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Oral History Number: 163-020

Interviewee: Bob Marshall

Interviewer: Rosa Stone

Date of Interview: August 12, 1986

Project: Civilian Public Service Smokejumpers Oral History Project

Rosa Stone: This is an historical interview, Rosa Stone interviewing Bob Marshall. Okay, Bob, would you tell us...Of course, there's a wilderness named after you, isn't it?

Bob Marshall: Yes. [Both are joking. The Bob Marshall Wilderness was named after a career forester and founder of the Wilderness Society. He died in 1939.]

RS: Quite an honor having the name Bob Marshall, hear about the Bob Marshall Wilderness. Would you tell us a little about your background, your religious background? Did you have any trouble getting the 4-E classification and what were those difficulties, if any?

BM: I grew up as a Quaker and I guess when I was approaching 18 gave some serious thought as to what I would do because the war was just underway, and decided that I would try to get classified as a conscientious objector. I came from a small town outside of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and that area has a fair number of Quakers and so I did not have much difficulty with the board in receiving my 4-E classification.

RS: And the Quaker Church helped you with getting information that you needed on how to do it?

BM: There were people who I talked with who were helpful, yes.

RS: And then where did they assign you when you got your classification and what transfers did you have—

BM: I was assigned first to West Campton, New Hampshire, which was a Forest Service camp, and I was there, let's see, it must have been '43. Yeah, June of '43 until it closed in, I believe, December of '43. There were a group of us in that camp who had been studying together, and with the possibility of doing relief work overseas. So we asked to be transferred together, about 12 of us, who were going to go to a school for retarded children in Laurel, Maryland. But that site was not ready when the camp in New Hampshire closed and so we went instead to Luray, Virginia, and were there for, I guess about five months until the training school for mentally retarded opened its facilities to us. In Luray, Virginia, then, we worked in the Skyline Drive, in the national park there, Shenandoah National Park, and we were repairing some of the facilities, the cabins and the fireplaces and so on in the park.

Then I guess it was approximately 12 of us who went to the training school in Laurel, Maryland, and there I worked both on the ward with kids, a lot of kids at one time, and also helped in the

shop. They had a shop for woodworking and some other crafts, as I recall. A couple of us helped the instructor in that shop part of the time and the other part worked in the wards. My best friend there, Courtney Siceloff, said one time, "Why don't we try to get into the smokejumpers?"

I said, well, I didn't know if I was really up to that, but he convinced me. So we applied and before we were accepted he got a pretty serious girlfriend in that area and decided to stay there. But when we were accepted then, I came to Montana, and that was for the last year here, which would have been spring of '45. And I remember having a really great train trip across the country—

RS: Long one.

BM: —for three days, I think. Arriving in this beautiful country here, in either May or June, I'm not quite sure.

RS: Where did you do your training, then, when you got here?

BM: At Ninemile. We had approximately a month of training there.

RS: Did you find the training pretty rigorous, or were you in pretty good shape?

BM: I enjoyed it. I was, I guess, 20 at that time, and liked physical activity and had been playing ball and doing things, so I did not find it that difficult. The one thing that I disliked was the tower jump. Quite a shock to your back and neck when the rope snapped you short. But overall I enjoyed the training and learning what I could about firefighting as well as getting in shape.

RS: Did you have other projects that you had to work on, like during the practice jumps, in between, and during the fire season when you weren't going out on fires?

BM: Well, there was a period after our training and before fire season got underway really when about six of us went to a side camp in Glacier Park and worked on a ranger station there. We put in a telephone line and built a fence and spent a couple of weekends hiking in the park. That was beautiful.

RS: What was your transportation like, going up there?

BM: I suppose we went by truck. I don't really remember that.

RS: Did you like the truck rides?

BM: Well the short rides were okay. When we were going—well, when we came back from Glacier Park, then I was at Ninemile again, in the beginning of the fire season, waiting to get

near enough to the top of the list to come into Missoula, where we stayed in a fraternity house. The last, anywhere from one day to maybe a week before going out on a fire. Sometimes we'd come in from Ninemile, get to the fraternity house, have a couple of hours, and then go out on a fire. Other times you might stay there for several days, depending on the situation.

RS: But it was a busy season that year.

BM: Apparently it was the busiest season, yeah.

RS: How many practice jumps did you make?

BM: I had seven practice jumps, and then, I guess it was six fire jumps and one rescue jump. 14 total.

RS: Did you have any injuries?

BM: No. I was fortunate. I guess I had a close call on a jump. That was—we, of course, tried to avoid old, dead trees, snags. But in this particular jump, it seemed like there was nothing but. And I did land up in one, fairly high up. I would say I was up at least 30 or 40 feet, and looked down for the rope in my pocket, in my leg, and it had fallen out. So I wasn't quite sure what to do but this dead snag had some short branches, maybe a foot long, coming out from the trunk, and so I decided to take off my chute and try to come down the tree trunk on these short, dead branches.

RS: That's dangerous, isn't it?

BM: Well, yes, I guess if any of them had broken I would have had a free fall. And I was lucky. I got down to about 15 feet from the ground and then there weren't any more branches, so I dropped from there, was okay.

RS: You couldn't stay up there, that wasn't—

BM: No, I couldn't stay up there, and I didn't see anybody coming up to get me.

RS: So you needed to do something and it worked out all right.

BM: Yes.

RS: With the 15-foot fall, it was about like the jump from the tower?

BM: Yeah. It was.

RS: You knew how to roll when you got there.

BM: Yes.

RS: So that was your closest call.

BM: Right. My most comfortable jump was landing in new growth pine, about 30 feet high, where I landed with my feet about two feet off the ground.

RS: Very good.

BM: Just a very soft landing.

RS: Tell me about the rescue jump you made.

BM: This was really at the end of the fire season, and we were called one night, just before dark. We were at the fraternity house in Missoula, and told that there was an emergency, and could we jump? Well, they said that it was a little too far to go that night because it would be dark by the time we jumped, so we were to get ready to leave at daybreak. Six of us went out the next morning, with an army paratrooper medic. We, I guess, learned the next morning what the situation was. This was where two hunters had gone out in the wilderness after saving their money for years and years for this big hunting trip and apparently what had happened is that one of them had left camp and said he was going out and see what he could find. As he circled back into camp, his buddy, who'd been probably drinking fairly heavily, saw this movement in the bush and took a shot with his shotgun and hit his friend in the shoulder. And seriously wounded him. When we got there, he was still alive, but had lost a lot of blood. So the army doctor gave him blood plasma and morphine and bound up his wound as best he could, but really the whole shoulder had been shot away. Then we had a stretcher, [on] which we took turns carrying him. My recollection is about six miles to a little airstrip in the wilderness there. Plane came in, met us. We did have radios and so they were there to meet us, and the plane flew him out. We did not go with him, we waited for a later plane. We learned later that he had died in the hospital.

RS: Was that your last jump?

BM: Yes.

RS: It was the last time that you jumped. What was your experience with your first jump?

BM: Well, I was really scared. I guess my biggest fear was, would I actually be able to step out of that plane, or would I get so frightened that I wouldn't be able to make it? I was about the, see, was I first or second? I think they put me first in line, of the six or seven of us who were jumping. So I figured, well, I just can't let everybody down. So when I felt that slap on the back, out I went. And as soon as the chute opened, and it seemed like it opened immediately,

everything was just great. I felt, wow, this is marvelous. Just floating through the air was a wonderful sensation and my fear vanished when that happened. Until I saw the ground coming up. However, that came up very quickly, and was over in a hurry. I never did totally get over the fear of jumping, but after I had done it once then I knew I could do it. So I wasn't worried anymore that I'd have to make that decision.

RS: How long were the fires that you jumped on? I realize 40 years is quite a time, and it's just, you know, what you remember from them. There were some that were, like, two-man, three-man fires, small ones, and then some that were longer.

BM: Well, I remember two particularly. I think that most of the fires I went on, we went in the Ford Trimotor and that was six or seven men. One planeload. There was one large fire, where they dropped three planeloads of us, and we fought that fire for about a day and a half, and had it under control. It was not out, by any means, but we had a fire line around it, and had it well under control. Then ground firefighters walked in, and we were relieved and walked out about ten miles, and spent the night in Kalispell, where we had cleaned up, stayed in a little hotel, and went to a dance in Kalispell. We probably were at least two nights on that fire. All the others, I stayed on until the fire was dead out and then walked out, but they were smaller. The other one that I remember was, two of us went in the Travelair, and jumped on a very small fire, which was probably no more than half an acre in size. And we were able to get that out in pretty much in a day. We spent the night there, and the next day made sure that there were no hot spots. I guess the longest time I was on a fire was probably about three days.

RS: Did you have good food during that time?

BM: Well, it was, for the most part it was K-rations and C-rations. On the larger fire they dropped more food to us, and one of the things they dropped was a crate of eggs. The only problem is that the chute didn't open, and so the eggs just totally squashed.

RS: Humpty Dumpty.

BM: Right.

RS: But ordinarily, did they drop eggs and they came down okay?

BM: No. that was the only fire where eggs were dropped.

RS: Tried it once—

BM: Most all the fires that, except for that one, I think we just had dried food.

RS: But the camp food was pretty good, was it?

BM: Well, it was okay. Oh, when we were at base camp?

RS: Yes. When you were back at camp.

BM: Base camp food was excellent. Oh, we were well fed. At Ninemile, I remember getting steak fairly often and good food. I also remember that we played softball in the evenings out there. Worked hard during the day and then had a good meal and then we'd go out and play softball.

RS: So you didn't have to work other projects much. You get to go to the nursery, or—

BM: I was on three side camps. I mentioned Glacier Park, for about a month, and that was beautiful and enjoyable. The ranger had two daughters and horses, and [we] used to, after work, go horseback riding with one of his daughters. That was before the fire season started. After the fire season, I went to Savenac nursery for, I think it was about a week, tree nursery. And then they sent about five of us to Bonners Ferry, Idaho, where we stayed in a tent. This was probably November, and we cut brush and burned it, and the snow came down, and we were burning brush in the snow. We were up there for maybe three or four weeks. And then we got word the camp was closing, so we came back and made arrangements to leave for another camp.

RS: So leaving smokejumpers, where did you go then, before your final discharge?

[Background noise]

BM: I went to work in a mental hospital in Lyons, New Jersey. It was a veterans' hospital and I figured I'd go back east again and be nearer to my home and my sister. But I also thought the experience of working in a mental hospital would be a valuable one.

RS: How long was it then until you got out?

BM: I think I got there in December, and was discharged then in June of the following year, which was '46. So I was in just three years.

RS: Had you made plans for what you were going to do before the CPS experience came along, or hadn't you decided yet what you wanted to—

BM: Yeah, not really yet. I had just about a year of college. I did have a year of college before being drafted, and went to Penn State for part of that time and then to Guilford College, in North Carolina the last half of the second semester, to be part of a unit there that was studying for overseas work. But then when school ended I was drafted. However, I really didn't know what I was going to do, and, well, CPS for me was a relatively enjoyable experience, getting to

know so many people and having the varied experiences I did. Still, when I got out I was not sure what direction—

RS: Not even when you got out?

BM: No. I stayed out of college for a year, actually I guess it was only a semester, and I think three of us, who had been in CPS together went on a cattle boat to Poland. When I was first discharged, we put a roof on my folks' house, the three of us, and then decided that we'd like to try and get in a cattle boat trip. Which we did. So that was enjoyable too. And then got back in September of that year, and worked at short-term jobs, and by the fall had later decided that I would try to get back into college and did so in January of the following year.

RS: What did you train for then?

BM: I took a liberal arts course, majoring in sociology, and minor in psychology. Still thinking fairly broad term. My last year and a half I decided to get a teacher's teaching credential and also took some industrial arts courses, thinking I might teach those. So did, then, complete that and worked for two years as a teacher.

RS: That was all you wanted to work, as a teacher. Two years.

BM: I found that was not my thing and during the summers I had been doing home construction work and got a job then, after that summer, of continuing to work for a home builder in the area where I was living. During my college years, my wife and I got married—we met in college and so we were then living back in Pennsylvania, and after...Okay, then I got this job in housebuilding, which probably lasted for eight months or so, and then I was asked by the American Friends Service Committee if I would be interested in working in a self-help housing program in Philadelphia. And that sounded like a really interesting thing and so moved into that, and stayed there for 14 years.

RS: Combined your service and your expertise.

BM: Yeah. The teaching was a part of it too, as well as the construction. Because we were showing the families how to do various kinds of work in rehabilitating old houses in Philadelphia.

RS: I understand from a conversation earlier, that you were building your...some number house [total number of houses the cooperative had built]?

BM: Okay, I stayed then on that job for 14 years, where we helped families to develop a housing cooperative, and then built some new housing for the elderly and ran a woodshop there for neighborhood people to come and use. Then I learned about a program in California, self-housing program that was just getting underway. This was in 1966 and was asked if I would

like to come out there. Since our project in Philadelphia was no longer...we were not expanding it. I was the manager of the cooperative. So I came out, then, in summer of '86, to look at the project and decided it was something that I would really like to take part in. By this time we had three children, and our family agreed that we'd make the journey from the east coast to the west coast, so in August of '86—

RS: '66?

BM: '66. 20 years ago.

RS: Right.

BM: We moved to Visalia, California, which is in the San Joaquin Valley, about 40 miles south of Fresno, where I've been ever since, working for self-help enterprises. Didn't go there. Went there to work for the director and the day we arrived he was killed in an auto accident. He and his wife and two of their four daughters, which was quite a tragedy. The program had been going for a year. After I'd been there for three months, they asked me to be the director, which I've done ever since.

RS: This is where you're building the, what number house?

BM: Okay, we're helping families to build their own individual homes, in a mutual self-help housing effort. That is, ten families work together to build ten homes. And next month, we'll be celebrating the 3,000th family to complete and move into their self-help home.

RS: That's tremendous, just tremendous. Looking back on the smokejumper experience, as well as the total CPS experience, how does the smokejumper experience fit into your total perspective? It must have been valuable enough to bring you back to the reunions, and—

BM: Yes. Well, it was a growing up time for me, and I think one thing it did was help me and my own self-confidence to know that I could do things that perhaps I wasn't sure I could before. And the beauty of the area confirmed my love with the outdoors, the wilderness. Some of the men here, I think, helped me to firm up my convictions in, maybe the direction of my life, that I wanted to do something worthwhile and of service. So I think that it did help determine my direction, although I didn't know at the time what that would be.

RS: Yes. You needed those maturing years, and it was, in and of itself, it was a good experience.

BM: For me it was. It definitely was.

RS: Okay. Have we missed anything? Are there any interesting things that happened to you in smokejumpers that you could tell us about?

BM: Well, I think that I'd like to say that I'm grateful to the Forest Service for providing the opportunity for conscientious objectors to be smokejumpers. I think that probably took some courage on the part of some of the officials because I'm sure there was difference of opinion, and for them to have taken that step and provided that opportunity, I appreciate it. As far as my own experiences, nothing stands out that I...just the total experience was, for me, a positive one, and the firefighting was hard work. We'd stay up late, maybe all night, and work 'till we were exhausted to make sure that the fire was under control, and then take our rests or sleep in turn. So it was hard work, but when you're 19, 20, 21, you need that.

RS: If you had it to do all over, again, you would do it again?

BM: Yes, definitely.

RS: Okay. Thank you very, very much for sharing your perspectives here. This will help the Historical Society.

BM: Good.

[End of Interview]