: Well it was on the Middle Fork of the Salmon about five miles up the river and it was in the end of July. Water was starting to drop. The canyon was so steep the only place we could get air delivery or any equipment or food was on the ridge top above. The fire had done a very strange thing. It started about mid-slope, and it slowly burned up through the grass and through the scattered pine. Oh, there was about 60 or 70 acres burned.

Pretty good and it dried out all of the trees as it went up. Well the real danger when you have a steep slope like that and you've got fire below is that you'll get a re-burn and it'll crown and run the full length of the drainage you know. So what we had to do was a very, and it's loaded with rattlesnakes over there. There was blind rattlesnakes that had been caught in the fire that were blind, wandering all over that hillside. The poor things were just—they' re thick over there anyway. There was blind rattlesnakes every place and you didn't, we couldn't fight fires at night, we had to do daylight firefighting only.

KR: Because of the snakes.

FB: Because of the snakes. I did have three men patrolling the line at night but no work, just patrol. And the Region Four crew stayed on top, but we had to resupply with a fellow by the name of Don Smith. He was a river boat expert and he had, was the first one, him and his boat. Well, the boat that he had was the first boat that ever ran the Rouge River and we had it up there, it was a plywood boat and Don Smith was a real river man. Well Don and I resupplied the crew; I didn't want to assign anybody else to that damn thankless job because it was really dangerous. Shooting that river every day and going across over to the Salmon River where the, at the mouth of the Middle Fork and getting a boat loaded with supplies and bringing it back up to supply that crew. Because we couldn't, they tried to drop to us time after time, there just was no way a airplane could get down in that canyon low enough to be accurate. The stuff drifted way away all the time so we had to do it by boat. We resupplied the crew five days. with running that river. What a wild experience that was.

KR: You ran the river every day.

FB: I ran it every day with Don Smith. I learned in a hurry, [laughs] I'll tell you. Boy, that was a wild experience, and of course, at night then I had to go and walk the fire to see what we were doing. We did save it from re-burning. Al Cramer handled the crew on the bottom, and he did an absolute expert job of professional firefighting.

FB: We had that thing figured out right, and we kept it from ever getting off the ground and re-burning that slope. Because we'd have lost the whole Middle Fork drainage if it had ever started one. We held our breath for four days but at last got a line all the way around it and got the bottom out and then we were safe, of course. The ranger, I can't remember what his name was, but he was from Yellow Jack Ranger Station and I remember that. That man was so relieved when I called him and told him that we had it out down there that you can't believe it. Because he was really in a bad position up there anyway, you know, at the head of the fire and a Region 4 jumper. In fact, they had gone and burned-out areas on the other slope so that they, if it ever started, they could hustle over there and get into the burned-out areas and lay down, you know—cover up.

KR: Just in case.

FB: It was—that was one of the most interesting and hardest fires I was ever on. That was a real dandy. We had several large crew fires; we had a lot of fires go over 100 jumpers.

KR: Really? What other ones?

FB: We had one up—I can't remember. It was on the Flathead. I can't remember—Hon Creek. We had 75 jumpers in there, quite a few ground personnel. I had a—I can't remember, 65 on Castle Creek over on, out of Challis. And it got to the point where, Al Spalding was the division

chief here and Al didn't want you, me to jump in the heat of the season And I wanted to because I wanted to take my rotation turn, you know. But he thought that I shouldn't do that. It was all right to jump in the early part of the season with a big crew or something once and get it over with. That's why they decided in '58 then, when I was 40 and gonna move into the helicopter program. They brought Earl Cooley back then into the program again as a non-jumper.

KR: They didn't want you to jump anymore.

FB: We were talking about—

KR: They didn't want you to jump mid-season.

FB: Oh, yeah, yeah. That's when they brought Earl back as project leader. I don't remember now how long Earl stayed. He stayed—from about September of '58, I guess, until '64 or so. Then he went into the regional office to do something and then retired.

KR: We're moving—we moved out of '40s, and we're into the '50s now. Was there a difference in men that were jumping then because we got away from bad areas?

FB: I think, I think the biggest share of them that I hired were university students. A good many of them were forestry school students, but not all, by a long ways. A lot of pre-med students. Cole McPherson up here, the dentist, and Brady's a doctor back in Illinois. There's all kinds of people. But most of them were students; they were university students. So, I think when we were doing this, of course, well, they all had to have one year's experience—firefighting experience. That was a must when I was hiring. We sacrificed a little to hire the student over the kid that was born and raised in the Bitterroot Valley and was the farm boy and had worked. But there was such an emphasis on education in the Forest Service, that it was just so difficult to hire these boys and keep them on for six, seven, eight, ten years and have them get hurt and reach an age where they shouldn't jump anymore and find them—a place for them.

So, the choice was, don't hire—I hired the best qualified people, no matter who they were. But we just kind of weaned away from the local kids like Herbert and those boys—Roberts and those kids. Because it was so hard to place them. Now, very fortunate—and we did better at that period of, oho, probably '53 through '58—we did better than they've ever done before since in placing those kids. But on the other hand, we had less of them after about '55 too. They were going mostly to school. Student hiring.

KR: Did the smokejumper's unit—the character of it or anything—change with the hiring of more university students or forestry type students?

FB: No, no it didn't. I think it was because we had pretty high standards, and that came first. If he couldn't cut it, why, we weren't bashful about telling him, well you just don't make it. And once you do that—the kids that really know and most kids know if they're going to be able to hack it or not. They've got a pretty good idea. They just didn't apply, that's all. We got better and better

kids applying all the time.

KR: Do you remember your last jump?

FB: [Pauses] I really don't. I don't know if it was a fire jump or if it was a training jump. I think it was a training jump, I used to take two jumps every year, refresher jumps, you know, Go out and jump with the boys mostly. That was important, and I think they lost something in the program when they decided to go with the non-jumping project. I think they lost something; I think there's still a loss there. I think that character of, that's developed there both in the personnel and the overhead is important. When they're non-jumpers, they lose something there; they lose that touch with each other.

It's important in a thing of this kind. I was trying to explain to a fellow one day about it. He was telling me about the project out here, the way it was operating now, and I don't know too much about the way it's operated. I've never been out there to try to observe it even, but the parallel I drew is this, there's the Army and then there's the ranger battalion in the army which is a select group. And they have to meet higher standards, and more is expected of them. The same with the jumper program as far as I'm concerned. They're not professional jumpers, that's bologna. That professionalism on jumping is a crock. That had nothing to do with their jump, other than they should try to do it safely. And they don't need to be professional jumpers to be the best firefighter there is, you know. And I think that's important. You look at the army and you say here's a ranger battalion and they're kind of a select group. The smokejumpers should be the same. There's firefighters all over the Forest Service but the damn smokejumpers should be a select group trained specially, not prima-donnas. But trained to be better than the average firefighter on the forest. Trained to do a better job, than the, just like the rangers train to do a better job in the army. I can't get away from that thinking and I guess it's antiquated. I don't know, from what they tell me now days, that isn't it at all.

KR: It may be lost.

FB: It's lost, and I think when you lose that, you lose a *esprit de corps* with the organization and you lose a working relationship between the overhead and the jumpers that's important. You lose a good working relationship with the forest, with the ranger district. You know, I had a boy tell me out here [the Missoula base] the other day that it's not uncommon for them to make 300 and 400 or 500 hours overtime in a season. You know what my average two-man fire in 1957 and '58 drew? Thirteen hours.

KR: Thirteen hours for the whole season?

FB: Thirteen hours average for two-man fires, overtime. And I didn't complain because they was coming back to go on another one. They rotated as they returned. If you got on a bad fire and you got very little time, why, you went on the list ahead of the guy that had more overtime. It had a tendency to even out as the season progressed. You might hit a big crew fire or something, but we never ever looked at 400 and 500 hours overtime. I know we were fighting

the same kind of fires. So there's something happening. I don't know what it is, and I'm not badmouthing—I just don't understand it.

KR: It's an observation.

FB: It's just, I don't understand it. How that. How they could get that much time in the first place. In the old days, if you turned in more than 21 hours the first day, you were before a board of review. I've had to go before boards many times on overtime with men turning in 21 hours the first day. Well, it isn't hard to understand or see where a man could get 21 hours the first day. But boy we had to answer for it. How could you get that many jumps to get that much overtime in a season, I don't know, and I, it's just a mystery to me, I don't, I just don't know how they operate now days, I guess.

KR: Yeah. Of all the things that you did when you worked for the Forest Service—your whole career—what is it you enjoyed most?

FB: Well I enjoyed the smokejumper program. In fact, I turned down going into the American Airlines as a co-pilot to come back to the smokejumper program because I believed in it. And I loved this country and I've always, always believed that you should work at something that you honestly feel that you can contribute something to and that you enjoy.

Or you're just marking time otherwise. And when they told me in the American Airlines that I would be going as a co-pilot seat for six months to year and I would have to go back overseas, I knew what I was gonna do and that was get out of there and come home. Go back into the jump program. But I really believed in it. Like I told you at the start, it was obvious from my five years previous to the jumpers that that agitating that gravel all night to get to a fire was not the answer to saving 33,000 acres of forest a year.

In the back country. There's no way that that was gonna do the job or building roads to it wasn't gonna do the job or flying aerial patrol and picking them up rather than lookouts wasn't gonna get the job. It had to be a shortening of the time from the time it was located for the first time until somebody was attacking that fire with hand tools. That interval had to be shortened until you got there before the fire got out of hand, that's all. That's exactly what happened with. through the—well, the smokejumper program contributed largely to reducing that 33,000 to 3,000 [acres of forest burned]

KR: Right. Do you miss it, do you miss jumping today?

FB: Well, my wife made me sell my free-fall outfit when I was so I would still.

[End of Interview]