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Oral History Number: 133-002

Interviewee: James C. Ayers

Interviewer: Kim Taylor

Date of Interview: June 18, 1984

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Kim Taylor: This is Kim Taylor interviewing James Ayers as his involvement as a smokejumper. How did you get interested in smokejumping?

James Ayers: Well, I had a job at 16 at St. Regis, and I was on lookout. We had a fire way back in the mountains there, so it turned out, it was a lightning strike. I followed the old army artillery method for locating and pinpointing it exactly. I don't know if they still use it. In those days, they would count slowly from 12 in cadence. Like 13, 14, 15, 16, after you saw the strike and then you'd stop after you heard the clap of thunder. You would subtract twelve and divide by five, that would give you an amazingly close pinpoint of the fire. So any rate I hit this one right on the button and the office actually couldn't—if I understand, if this was the same fire, I think it was. At least it is an example. I seemed to vaguely remember it was all connected, interconnected. But any rate so they sent somebody up and they couldn't find it. So they sent in smokejumpers on it. I saw it. Well at any rate, to reiterate and we just plot right out on the map, after we subtracted twelve and divide by five after seeing the strike and then hearing the clap of thunder. So I got this fire right on the nose and turned it in. They sent the crew foreman up with some men to tackle it by foot, but they couldn't reach it. So they called the jumpers and it was close enough, the fire was close enough where you could actually see the chutes open. I was pretty thrilled by it. So I decided from there that if I ever got the opportunity, I'd try to join. I talked with either a dentist's or a physician's son in my own hometown of Shelby and he had already mentioned that he had applied. I thought, well I don't really stand much of a chance but he, on a buddy-buddy basis encouraged me to join right along with him. So, I sent in my application. I didn't meet up with him, but I met up with one of the fellows that had worked with me on the St. Regis crew where I was on lookout. This member was from Ogden, Utah, and he was working trails all season, he wasn't on lookout. He was a relief lookout, but he wasn't a straight lookout, regular lookout man. So then when I came down here to the University to go to pre-medical school, the following summer I was taken on with the smokejumpers. Under Earl Cooley, Jack Nash in the office, and I had some real good foremen. Like I remember a man by the name of Barnowsky. A very differential fellow that hardly said two words. He was what they used to call in the old days I think, the strong, silent type. Everybody used to like to kid him because he was a very slow speaker. He was awfully hard to get ruffled. He had a very calm demeanor, a very calm personality. He was a very fine guy. He was the foreman over me on a couple three jumps, two or three jumps. He gave me a good recommendation. By the second season then, why I had this one good recommendation from Mr. Barnowsky. Course his name, the name itself is sort of appealing, Barnowsky. From an appealing flavor to the name, atmosphere of the name, is a kind of interesting. In those days they mostly did take people with a lot of farm experience and so I guess that was in the back of our minds. Another point to his favor was where we really enjoyed being around the man. So that's pretty well the influence. Of

course, I knew of the forestry department here on campus [University of Montana]. I think I tried to attend the Foresters Ball maybe a time or two. Maybe in the back of my mind I was thinking of changing to forestry. But I just never got around to it. That pretty well covers the reason for my actually joining. That's all I can really recall.

KT: What did your training entail?

JA: Well, it was pretty well covered in my letters. We had, of course that tower where they had the make-up straps around your shoulders. You step off the step and you would have a rope that would bring you up short, and you would get the feel of a chute opening. You get that feeling of the jar from the chute. Then we had the, like I mentioned, the torture rack. I thought was really fine, very excellent for building up one physically and then you had calisthenics. Of course, we had a lot of calisthenics. We also had, similar to the Army, say Fort Bragg, or the paratroopers training—we had a bunch of tires out and we would have to crisscross our feet and run real fast to put our feet in the spaces, in the middle space of these tires. Oh yes, then we had like in the service, we had the rope pull. We had a high wall, wood wall, and we have to pull ourselves up over this rope in a limited time. All of that was very enjoyable. Then of course, the setting of Nine Mile camp was very beautiful. It was set among the pines and the firs there. The former as I understand, former CC [Civilian Conservation Corps] barracks—and I think it must have been at least—that stain, dark stained log construction on this four or five major buildings. Including the cook shack, then the over heads, office buildings, and that is about all I can remember. I was up there '69...Was it 69? Well anyway, I was up there to Nine Mile and I didn't recognize everything because it was all torn down. The Remount station looks the same, of course that is now the ranger station. It is no longer the Remount station. But at the Remount station they had us pitching hay. That's where they kept all the mules that supplied the mules for the Forest Service, as I understand it, I think I'm correct on this for northern—well all of Idaho, Northern Wyoming, tips and parts of Northern Wyoming at least, western part of South Dakota, and the eastern part of Washington state. Supplied all of the mules for that, that much territory. That's pretty well my reflections on Nine Mile.

KT: Can you tell us a little about the training jumps? What did that entail?

JA: Well after we had our mock-up, we had like mock-up airplanes. Then we went out to, like a regular, just like a regular cow pasture, airfield. Loaded up, just a dirt strip, air strip, loaded up, and first round. First jump was very vivid because it was a beautiful day. They took us up about the highest I was ever dropped out of them. Seems it should have been more, but I guess it wasn't. The weather—I told my mother it was 2,000 feet; it was a bright sunny day. It seemed like it was at least maybe 4,000 or 5,000. It was very soft down there and appealing, inviting, I had no problem. I guess as I understood it some of the members of the crew use to get quite violently sick. No one I knew ever did. I never did. It looked very inviting to me. I enjoyed it. That's all I can remember on that.

KT Can you remember what some of the general feelings were amongst the jumpers?
Anticipating their first jump?

JA: No, it was quite gung-ho, We had lot of service men coming back. We had some fellow from Missouri that always, he tried to act like a character, He'd always say, "Well I went out of the plane like a big bird." Actually, some of the people had sort of dampen his enthusiasm because he used this phrase, ad nauseam. Finally somebody in the barracks when he came in one day, finally told him to knock it off. It was getting a little bit tiresome, that phrase, " I went out of the plane like a big bird." That sort of thing—oh, well. I mentioned, I thought, to me any rate, an interesting experience I had was a fellow that fought in the Spanish Civil war. He said it was like fighting tanks and guns with sticks. So, I assumed he was with the Loyalists, which were against Franco's troops. He evidently parachuted, assuming he parachuted. He was sort of, in today's terms a macho male, very assertive. My buddies and I were heading into town from Nine Mile camp. I think Chuck Stelling, at least Charles Garrison had a car then. He was the only one in my crowd that did have a car in those days. He had kind of an old, something like an old Dodge, something like that. This fellow said he wanted a lift into Missoula. We said sure, fine, come on. But we had the car so loaded up that he had to sit in my lap. Well, he took that as an offense. He must have been using his legs as sort of lever they had these old-fashioned dash boards in the old Dodge, whatever it was. I assumed, it felt like it was about a 500-pound man was sitting in my lap there. He was kind of talking a little bit aggressively, either to me or to everybody. Sort of, I got the impression that it was pretty much everybody. Well, I don't know, we finally dropped him off, we got rid of him. I never did see him after that. He just sort of appeared out of the mist and then just sort of disappeared into the mist. I never saw him afterwards. At least I never kept no track of him. Maybe he was, he might have been shipped out, too. He might have shipped to a different base like McCall, Idaho or gone up to, if he was as tough as he said, he might even have gone up to Alaska. They have a select crew for those, I think they were sending them up Alaska then. Quite sure they were. So, he might have gone on a special crew. They might even have sent him to Redding. They have a smokejumper base in Redding, California. I don't know. I know they use to talk about in our bunch. They used to talk about if you jumped in the woods out at Redding. You really knew you were in some big timber. Course you, you know, potentially Redwoods, very high timbers. So that pretty well covers that portion. I can't, well I can remember minor incidences, but I think that is one of the highlights.

KT: Are there any other specific characters that you remember?

JA: Particular characters? Well, this fellow who was Crow, the one I mentioned in the written report. He was an ex-paratrooper. I guess out of Fort Benning originally. He got his training in Fort Benning. He swan-dived out right after me. I guess as a result he was falling faster than myself because he went through my lines. But he was the one that had the presence of mind to tell me to take off my emergency knife and cut the shroud lines away. So, after he was cutting I was looking at him mask to mask, almost eyeball to eyeball. Why, he finally kind of impatiently ordered me, he said, well take out your knife and start hacking away those lines like that. We were sailing down, right, going right together. You know. First, I was tempted to crack my emergency chute. I don't know, I wasn't thinking. But fortunately, I didn't do that or that would have balled us all up worse. I cut away with him on the lines, and the wind took him away from me. I recall crowds of cheering, all of the people down below, which looked like an Army bunch

down there. Where all the chutes draped over trees it looked like tents down there. Must, well they dropped quite a large number. I think it was one of the biggest fires. I'm quite sure was it was a 100, maybe it was over 100. Enough to make what, about four C-47 loads. I forget the, I think it is 25 in a C-47 load, so I guess it was approximately 100 with four C-47 loads. It looked like a big Army camp down there. Heard all this cheering, you know, hurray, good show and all this business. So, this Crow, whether he was Indian descent or what I don't know. Whether that was an English name I don't rightly know. But he went on safe down the hill and I landed safe. I remembered him off and on, thought about that incident off and on over the years.

KT How much time did it seem like you had while you were falling?

JA: Well, it was surprisingly long. I think they must have dropped us fairly high on that one because we seemed to have plenty of time to get all of this accomplished. I'd remembered then, when he mentioned cutting the lines. I'd remembered in our training something about they said to the affect if you cut every line off the chute, and you left about only three, evenly spaced, you know, all the way around, that the...the silk was strong enough to hold you up anyway. The whole chute positioned some. We had nothing to worry about. We didn't have that many lines to do away with.

KT: Were there ever any other incidences that you can remember while you were working, that happened to you or any of the other jumpers?

JA: No, well, no I don't if I know if I'd recall this. I think it was Mr. Brauer who was in the office and I heard this second hand. That he came down on a mountain top, jumped and it was a high updraft, and I mean a strong updraft and he came down, and instead of hitting hard—his toes touched the ground, and his chute was still billowed out. Then he just gradually just sunk on his heels. That's how strong the updraft was, I guess it was coming maybe from both sides or something. Wasn't blowing on any direction. He just sort of had a beautiful landing, just ended up just right on his feet. Never had to make what they call, they had what they call Marine Allen roll that we had to practice all the time. When you were coming in you twisted your legs around and then fell on one hip. Then this was all to distribute the weight. Get the shock off your body, evenly distributed. So you'd end up with your feet over your head and that would sort of bring you to a skidding stop if—the whole works—if the wind was at a high velocity and moving you pretty fast. Why, after you hit, why you would come to quite a stop because you'd ended up with your feet over your head and toes digging into the ground, so you came to quite an abrupt stop. If the wind didn't drag you very far that way.

KT: Were there ever any injuries that you can remember?

JA: Well, no not any that I already mentioned. I covered that quite thoroughly. But the only real jump that I didn't mention was they had a Pepsi-Cola skywriter crash out here. Actually, if you look from Van Buren street almost due north you'll spot Stuart Peak. It was somewhere in the saddle, either right of Stuart Peak, or left of Stuart Peak. Some young fellow came up to Missoula, Johnson Field, with a low-wing plane. He was a skywriter and he crashed up there. I

was on the top of the stick. I was out—based out of the airport at this time. We just stood on the front steps of the office there and we could see the smoke actually. That's how close it was. Wasn't the other side of the chain of mountains. It was right this side and right in the saddle. We could see this big column of smoke, white smoke as I remember, bellowing up from the saddle horn. They said there's your fire. So we went out. I forget which kind of plane it was—I don't recall. I think it was a Travel Air on that one. It wasn't a very big fire; it was an awful small fire. Well, they dropped me and this other fellow, as I remember I only recall it was myself and another young man they dropped. There was the wreckage of the plane, aluminum wings were all melted. But the gasoline was still flaming from the wing tanks. Fire was nothing, we had it out in no time. I guess they dropped another load or another two or three loads or something. We had actually had more crew help than we needed. After we put this real small fire out, we spent most of our time just gossiping and talking about old times, etcetera and so on. But I do remember one ghoulish member, I think he was from back East, took a show, I think as a joke. I don't even know whether maybe I should even mention it. He took a show and said I want to see what that fellow looks like. He was still, the pilot still strapped in the seat and upside down and so they, I guess they released him. Well, the CAA I believe officially released him later. Well maybe he wasn't released. I suppose we were ordered not to touch anything until the CAA got up there. This kid took a shovel and pried slab of aluminum off the injured, or I mean off the pilot's face. Of course, there was nothing but skull there. There was nothing, no features. But he was awfully young, I don't know, 17 or 18. It's kind of ghoulish, but maybe that's why I didn't mention it. Its rather ghoulish. But we had the fire out in no time. So, I had quite a bit of time on my hands and so did everybody else. I don't know if I went along with the CAA investigator or what. But I walked out where the path of the plane first started. I could see that the pilot was clipping the tops off the trees and pretty soon he was knocking whole trees down. Pretty soon ended with a tree that was about maybe three feet in diameter. He just couldn't go any farther. He crumpled the—melted aluminum mass right there at the base of that tree. It was just almost to the top of, top of the saddle of the mountain. He almost made it over. There was a little stream I believe when I was going back. Yes, as a matter of fact there was a little stream near the crash. That was the extent of it. It was written up in the Missoulian. As the matter of fact. I found it here at the library on tape. I have a black and white copy, a reverse copy from a xerox. I have a copy of it, not a very good copy of the news article on it. It happened just before Labor Day. Actually yes, the day before Labor Day, and so we were up there through Labor Day. Just preceding when we were ready to release us for school. To go back to your high school or go back to your university.

KT: Can you tell us a little bit about your first fire jump?

JA: Well, that's rather...I have it all mixed up in my mind and I don't, I can't.

KT: Is there a particular fire jump that stays in your mind?

JA: Yes, well I the ones I mentioned. Do you want me to repeat all? You want me to repeat on it. All I can do is just repeat. I can't recall. Just the one that I really saving, that one up there, near Stuart Peak. That's the only one.

KT: What other details did you have besides the firefighting?

JA: Well, I did have a little, I mentioned pitching hay for the mules. I guess Stu had some old dynamite, I was about the only other, that sort of sticks in my mind. That was my first experience with high explosives. So I guess somewhere where, well we were clearing stumps. But they had I guess some dynamite, old dynamite they were getting rid of. So we set off a bunch of dynamite there where we were blowing stumps. It is rather vague in my mind what that project was, exactly. Cause as I recall now, it was concerned with clearing land and a blasting stumps with dynamite. Where, I'm not sure. Somewhere near Nine Mile camp.

KT: You were actually involved with the blasting?

JA: No, no. They had a munitions expert. We were observing this. That is all. I mentioned that bear incident, mentioned this jump in Idaho where we had this extremely high wind and they dropped us. On that jump in Idaho—500 feet, I thought that was a the lowest I ever got. But then with talking with other people I found out that among the jumpers, they said, they dropped them, I mean the actual Army jumpers, they dropped them as low as 300 feet. So that really wasn't slow that we thought.

KT: What's the difference between dropping from a high elevation from a low elevation?

JA: Oh, it was quite a thrill. No sooner had the chute opened and racing parallel with the ground. In no time we were down. I was quite fortunate in all my landings. I either landed in a tree or landed hard, maybe hard, but I landed you know where it wasn't so hard. It could be, I never came out with any strains, or sprains, nothing like that. I always kind of welcomed the tree landing because it was very soft. We were well protected of course with those canvas suits. They weigh 150 [pounds] I believe that is correct, I'm pretty shaky on the numbers. I believe I'm correct in saying we had 150 feet of rope in our right pocket. A big, huge canvas pocket on the side of our canvas suit. Of course, then our football helmet, and our steel grid mask, pair of thick gloves, so we had no problems with meeting up with trees at all. It was feather bed landing to me. I liked them.

KT: What were some of your off-duty activities during training?

JA: Oh, we would go down to the Nine Mile Bar quite a bit. Actually, that Nine Mile Bar has hardly changed. I was up there just to visit to look at the building and the interior of it. It was very comforting to see that they kept the building like it used to be in '47, '48. It made a person feel at home up there. I'd almost swear they had the same, almost the same selection of pictures on the wall. [laughs] I'm probably kidding myself, but I looked at some of the decor and it was almost exactly the same that they had in the '40s.

KT: Did the guys ever go into Missoula?

JA: Oh, sure. Quite often.

KT: What would they do in Missoula?

JA: Oh, well, we did go to all those dances. Moose Hall was really popular. We'd enjoy dating the nurses at St. Pat's. That was, at least among my friends, that was biggest opportunity we had was to go to the nurses' quarters and date a nurse. So, we all had dates among the nurses. Or at least it seems to me we did. I might have it mixed up in my mind because, of course attending the University I believe we were still dating nurses. I'm not completely sure on that. I went back to my fraternity and I read the logbook. I did some cartoon illustrations back in those days. I did pictures of some of the people I knew dating girls, and I didn't see any mention of any nurses. But I think when we were attending the University, we were still dating nurses. We went swimming a lot. The old pool down here. We would go out to Missoula Pool on weekends, it was quite a lot of fun for us at that age. I was 18 of course. That's about the extent of it.

KT: What about the off-season activities?

JA: Well, studying at the University was about all I can remember. I don't know. I got interested in classical music. I remember I spent one Christmas here at the University. Stayed here listening to classical music. I had the whole fraternity house to myself and with a roaring fireplace. It had a nice little fireplace in that one. I got a bunch of records I bought—the old masters—and spent the whole Christmas season just listening to classical music. Well, I had a girlfriend that lived right next door. That was one of the reasons probably I stayed too. I believe we went out Christmas Eve for dinner.

We went dancing. We used to dance at the Momart. It's in the basement of the Missoula Apartments. It was a very nice club then, in the basement there with those slot machines. I can still remember the slot machines in the Momart. I don't know if they had them in the Flame. The other two bars were The Flame and Merles. We'd go in there quite often. I know we would dance at the Park Hotel. This is all connected with the University here. Then in the winter we would go to the Park Hotel and dance, listen to the music. Go to the Palace Hotel and dance. Dancing in there...I don't recall winter sports; they weren't all that popular then. I don't recall any skiing; we never went out like that. Actually, hunting wasn't so at least among the University students, or among the people I knew among the University students. There was no hunting done. I never went out hunting. I never went skiing then. Nothing like that. Actually I don't think they even had the Snow Bowl set up by then. One of the members of our fraternity house though surveyed the land up at Whitefish for Big Mountain. He was a top skier. He was a wonderful skier. Actually, he came back one season badly injured from skiing. He had his leg in a cast. Severely broken. He went up there and actually plotted the ground which is presently Big Mountain Ski resort.

KT Were most of the guys on the smokejumping crews college students?

JA: Everybody I knew. Yes. Like I had mentioned there were the servicemen that were

returning, there was still some of the servicemen. What they did in the winter. We had a lot of servicemen living, like in Jumbo Hall, that was the barracks, like a Quonset hut, for barracks. I think that was built for servicemen, quarters for servicemen. At least it was additional housing. It later became serviceable for everybody. We had a lot of servicemen also attending the University of course. That pretty well answers that question. I can't recall any other details. I was only here—the only year, there was two quarters the first season, two quarters the second season, actively in the University I spent close to half a year of just reading philosophy. I was checking books out of the city library; I wasn't attending the University then. I was doing reading on my own. I was reading books out of the local Carnegie Library. Which is presently by the way, it's an art museum. It's the old Carnegie Building.

KT: Can you describe a typical jump?

JA: The sound of the motors would lull me. I was kind of nervous maybe with high anticipation. The roar of the motors seemed to drown everything out. Those older planes, I don't think they had much sound proofing on them at all. So you had the three engines on the Trimotor and you had a single engine on the Travel Air. They were pretty loud motors. I found it sort of lulled me a little bit. So when we would hook our line on to the static line, or hook or cord on the static line, clamp on the static line, why I was ready to go. No problem. No problem of leaving whatsoever. Soon as they pat me on the back, why I just stepped right off the step if I was in, rather the first position I would. Or in say like the C-47, I'd just follow the man out just ahead of me. Just go right on out. I recall on those older planes, other than the C-47, we would go out one at a time. So I seem to recall, sure they have to. I mean on the C-47 we just go out; they pat each one of us as we were standing up. Whereas in the Travel Air or the Trimotor we'd put one foot on the step and kneel and have our hands out on the sides of the door. Then we'd receive this pat from the spotter as soon as he let his drift chutes out to see what the velocity of the wind was. Why then we'd line up, get on the step there and then he'd pat us on the back and we would just step out and go. That's all there was too it.

KT: How did they decide who jumped first?

JA: I don't know. I don't think there was any real selection at first. I don't believe there was. At least as far as I know there wasn't any preference.

KT: Once you got on a fire, what was the general fire procedures?

JA: Oh, they dropped nearly everything. They dropped big chests. They'd drop a radio. They dropped tree climbers, saws and all that. They wrapped them very carefully. A lot of it was free fall too. As I recall on some items they just—the plane would go over quite low, and they would just throw them out the door. They would have them selectively wrapped and other items, maybe tents or something like that, or sleeping bags or something of that nature that would cushion it. Cushion the force of the impact. Nearly every fire I can recall we had a radio operator. We had somebody setting up the radio. I seemed to always recall somebody setting up one of those Army style tube radios. I think even they were jeep radios. I believe I had one in

Lassen Forest later. I had my ex-wife on lookout out of Redding on Fall River Mills, Fall River Mills was a town. It had a National Forest. On lookout we have what I was told was a jeep radio out of a World War II Jeep. These old C batteries I think it's called. Those big ones, they use to use for old fashioned doorbells. Those tall batteries. Those round ones. Well about 10 or 20 of those. By the end of the season, we had a big collection of those used up one and a half old batteries [laughs] But anyway, getting back to the jumpers, I remember them sitting up a radio it seemed like at every fire and to report to the pilot, or they have to report in someplace. Keep radio contact anyway.

KT: What would you do after you landed?

JA: Oh, just no problem we just leave our gear there. We wouldn't even worry about it. As I recall, I never in my mind, I never bothered about it from the word go getting the a chute out of a tree, or anything like that. We just, if it was on the ground, we'd roll them up so the wind wouldn't blow them. After we got out of the harness and everything. Oh, we just meet in groups in the center and the crew boss would check us out. See who was there. Then we would look the fire over, walk over to the fire. I suppose by approximately that time then the plane would be dropping out our equipment. Of course, our crew leader oversee that, he'd—I suppose the first thing logically speaking, they probably dropped the radio. Then he would tell them whether, I guess, if there was any injuries or any equipment missing or what equipment showed up and all this business. That was it. Then we'd leave for the fire with our Pulaski and shovel, axe, and start building a fire trail. Knocking down snags, burning snags, and so forth. I mean the ones that were close to the perimeter of the fire. Cutting maybe those down. Mostly building just the trail to surround the fire as soon as possible so it wouldn't get away from us and crown out. That would be our top priority, would be our trail of course. Of course, the foreman would pretty well select who had which tools. Certain numbers of us would have our Pulaski, certain numbers of us have a axe, certain numbers of us would have shovel. As I recall the Pulaski, I haven't fought fires since Swan Lake, that was '72.

As I recall, that was 12 years ago. Pulaski in front and then shovel, then of course the axe man cutting the overhanging brush off from the trail. So we jump across the trail line, or the fire line. Then water carriers we have, I was selected several times for hauling water up. We had this big canvas water bag. We would go down to the nearest creek and fill it with water and bring it up to the crews. They also dropped us these water bags. Canteens we usually had, well that was on foot crew. I don't know if anybody that ever dropped out of a parachute with a canteen on his belt. So I won't say that they did that, but they would have those portable water squirters. Those had to be filled at the creek. That was about the extent of it. I don't recall any borate being used until 1963, '61 or '62. It was in California they were using borate on the fires. That was the first experience I had with that method of fighting fire.

[Break in audio]

KT: What were some of the after-fire procedures?

JA: I don't know, that's kind of hazy in my mind. Well, probably the measurement. They would have somebody appointed to mark off the number of chains. Then the crew foreman with the map would plot out the shortest trip down to the nearest road where they would pick us up with trucks. Pick us up and take us back. Maybe sometimes they might have left a man to watch. Some cases we would be pulled off a fire and it would still be a little bit warm. I assume they would leave somebody up there to put it out. Perhaps, I'm not sure. The plan was, of course, was never leave it till it was completely out. We had, I don't know if they still do it nowadays, in those days we had to go through our hands after the fire looked out, looked completely out. Then we would go through with a shovel and start digging up, within the fire line and go through it with our hands to be sure there were no hot sparks. We did that pretty often. As the matter fact I can't remember a fire that we didn't do that. Nearly everyone I attended I did that. Just head down for the waiting trucks and just haul us back in. To the nearest ports, so to speak, like up in Metaline Falls, we came by train. We went to Sand Point, Idaho, and we ended up at the old Milwaukee Station. Either taken us to Johnson Field out at the fairgrounds, or we were taken out to Nine Mile. If we were at the top of the stick, we would go to the fairgrounds once again. Well of course, that wouldn't be logical. After one jump we'd be at the bottom again. So then we'd go to Nine Mile, say for instance, in case of Metaline Falls, Washington, where we were clearing slash after a logging crew up there on a wet season. '78 was a very wet season, or '48 rather was a very wet season. So we came back by Milwaukee Road. At least we ended up on Milwaukee Road and went back to Nine Mile by truck.

KT: What was the general atmosphere after a fire?

JA: Oh, pretty much elation, I guess. A feeling of accomplishment, I think. Thanksgiving, feeling of thanks that we were not injured or anything. Then we'd be thinking about getting back into town and having some fun of course. Like going out dancing once again. Date the nurses from St. Pat's or go swimming.

KT: What kind of reactions did you get from friends and family when you decided to become a smokejumper?

JA: I think my mother was pretty pleased. Maybe she was worried I might turn out to be kind of, what they use to call in those days, pantywaist type. Because I was her only surviving child and she had just I, myself, supporting the both of us. Maybe she was quite happy that I got into some kind of work like that, she probably thought it would be good for me. I don't recall her ever saying this I just assumed she was quite happy. The local newspaper, I don't know if my mother told them about it, but the local newspaper got a hold of one letter I guess that I had written, must have been my mother turned it in. They were going to write it up, I never paid any attention whether they did or not. I think the Shelby Promoter up there did print it, print the letter. I guess they thought that was pretty big thing up there. As I mentioned the C-47 that brought us to Metaline Falls, it was an awful primitive strip. I remember a large group of people out there. They seemed to be highly impressed that a plane of that size actually landed on that strip. Because they had a very short running space in there and there was a dirt road crossing a logging road. As I recall somebody had said the rules were, for what reason I don't know, but

the rules were the pilot was supposed to—at least that was the story they told me—the pilot had to apply his brakes before approaching that logging road that bisected the air strip at right angles. Complete right angles.

KT: After your last season as a smokejumper, I believe in 1949, they had the Mann Gulch Fire.

JA: Yes, I heard about it.

KT: What kind of sentiments evolved after that incident?

JA: Well, I thought I had lost my foreman, one of my foremen. I found out later I was in error, I had made mistake. Somebody told me that one of the men, we called him Hank Shank. We had quite a few character-type names like that. Like one fellow was Smokey. I had worked with him on the St. Regis. That was the Cabinet National Forest. He was Smokey. Then we had Hank Shank as foreman. Well, somebody came up and told me that Hank Shank had died in the fire. I had always thought of this and it was just when I got back to Missoula, this trip this time, that I mentioned this to somebody, and they told me that Hank Shank was alive and well. So it was just a rumor, false rumor. But I was sort of disturbed about that. I didn't know Mr. Shank very well, but I was sorry to hear about it and disappointed to hear about it, about him dying in the fire—it was quite a blow.

KT: Did that change your ideas about smokejumping?

JA: Oh no, not really. No, I guess...I'd been in about a week, I guess it was maybe about two or three weeks. I was out at Nine Mile in '49. I guess it was a misunderstanding. They thought I was studying forestry, and by that time I was majoring in art. I turned to art the second year at the University. Somebody called me in and said something to the effect that they thought I was majoring in forestry. I was left out after that. I went in the Region 1 office and asked for another job, so I never returned to smokejumping after that. I got interested in fine art, I guess. By then I guess I was mostly interested in the intellectual side of life. I was looking at my life as, not in physical work, but my life looking at the future, my life in intellectual work. I think there was a period of time there when I just thought about the smokejumpers.

KT: Do you think your experiences as a smokejumper affected the rest of your life?

JA: Well yes, I think...I think it did. Because I did try to keep some, at least some kind of sport in mind, active in some kind of sport. Keep in shape. So instead of being a Bohemian type, let's say starving in the garret or something like that, I always kind of remained true to keeping physically fit. That is about all I can say on that.

KT: Do you find that your experiences as a smokejumper affect your art in anyway?

JA: Well, actually yes, I did start doing some drawings and some nature scenes. I remember one C-47 trip and we were flying around a mountain. The plane was banking real steeply, so much

so that the centrifugal force was such that you couldn't even get out of your seat. The pilot was I presume selecting a fire drop, or something like that, on top of this mountain. But I was very impressed by the scenery and we were low enough where I could distinctly see a lot of scenery down there. I did a drawing after that. I think I still have it as a matter of fact. That could have been the instigation for actually turning into the fine art field, turning to the fine art field. Changing from medicine.

KT: In what way do you feel like that, it was the catalyst in making that decision?

JA: Well, that is hard to say. Well, I have, I have this mental picture of the plane and the scenery below. That is about the extent of it. I can't remember any of the details about it. I thought, I consider myself as pretty poor memory. I always have had a pretty poor memory.

Kt Do you have any other stories that you'd like share with us?

JA: No, not really. Well, related to this, I went up as recently as '78 or '79, I went up the Bob Marshall to try to find that cave. Went up to Holland Lake and packed in over a high area there that still has a glacier on it. Picked up Gordon Creek Pass to head for Big Prairie, I finally had figured out from previous seasons up there. Once I worked for an outfitter camp up there, and I was down at Blackbear and they had a landing strip at Blackbear. Which is in the wilderness. I thought well this might have been where that fire was with the cave. But then I dismissed that from my mind. Cause I looked over the mountain area where I was quite sure the fire had been and it didn't look familiar. So I thought it must be Big Prairie. I looked on my map and I figured, well none of these strips are used anymore as I understand. I figured well it must be Big Prairie. So I headed over Gordon Pass, heading for Gordon Creek Pass, heading for Big Prairie it is, to see if I could stumble across this cave just by accident. I finally had to turn back. I was wearing short pants and the horseflies were eating me up. So, I cancelled the idea out, and I was going to spend, oh, maybe a couple of weeks or more so I could find it. I only had this one change of clothes and so I said, well, I just come back. So I returned to Holland Lake and came back to Missoula. Then I was talking with this taxidermist on California Street and told him. He said sure I know what cave you mean. I said, you're not referring to the Hole in the Wall Cave. That's on the maps near Big Prairie. I thought he was in error, but he said he knew the one. He said it's not the Hole in the Wall. He said he passed it dozens, literally dozens of times. He never noticed it because it was covered by a big bush. Then finally one day he just came across it. That's why he didn't see it, because the bush covered the entrance so well. That cave had had a grizzly bear living in it. We'd stayed that night and the grizzly bear was in the cave. We had thrown our sleeping bags down right at the entrance of the cave. We spent the night with the old grizzly bear there as a companion [laughs]—unknown companion—because it was late at night. We had no inkling whatsoever that there was a cave there. We were tired and we took the first level spot we could find. Just happened to be the landing right out from the entrance of this nice little cave. I thought that was—the story of that has definitely remained in my mind. I think that was very interesting. Just I had been at Limestone Cave and that's at the northern border of the Bob Marshall Wilderness. This cave is almost evenly distributed, equal distant from border to border. What is it, about 150 miles from the north border to the south border at

Lincoln? From Spotted Bear to Lincoln. So that would be 75 miles approximately that—Big Prairie is located. 75 miles. Almost right in the middle of the wilderness.

KT: So this cave with the grizzly bear, this was during a fire jump?

JA: Yes, yes, it was. That's the only one where they took us up in, the only one I can definitely remember we were in a Travel Air. The one that's...did have that the Ford Model T basic black, kind of dull basic, basic black. Have you ever seen a Model T from those years why you'd know exactly what I'd mean? Well, that is how this Travel Air was painted. Basic black with a top wing and a radial engine—old plane, probably built in the '30s. Early '30s. So we dropped on the top of this ridge. There was a sheer wall straight up and down from the top and they had quite a problem finding that. It was just a pilot as I recall, I don't believe they had a co-pilot in those little Travel Airs, they were so small. As I recall they had two jumpers, I know they had two jumpers. I know they had a spotter. But whether they had a co-pilot, I don't think they did. So any rate, so the pilot had quite a problem and the spotter had quite a problem finding where to drop us. Finally, they picked a spot. We walked over to where this cliff was and had to let ourselves down with this rope to get to the fire. It was sheer cliff, and the fire was at the base of this cliff on top of the mountain. Then the fire was at quite a angle, too. We put out the fire and then—in no time because it was real small. Then we had the chore of finding a place to sleep. Because we had no level, we didn't want to climb up that rope back on top of the level area on the top of the mountain. So we scouted around and found this little level patch. Went right to sleep. Cause I think it was, at least nine or ten o'clock at night. Maybe morning, and very dark, overcast, I believe, it may have been overcast. At least they were no lights and no brilliant moon or no bright stars or anything that I recall. So I never even noticed that darn cave. Until the ranger went up and he was a—as I had recalled in the written report, he was everything. He was a jack of all trades, he was his own alternate ranger, he was his own packer, his own cook, his own telephone man. He'd go off at two weeks at a stretch, he had that much time on his hands, and just go fishing. He's a great guy too. He was glad to have some company anyway. He really rolled out the welcome mat and put on a big feed for us, as I recall. Then he went up—we'd arrived in the morning. We picked up this trail right into the Big Prairie Ranger Station in no time. We had an easy walk out because the trail led right in to it. He went up either the next day or whenever and got out gear. He said to us when he got back, he says boys, he said, I sure wish you had been with me cause just right where you slept that night was the entrance to a cave. Standing bolt upright in the entrance of that cave was a silver mother, an old grizzly bear and he'd wish we'd had seen the sight. I wished so too. That's why I guess I went back. By then I was getting sort of intrigued with caves. I'd met spelunkers up there when I worked at Spotted Bear. When I worked for this outfitter below, another outfitter fellow. They said they were, these spelunkers were parked in the car and they said they were heading out. They were at the entrance to the cave heading out to Limestone Cave. They were going to check it out. By that time I was getting very much interested in caves. That was in 1969 when I seen them. Now when I got back here to Missoula in '76 then I was—then I had all this time I could spend. I was very highly interested in getting up there and seeing if I could find that cave.

KT: Are there any big differences you noticed in the way the smokejumpers are run today?

Compared with how they were run when you were a smokejumper?

JA: Well, I knew for a stretch there they were using nothing but helicopters. That sort of took the glory out of it I think. From there on I thought well, heck it's no fun no more. Then I next heard that they got back those Canadian planes, using Canadian, what do you call it, Nord Master, or something like that. Is that a Canadian plane?

KT: I don't know about that.

JA: At any rate, it is a Canadian built airplane. They're dropping them again with parachutes. So that sounded a little more like it. But the advent of those helicopters, well my gosh there is nothing to that, anybody could do that. So they switched again, back to jumping as I understand it. I've been out there at the new quarters and so I know there back again. I've talked with them. There back again using parachutes.

KT: Do you have any observations about the attitude of the smokejumpers today? JA: No, it is kind of surprising I even know anything about it because I haven't talked to any of them. The people I dropped with that are still in town, why they have gone on to other fields. One is a realtor, two of them are realtors, married with families. I'm the only one that is single right at present. But I went out on bicycle up to the new base out there. The one that President Eisenhower, wasn't it, himself who dedicated that. Yes, it was President Eisenhower dedicated that new base out there. That was after I was gone, I know. But I went out there by bicycle and I saw one of these jumpers pedaling on one of these unicycles. That's a great way for a physically building himself up. That is magnificent. Certainly, can build himself up to perfect shape that way. I would imagine it is very strenuous. Takes a lot of balance. You only used to see people in carnivals who were really heavily used unicycle. There must be a whole different crew now. [laughs] I wouldn't recognize them, wouldn't even be able to talk with them. It's a whole new ballgame now, I guess. I have never—I've been here seven years now this stretch, and I haven't talked to a single fellow that said he's a new man just jumping. So I don't know.

KT: Is there anything else you'd like to add before we complete this interview?

JA: No, not really. Maybe, we were pretty gung ho. We used to wear a shirt, everybody had T-shirts in those days. Everybody wore a T-shirts. Usually invariably we wore a brown sort of army-type twill shirt. No epaulettes on them but it is very close to the Army shirt, Army brown. The Levi's, that was universal, everybody had Levi's, two or three pairs of Levi's. A pair of nice boots and that was it. Everybody had these white T-shirts and then somebody in the rigging crew had a stencil. So we would go in to where they rigged the chutes and we'd stencil our T-shirts with a couple pairs of wings and that parachute in the middle of the parachute would be flanked by the wings. So we'd go into the dances, and oh wow did we really think we were something. We thought we were the greatest. We would go over the bridge, so of course the whole design was to attract the girls to be perfectly frank about it. We thought that was pretty classy to have this design on our T-shirts. Everybody I could recall had at least one of those T-shirts designed with those wings and the open chute in the middle. I think maybe there was

even lettering on them. I think they even had the Forest—also the Forest Service stenciled. The Forest Service symbol also was stenciled in there some place.

KT: Was there a typical humor associated with the smokejumpers?

JA: Oh yes, I think so. I don't know. I can't recall practical jokes or anything like that, but...gosh, can't remember. Can't remember amusements but offhand. Maybe later, but I can't offhand.

KT: Were there any other kinds of fads beside the t-shirts?

JA: Pardon me?

KT: Were there any other kinds of fads beside these t-shirts?

JA: Oh, well, army clothes of any nature like that. I remember I showed up there in my—relatives had bought me one of those leather jackets for high school. I showed up at jumper camp with this leather jacket. A fellow had a real nice, it was quite practical, this fellow had a real nice but warm naval jacket. It was in green though; it was sheep-lined naval jacket. Very well cut and everything so I traded him. He wanted the leather jacket; he liked the leather jacket. I didn't really care for that leather so much. So I traded him the leather jacket for the practical naval jacket. Turned out it was wise move because cold evenings on the top of a mountain my jacket was much better than the leather jacket would have been. So that was really the only the only thing I can recall that was sort of distinctive. Seemed like everybody, nearly everyone had some, at least one item that was connected with the service because the service was still of interest to us. Several of us had just missed the service and had been hoping that maybe we might have gone into the service as a pilot or something of the nature. That's where that leather jacket came in, on I believe was I picked that out because of—it referred to the Army pilots, referred to the Army services as a pilot. And K-rations of course. We had maybe sort of a kid's interest in K-rations. Taking the cigarettes out of the K-rations and keeping those little packets. Everything tasted very good cause it was sort of exotic. Compared to a regular meal like in the cook shack. We kind of these exotic candy bars or those fruit bars. It was kind of mysterious cause they had a lot of fruit, build up the vitamin content, well they had quite an unusual mixture. For instance, the fruit bar, maybe I don't know, had six or eight different fruits mixed in, and some other items mixed there. There was chewing gum, chewing gum in the kit, in the old K-rations. We'd eat all the parts of the K-rations. Cause it was kind of like going to the store getting a treat for us on a fire. At least for me it was too. I mean then I think some others, too felt the same way. That's about all I can do to sum up. Probably when I get away I'll think of something. One item I wish I had mentioned. That's basically it.

KT: I would like to thank you for this interview.

JA: You're entirely welcome.

[End of Interview]