

Oral History Number: 163-024

Interviewee: Earl Stutzman

Interviewer: Rosa Stone

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Project: Civilian Public Service Smokejumpers Oral History Project

Rosa Stone: This is a historical interview. Rosa Stone interviewing...

Earl Stutzman: Earl Stutzman.

RS: And first of all, Earl, what was your religious background?

ES: Mennonite. [Unintelligible] Mennonite.

RS: And did you have plenty of information on the 4-E classification? Did you kind of naturally fall into this because the rest of the fellows were, your age?

ES: Yeah, I guess so. I mean I heard about it.

RS: The church provided you with—

ES: The church provided, yeah.

RS: Right. And you didn't have any difficulties?

ES: No.

RS: This was an accepted fact, that you honestly were a conscientious objector.

ES: Yeah.

RS: And then where were you assigned?

ES: I was assigned to Camino, California.

RS: That was your first assignment.

ES: First assignment, yeah.

RS: And from there, did you have any transfers?

ES: I transferred then to smokejumper training here.

RS: You found out about it while you were at Camino.

ES: Yeah.

RS: Did it appeal to you?

ES: Yeah, thought that's something I would like.

RS: Were you in the first year group?

ES: No. I signed up for the first year, but didn't make it then. Second year, I signed up, then I got in.

RS: Okay, so you were at Camino a whole year before you got into.

ES: Yeah.

RS: And did you do firefighting there also?

ES: Oh, I think one or two is about all.

RS: So you had a little experience before you came up to the smokejumper unit. Where did you train when you got here?

ES: We trained at Ninemile.

RS: Was it hard?

ES: Oh, I didn't think it was too bad.

RS: You were in pretty good shape.

ES: I guess, fairly well.

RS: Okay. And did you have other projects that you worked on while you were training? Did you clear trails, or did you—

ES: Seems like we cut some wood, I don't remember it for sure.

RS: And then, do you remember how many practice jumps you made?

ES: I think we had seven, I think, down here or something. Then we transferred up to McCall, Idaho, to give us our other two practice jumps before the fire season opened.

RS: So then you had fire jumps, besides the practice jumps.

ES: Yeah.

RS: What were those like?

ES: Oh, I don't know. All right, I guess. There's one of them that I really remember, it was 50 miles from the closest road.

RS: Oh, oh, oh. And was it a long time on the fire, like were you on it a week, or...Or just a day or two?

ES: I think I was on that one about four or five days, something like that. I forgot the—

RS: Is that one of the bigger ones?

ES: It was pretty good size one, yeah. It was up by the edge of the Salmon River.

RS: Did they jump quite a few fellows on that?

ES: Let's see. They jumped four of us from McCall, and I think, it sure seemed like 10 of them from Missoula [unintelligible] out there.

RS: So you had a whole bunch of fellows on that trip.

ES: They wanted enough there to get it out

RS: Did you have to set any back fires?

ES: I think we set a few little ones, not too many. The hills were so steep, mostly left it to burn down to the creek. Just standing by on [the] end.

RS: So the creek then was the natural stopping place.

ES: The bottom place, yeah. Cut it off at the top and down each side.

RS: And away it went.

RS: Okay. Did you ever have any injuries?

ES: No, not very bad ones I don't think. I had little bruise or something.

RS: Just the ordinary bumps.

ES: Yeah.

RS: You didn't hit any lakes or rocks or snags.

ES: Oh, I landed in trees a couple times.

RS: Did you? But you could get down without getting hurt badly.

ES: Scut down, just pull a little on the chute and it'd come off. You have to climb up after.

RS: Did you ever have to help carry guys out?

ES: No, I never did.

RS: So none of the fellows that jumped with you ever got injured too badly either.

ES: No.

RS: Okay. Did you like the food?

ES: Yeah, I like food pretty good.

RS: Even the K-rations?

ES: Yeah, they haven't been bothering me.

RS: Were you here two years, then? You came in '44 and '45, or what years were you here?

ES: Yeah, it was two years at McCall, Idaho. Then '44 and '45.

RS: And then from there you were discharged?

ES: Well they, went up to Belton, Montana there for about one month until I got my discharge after the war was over.

RS: What had you planned to do at the time that you went into CPS?

ES: Oh, I had just started farming the fall before. Before the war broke out.

RS: And that's what you would have been doing if you hadn't gone to CPS.

ES: Yeah.

RS: Then how did that interruption of going to CPS and smokejumpers, what change did that make for you then? Did you go back to farming?

ES: Yeah, I went back and started farming again.

RS: And have you done that ever since?

ES: I've done that ever since until last spring, and I turned it over to my son.

RS: So you're retired from farming.

ES: Retired. Of course, seems like I'm working just as much.

RS: Yes. Well, you can have time off to travel and come to reunions, but you're still working a lot.

ES: Yeah.

RS: Okay. What was the biggest fire you were on? Was it that one that lasted four or five days? Fifty miles from the road?

ES: I don't remember for sure. That one was pretty good size. We got it cut off pretty quick the first night; we worked all night.

RS: You worked all night. Did that give you some compensatory time?

ES: Yeah, they usually give us time off for what more than we worked for in the daytime.

RS: Did you make good use of that time then?

ES: Well, I don't know. I guess I worked out for some money then, in the fall in the potato fields there.

RS: Right. And that was necessary, because you didn't get much pay as a smokejumper, is that right?

ES: No, not very much.

RS: Do you remember what you got?

ES: Oh, not quite sure. Seemed like around 12 dollars a month or something like that.

RS: And then you had to buy your own boots and...

ES: Yeah.

RS: And whatever own clothes you needed.

ES: Own clothes and stuff, yeah.

RS: And in the wintertime, did you work out in the rain and things too? Needed rain gear?

ES: No, I guess it's lucky there. When I first got the call, why they wanted... I had to work the forest service shop, overhauling trucks and stuff. [They] wanted volunteers. Nobody said nothing, so I said, well I'll try it. So whenever I wasn't jumping I was up in the shop. Summer and winter.

RS: Oh. That was protected for you, wasn't it?

ES: Yeah.

RS: That was a nice change, wasn't it?

ES: Yeah.

RS: You probably had experience with your farm machinery, keeping it going.

ES: Yeah.

RS: So you made a pretty good mechanic. Did you go on a lot of fires, then?

ES: I think it was 12 fires I jumped in.

RS: That included both summers.

ES: Yeah.

RS: Okay. The last summer—

ES: I think there's one or two that we went to just in a truck. I mean it wasn't very far off, drive right up to it.

RS: But the actual jumping was—

ES: I think 12 jumps, if I remember right.

RS: Twelve jumps. Now, this fire where you were 50 miles back. How did you get out? What was that like, getting out?

ES: Well, we walked for 25 miles, so they had a little strip they could land an airport and they picked us up there.

RS: Otherwise you'd have had to walk the whole 50? They didn't send a mule train after you?

ES: Well, they sent a mule train in afterwards to pick up the parachutes and stuff.

RS: Oh, you didn't have to bring everything out with you for those 25 miles.

ES: We didn't have to pack it out, no.

RS: They sent the mule train in later to get it. Well that was lucky, wasn't it?

ES: Yeah.

RS: It was good you didn't have anyone injured back in there either.

ES: Yeah.

RS: Had to carry out—

ES: Before they had jumped there, they had one fire, just the same place about, and they had 200 guys fighting then.

RS: Two hundred.

ES: And they said they never did get it out 'til the snow flew.

RS: You guys were a little better at it.

ES: Well we got there quicker, see.

RS: Yes, by jumping. You got there a lot quicker.

ES: Yeah.

RS: And were you always glad for the end of the season to come, the snow?

ES: Oh, I don't know. Enjoyed the snow too, but I enjoyed the summers when we jumped way out in the wilderness.

RS: Did you enjoy the wildlife and the nature?

ES: Yeah.

RS: Okay. And what would you consider the most interesting experiences that you had while you were in the jumping part?

ES: Oh, I don't know really what'd be the most interesting.

RS: The whole thing was kind of interesting, is that it?

ES: I enjoyed it all the way through.

RS: Yes. Every jump was exciting?

ES: Yeah.

RS: Well what was your first jump like?

ES: Oh, it's a little bit harder to get out of the plane right away the first time.

RS: And did you like that, when you were suspended up there in the sky?

ES: I just loved it.

RS: [laughs] That was really great.

ES: Yeah.

RS: And then when the Earth started coming up toward you, that was a little more exciting?

ES: Well, maybe a little bit more.

RS: But you must have learned to guide your chute pretty well, to not get into any kinds of snags or difficulties. I can't believe you were so lucky—

ES: There's only one time I landed in a tree, and that time, I mean I just come down, pulled the chute a little sideways and dropped out.

RS: You must have had some skill. I can't believe they would just drop you out anywhere, you'd never hit anything that you didn't want to.

ES: Oh, we'd get them to turn pretty good. And then we'd kind of drift the other way.

RS: So you could pick out a spot where you wanted to go and head for it.

ES: Yeah, we usually tried to pick out a spot where we wanted to get to, where there wasn't too many trees.

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

ES: I think I would.

RS: In other words, you'd recommend that for any youngster. How old were you when you entered into smokejumpers?

ES: 22, I guess, something like that.

RS: Any 22-year-old that wanted some good, interesting excitement in life—

ES: I think it'd be all right.

RS: You'd recommend it.

ES: I think so.

RS: Okay. Did I leave out anything here that you'd like to say, something you'd like to talk about here?

ES: Not that I know of.

RS: Okay. Yeah. Well, I appreciate you giving me your time here. Giving us your perspective of what it was like to be a smokejumper. And especially since you were two years into it. And you'd do it again.

ES: I think so.

RS: Okay. [laughs]

[End of Interview]