

**Oral History Number: 163-022**

**Interviewee: Kenneth A. Diller**

**Interviewer: Rosa Stone**

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**Project: Civilian Public Service Smokejumpers Oral History Project**

Rosa Stone: Okay, this is an interview for the oral history by Rosa Stone interviewing...

Kenneth Diller: Kenneth Diller.

RS: And first of all, we'd like to start in with asking you, Kenneth, what your religious background was and whether you had any trouble getting your 4-E classification.

KD: My religious background was general conference Mennonite and I had a bit of difficulty. I had to appear before a federal judge in Toledo, but seemingly no problem convincing him.

RS: And then where were you first assigned and how are you transferred? What was your pre-smokejumper experience?

KD: Okay. I was first assigned to Galax, Virginia, which was a parkway project. The workers scraped the banks of the roads to shape the parkway. And my job was as the blacksmith, sharpening the tools that were used on the parkway. And I was there until I saw in some publication that they needed smokejumpers. So I applied for it, and sure enough was accepted.

RS: What made that appealing to you, the smokejumper thing?

KD: I've always loved mountains and I've sort of liked flying, so this was my chance to get both.

RS: Kind of made-to-order for you.

KD: Oh, yes.

RS: And so what year was that, you came?

KD: I believe was in May of '43, when we trained here at Seeley Lake.

RS: One of the first units that came in.

KD: I was in the first group of 30 that trained. As soon as we were through training, we were asked when we'd like to go, and I asked go to Oregon, and got to go with—some of my friends also were going there.

RS: Now what kind of projects, then, did you work on in between the jumping and firefighting?

KD: At Oregon, there had been no camp there, no base. So it was our job to move parts of an old barracks to the training site in the town of Cave Junction. We moved it over there and built a packing loft, which took most of the summer.

RS: Packing parachutes?

KD: Parachute packing loft. I'm not sure whether it was that year or the following year that we built an airplane hangar on the airport. All of this made out of material that cost no money.

RS: You mean the trees.

KD: The trees and the shake roof, and we did all the work.

RS: Did you stay there?

KD: Yes, we stayed there.

RS: How long then?

KD: For two years. We stayed and we did timber cruising in the winter.

RS: What's timber cruising?

KD: Yes. We estimated board feet, and the type of timber, the kind of trees, and got it on paper, and mapped the area of some of the country. It was a timber estimate for the Forest Service, so they knew what timber they had in stock. And we did this for two years. Most of it, we did around Cave Junction the first year. The second winter, we did this work between Roseburg and Crater Lake. It was in the Umpqua forest. So that was the winter project for the first two years.

RS: Were you there the third year also?

KD: The third year, we came back to Ninemile for refresher training, and about half of our crew transferred to Washington, where we started another camp. We started a base at Winthrop, which is still in existence today.

RS: So you were in smokejumpers the whole time that it was an operation with CPS?

KD: The whole three years, yes.

RS: Never wanted to get out of it.

KD: Oh my.

RS: What better thing could you find?

KD: The only thing that I believe drew me back home was family. I loved the mountains.

RS: You fell in love with this area of the country?

KD: Yes.

RS: When you were timber cruising, was that very interesting to you also? Did you like that?

KD: At first, I couldn't get used to working through rain, all winter long. But we were dressed for it, and all the time we worked in the rain I never once had a cold. If you do this in Ohio, you're sick. I got to a place where I enjoyed it.

RS: Farmers get a vacation when it rains, but you didn't out here.

KD: That's right. And sometimes there would be snow on the ground, but we got used to working wet.

RS: You never considered becoming a forest ranger, or something like that?

KD: No, never did.

RS: You went back to Ohio because of family.

KD: That's right.

RS: When you were in smokejumpers, then, was the training pretty hard? What did you find the most difficult?

KD: I can't say that anything, really, was difficult. Certainly can't complain about the first jump. I was airsick and was glad to get out of there. [laughs]

RS: [laughs] And how many jumps did you make that first year?

KD: I think it was possibly 10. I was short one jump from the rest of the jumpers—I sprained my ankle out on project here. Not ankle, my knee. And I missed two jumps, but they allowed me to make one up. So I went with one less than the others. The last jump I made, I did with a stiff knee, and everything came out well. I wanted to go with the rest. That's the only injury I had, all the time that I was in smokejumpers.

RS: The whole time. And that wasn't from a jump, that was from the project.

KD: That wasn't from a jump, no.

RS: How many jumps did you make the second year?

KD: It must have been around...Actually, I have this on a book at home, which I haven't looked at for 30 years. I can't remember. I know my total number of jumps was 28, for the three years.

RS: Okay. You just don't know the breakdown on the three years. But you made a total of 28 jumps.

KD: Yes.

RS: Is that the most anyone made?

KD: No, I don't believe. I think there are a few that might have had a few more. We never had so many fires that we had to go out of order. We lined up in sequence, and we each got about the same number of jumps.

RS: Were there many other fellows who were here all three years?

KD: Yes, I would say there were a number of them. The Oregon group, there were three of us that were in Oregon two years and one year in Washington, and a number of them were there for one year in Oregon and one in Washington.

RS: Now without any nice stories of falling on a snag, or hitting the rocks, or—you didn't have any of those mishaps when you were jumping?

KD: Nothing. I ended up almost on my head on one practice jump, at the airport, which was rather hard, but no harm done.

RS: What were the most exciting fires that you had? Did you have big fires, or—

KD: Our largest fires were in Washington. We had some large ground fires in Oregon that were real close by.

RS: You didn't jump on those.

KD: No. We had one that got out hand for the loggers, and... [laughs] We got over there, eight of us I believe, got on that fire and we started building fire lines, and we couldn't understand why we would pass crews of people sitting there as we went by, until the next morning we found out that our crew leader went ahead of us and told them to patrol our line—we'd build it. So we found out the next morning that we had built the fire line for everybody. [laughs] But

that was the second year we were there. In Washington, we had a large fire we jumped on—I think it was called Bunker Hill fire. It was along the Canadian line, along British Columbia. And I believe we jumped in eight people. It was rather strong wind, and one of our jumpers injured an ankle—I think he broke it. And the rest of us went to work and controlled the fire. I think it was 250 acres. We put a line around the hot parts of it and the next morning, they had sent in 100 black paratroops from, I believe, Camp Pendleton. And we were over them, and to mop up the fire and finish the line up, and I was talking to some of the others here today, and they still remember the way those poor fellows were scared at night to be out in the dark. The first night, I don't believe any of them slept.

RS: They weren't used to this.

KD: They weren't used to the outdoors. We had a wonderful time with them, but toward the end of the week we had wonderful times sitting there, visiting with them. I remember one of their lieutenants was from Wilberforce College, which was—Wilberforce used to play Bluffton in basketball. We got quite well acquainted.

RS: Did this fire last a week? You said by the end of the week—

KD: Until it was cleaned up, until it was mopped up, it was about a week.

RS: You were rather tired by then, I would think? Maybe a little dirty?

KD: Oh yes. [laughs] That's part of it.

RS: [laughs] Bearded?

KD: Yes. And this was in August, and we had a cargo chute. I remember, we had a cargo chute that we slept under, and when we left, the tree that we had draped it on was bent way over. The chute was covered with frost about a half-inch thick. It got cold at night.

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

KD: No.

RS: You needed rain to put out the fire, if the natural elements were going to.

KD: Well, in fighting fire, the first thing you do is control so it doesn't spread any farther, and then you separate the particles and let it burn out and cool down. And once there is no hot spot left anymore, then you've controlled it. Usually you have no water to work with. All you can do is separate the parts so that they can't burn any further.

RS: You never had to set a back fire on any—

KD: Oh, yes.

RS: You did have to.

KD: Oh yes, there were times. Especially ground fires, where we went in on them. You'd get there and the fire is beginning to move, and all you could do is get a border so it couldn't jump across it. We had another interesting fire, is the first one that we left the area. It was a fire up here in the Chelan forest, west of Lake Chelan, and they flew us from Oregon to Wenatchee—well, to the fire. I think there were eight jumpers on that fire, and we were on that fire almost a week. It ended up, I believe, the first week in September and when we left it started to snow.

RS: It snowed that early in the season.

KD: I think, the way they say, usually in the first week of September they can expect some of the weather to start changing.

RS: And then the need for the firefighters isn't so great.

KD: Oh yes. Once they get a rain then it drops off.

RS: Were a lot of the fires just two, three jumper fires, not—?

KD: Oh, most of them were. I think there was one fire—if I remember right there was one fire that wasn't too inaccessible, where one jumper went. I can't remember who it was.

RS: Did you have any interesting companions on some of your jumps?

KD: Yes. Some of these fellows—well, one of them was—fellow turned out to be a doctor, got his doctor's degree by going to Mexico City, and then I haven't heard from him since. He's passed away since then. Returned to practice in Wichita, Kansas. Actually, most of these were quite interesting. The one that broke his foot is a history professor at Union College in Schenectady, New York, and I hadn't heard anything out of him for about 35 years, but one morning I saw him on public TV teaching South American history. And he's still there. I got a note from him. I wrote to him to come and he said he can't, because he married late, his wife is still working. He retired two years ago.

RS: He could come without her, you know.

KD: Oh, he could have, but he has children.

RS: Oh, yes.

RS: But that was quite a thrill, to see your smokejumping buddy there on television, wasn't it?

KD: Yes. So I went to the World Book [Encyclopedia], to look where Union College is, and I believe I found four, and I still didn't find out where he was at until I got the roster from the smokejumper group.

RS: Yeah. What would you say was your most interesting experience while you were out here?

KD: Oh, I would say all of it was. Possibly the flight to Washington on a DC-3 [a Douglas DC-3 airplane]. That was my first ride in a DC-3. We did have a plane in Oregon that developed motor trouble while I was on a fire, and one of our observers didn't have a chute, so I gave him my chest pack and we made it back to the airport.

RS: That's a bit exciting, I'd say.

KD: Then they thought they had it fixed, and I suppose they did get it fixed well enough, because they dropped my jump partner and myself on a fire at 7 in the afternoon, on the road in back country. And we both landed on the road. So after we got back from that fire, it was our turn to go on KP and that day the plane took off again and the motor misfired and he made it back to the ground with his load, and he worked on the engine a bit, took off again, but this time without the crew, to try it out. The plane crashed and killed the pilot. Burned up. But I didn't get to see the crash. The rest of the fellows, all except two of us, got to see it.

RS: The KP fellows didn't get to see it.

KD: No, we didn't get to see it.

RS: But that was a good safety precaution not to take a whole crew out.

KD: Yes. I'll say that for Jack Hanselman. He did keep the crew off. And yet, I almost feel, from what was said, that the pilot over climbed, to show the people on the ground that it's working, and it wasn't working, and he couldn't recover from the stall. But that's just my feeling.

RS: Was that a fire that you were supposed to go to?

KD: He had a crew on to go to a fire when that happened.

RS: And he brought them back.

KD: Yes.

RS: And left them off. Did the fire take off then, without the—

KD: I have no idea.

RS: Okay. Well that's a pretty important event, I'd say.

KD: Yes. That happened in '44. And it was after that, then, that we flew up to Washington to fight that fire.

RS: In the DC-3.

KD: Yes.

RS: For your particular life—you were in farming before you went into smokejumping?

KD: Yes. I was in farming. My folks died when I was age 13, and we had two cousins living with us, because their mother had died. My brother was 19 at that time, so there were five of us living together, and the judge allowed us to go ahead, if we behaved ourselves and keep on, so we farmed together and my brother and I kept on farming, and three of the others, all three, went to college. We helped them get through college, and then in the last year of college for the other boy, who was the same age I was, I was drafted first and he was allowed to finish college. He then went on to CPS in Luray, Virginia. As a result of his CPS experience, he became manager of the Atlantic Breeders Co-op in Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

RS: But you went back to your same location then, after CPS?

KD: Yes, I went back to the same farming location.

RS: And that's what you did for life.

KD: That's what I did until two and a half years ago, when I retired.

RS: So your CPS and your smokejumping experience was just kind of an interruption of what you would have done all your life.

KD: The CPS was my college experience.

RS: Yes. And you didn't feel the need to go on to school, then, or change from that.

KD: I think I might have, had we had some parents around to maybe guide us a bit. We thought there was probably no future for two of us on the farm. We did get the others all through college.

RS: And your love of nature, the soil, being with the ground, the earth, wasn't interrupted when you came out to smokejumpers.

KD: Oh my, no.

RS: Was just enhanced.

KD: I think so. I believe, at this point, if I wouldn't have had relatives at home, I'd be a Westerner. I enjoy this country.

RS: And the appeal that this has for everyone, you know these trees we're sitting under—you felt like you were doing something that was of vital importance, protecting this.

KD: Yes. Sure did. One thing: we had a sawmill fire in Cave Junction. They had a fire department and they had us to fight fires. We got there long before the fire department did. We got to this sawmill fire, and something that sort of affected us: when we got there, they wouldn't let us fight it.

RS: Because you were COs?

KD: No, it's covered by insurance.

RS: Oh, because of insurance, all right.

KD: And we could see those piles of lumber burning, but still we couldn't do anything about it.

RS: Oh. They just wanted the money instead of the lumber.

KD: They thought, well, it's damaged. Might as well burn.

RS: That kind of goes against what you stand for, doesn't it?

KD: Yes. I really thought we did some good. And I sure can't say that I didn't enjoy it. I did enjoy it.

RS: There are no regrets, right?

KD: No, I have no regrets.

RS: If you had it to do over again, you would take that same path?

KD: Yes, I believe I would. I still believe that way.

RS: It's amazing that this is 40 years in the past, and yet the memories are still vivid.

KD: I feel we met a special group of people here. They all came here with a purpose. Was very little dissention among us.

RS: How do you feel about these young, vigorous adventuresome fellows, and yourself, now being at the retirement stage?

KD: I guess it's part of life. [laughs] This is the first time I've gotten out of debt, in farming, was when I became 65, and I said, for goodness sake, we're going back into an era that's very much like the Marshall Plan era, when we weren't shipping grain and bread. I said this has to be the time where I have to quit. So I don't think I missed anything by doing so.

RS: It's been a good life, being close to nature.

KD: It's been a good life. There were times during that farming time that we actually had some reversal, very much like now. When prices were low, or crops were poor.

RS: Okay, is there anything in this that we didn't cover, that you'd like to speak to? Something that I haven't thought and you haven't thought of 'til now?

KD: I just hope I didn't bore you.

RS: Not at all, not at all. This is very interesting to find out what your experience was. I'm particularly impressed with the fact that you were here all three years, you wouldn't change anything about staying the three years, there was no other place you wanted to go.

KD: I was glad to go on to Washington, after I had seen Washington the year before. I believe the country was more beautiful. I didn't regret that. We had a very good crew leader there. Francis Lufkin. Had a very good relationship.

RS: Well I hope it didn't bore you either, to share this with me.

KD: Oh, my.

RS: Thank you very much.

KD: Okay.

[End of Interview]