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Interviewee: Jeff Fereday

Interviewer: Floyd Cowles

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Floyd Cowles: Jeff, give me an autobiography of yourself to start out.

Jeff Fereday: I was born December 27, 1949 in Boise, Idaho. I grew up in Boise, Idaho, went to high school there. During my early years I was familiar with the smokejumpers in McCall, Idaho, which of course is only 100 miles north of Boise. I always admired the smokejumpers up there. My folks have a summer place in McCall, so we spent a lot of time in McCall, in fact almost all my summers from early childhood on were spent, at least in part in McCall. I was also familiar, in my teenage years, with the hotshot crew in McCall, the Payette Interregional crew, which of course is a 25-man crew. I was interested in getting involved with the smokejumpers and the way to do that was to get involved with the hotshots. So in the summer of 1968 prior to when I started college I managed to get a job with the hotshots, worked for them in '68 and '69. And then in 1970 I was accepted into the smoke jumpers and trained there. I went to college in the fall of 1968 at Columbia College in New York City and I was there through the ensuing four years and during all those years from 1970 through the end of college I was a smokejumper in McCall. In 1973, which was my first summer after college, I was a smokejumper at McCall, also in 1974, and in '75 I went to Fairbanks, Alaska and was a jumper up there for the BLM for the summer of '75. That was the end of my jumping career.

FC: What are you doing now?

JF: I'm a lawyer in Denver, Colorado with the firm of Davis, Graham and Stubbs. I have been with Davis, Graham and Stubbs for 3 years since August 1981. Before that I was a patent attorney with the Interior Department, the office of Solicitor in Washington, D.C. And of course, that was my first job out of law school, so for the 3 years from '77 to '80 I was in law school. Incidentally in the summer of '77 which was the summer right before I became a law student, I ran a Heli tack crew, or I was one of the squad bosses on a Heli tack crew out of Fairbanks, Alaska. So I've had that fire experience as well. So all told my fire experience years were from 1968 through 1975 and then again in 1977.

FC: Pretty good fire experience, Jeff. Let me get into your time when you were on the inter-regional crew in '68, '69 before we get into the jumpers, which obviously helped you get in to the jumpers, experience-wise and training-wise. What about any training then and the fires you might have been on?

JF: Well, I have very vivid memories. In particular the second fire I was ever on in 1968 it was in early September. Well, maybe I should go back and just explain a bit about my training on the IR crew. I got onto the IR crew in midyear, in midsummer, even late summer. I believe my first

day was August 8, 1968. I was working in a restaurant in McCall as a cook for the summer, making pizzas actually, in the Brassline Pizza establishment in McCall. And I got to know a lot of the jumpers and a lot of the IR people through that experience. And I knew that there were some IR crew members leaving in midsummer in 1968. One of them was getting drafted as a matter of fact to go to the Vietnam war, in fact there may have been more than one. But in any event the IR crew was in need of some more people right there near the end of their season. And I talked to Mr. Fouts, who was one of the forest fire staff, in fact he might have been the fire control officer then on the Payette, I can't recall. I just kept bugging him, so I just got in. I really had no formal training as a firefighter I knew since I grew up in Idaho and did a lot of woods work. I knew how to operate an ax, and a Pulaski and I was a pretty hard worker, so my training pretty much was 100 percent on the job. My first fire was up on Parks Mountain up on Big Creek, in what was then Idaho Primitive Area which is now the River of No Return Wilderness. And on that fire, I—we were on the fire as a crew but there was also some jumpers on the fire. Some of them were friends of mine so again, it was another incentive to work toward the jumper organization.

But it was the second fire that I was on in 1968 that was the most memorable to me. In September of '68 our crew had dwindled down to about 15 men. The hotshot crew had—people were leaving for school and so forth. I wasn't scheduled to leave for college until late September. We got a fire call to southern California to, I guess what has become a fairly famous fire, the San Gabriel Canyon Fire of 1968. In fact, there were eight people who were killed on that fire. No one from any of the crews I was working with, but some folks from California. But our crew, since we were shorthanded was augmented by about ten jumpers including Tom Hilyard, Floyd Chemitt and several others, and—

FC: Jumpers from McCall?

JF: Jumpers from McCall. So basically those jumpers, which they do sometimes, became pounders for the purposes of that fire. And the 25 of us or so flew to Ontario, California and then we were bussed and helicoptered up to the fire. Oh, incidentally, the most senior jumper in that group was Carl Rosselli—that is R-o-s-s-e-l-l-i—who is still with the Forest Service, I believe in McCall, but hasn't jumped in several years. That fire involved a lot of long nights, a lot of steep, hot, hard work through the manzanita, a lot of very technical problems with the fire itself. And in fact on one afternoon, the entire bunch of us were definitely in danger of our lives and if it hadn't been for Carl Rosselli and his good sense, I probably wouldn't be here.

FC: Why was that? Were you in the chute or something?

JF: No, there was no parachute action.

FC: No, I meant a chute canyon.

JF: Yeah, that's exactly what it was. A very steep hillside and we were in a spot fire situation.

And the area we were in was not a classic chute like you'll see on the Salmon River, but it was a fairly broad swale that had characteristics of a chute. This was a situation where the fire, we were actually cold trailing this fire that had burned once, it had been creeping along under this manzanita up this hill and we had pretty well stopped it. We were building a line down through the manzanita which really means we were building a trail through the manzanita. Because as you know you can't really walk through the manzanita or even crawl, you have to pretty much cut your way with chainsaws and brush hooks. So we were working our way down, each man leapfrogging down and past the other to cut more trail and all of a sudden in late afternoon, I heard shouting. I was the lowest man on the line at that point and I hear shouting from up above and what it was was Carl Rosselli relaying down through other members of the crew to get back up the hill as fast as possible.

What had happened was a spot fire had blown up below us and was starting to run up the hill, and I couldn't even see it I was so deep in the brush. But we all got back out on the trail we had just cut and literally ran up that hill. And by the time I got even halfway up it was obvious to everybody that we were in big trouble because there was a huge wall of crowning manzanita coming up beyond us, maybe less than 100 yards. And we got to the top and a helicopter took us off in, I believe, three at a time. Luckily there was a burn at the top, so we were able to get off on the top. Immediately after we were all shuttled over to an adjoining hillside, the helicopter that was carrying us swooped back around and crashed in an adjoining canyon which hadn't yet burned.

FC: And set another fire?

JF: And set another fire.

FC: What caused the crash?

JF: I never heard what caused the crash. I presume it was mechanical failure, but I suppose it could have been human error.

FC: It could have been you on board, you know, a couple minutes later.

JF: That's right, luckily at that point the pilot was alone. It had just taken us to safety and was heading over to pick up some other people who were in a similar situation, although not quite as severe, on a nearby ridge.

FC: You don't remember the name of the pilot or the company?

JF: No, I don't but he was flying one of the little Bell Whirlybirds, it was a B-2 or whatever those were.

FC: A little GJ-B?

JF: Yeah, I guess that's what it was. I can't really remember the numbers and models anymore. But, so it fell to our crew because we were the nearest and also because we had jumpers with us who had more experience to rescue that pilot. So there were about 12 of us, I guess, who went toward that pilot to get him out. And then about four or six jumpers including Tom Hilyard and Floyd Gemitt broke off from the group and went up the canyon to get that pilot out with the aid of another helicopter and the rest of us went down canyon to safety on a road. And I remember on the way over there we got into a hornet's nest, Tommy Hilyard got several hornet's stings, and one of his eyes was closed. But he still went up and helped get that pilot out of there. He had a I think he had a broken pelvis and a broken leg.

FC: But he did survive?

JF: He did survive as far as I know. I know that he survived, I don't think that he had any further complications from there, but they got him out. And just after they got him and joined back up with us on our way back down, that—the fuel tanks on that copter blew up and the fire that had throughout all this time been creeping down that ridge towards that helicopter. So it was a pretty exciting and frightening experience. I guess I look back at it now, I see that it was partly the cool heads of the smokejumpers that made the best of a pretty bad situation. So that was sort of my baptism in fire control, that was my second and last fire in 1968.

FC: Did you have any project fires in 1969?

JF: Yes, in '69 I was on a project fire for the hotshots in the state of Washington.

FC: What would you call your group?

JF: The McCall hotshots.

FC: Just the McCall Hotshots?

JF: Yeah', and in 1969 about halfway through the summer, because of some people or one person leaving I was made a squad boss on that crew. So I was in a leadership position that second summer. We were on several fires in Idaho, a couple of fires in Washington, and one fire in Montana that summer. I think I was on 10 or 12 fires. I don't remember any fires I particular in the summer of '69 that were all that noteworthy.

FC: Not any particularly hairy fires or narrow escapes? How about the names of the fires?

JF: I guess I never was very good at remembering the names of fires.

FC: Whereabouts in Montana was the one Montana fire?

JF: It was in the Bitterroot, somewhere in the Bitterroot range. Not that far out of Missoula as I recall. Thirty air miles or so out of Missoula. We came through Missoula on that fire.

FC: But nothing really sticks out as spectacular?

JF: No, 1969 was pretty routine, nothing really like compared to the fire in 1968.

FC: Let's get into your smokejumping career starting in 1970 and talk about your training, your training jumps and your fire jumps and involving the incidents that were significant.

JF: Well, I began training in June of 1970. Of course, that's a 3-week experience that I won't soon forget, but sometimes I wish I could. [laughs]

FC: Why was it so tough?

JF: It was tough I think for two reasons. Physically it was fairly tough although I didn't find it out of line in that regard. But it was tough physically, there were the intense calisthenic and running components of the training. A lot of stuff to think about and remember with respect to learning new equipment and that sort of thing. So for the first 2 weeks, before the week in which we get our practice jumps, our first jumps. It was tough physically. But the other part of that was, that was maybe even tougher or maybe more aggravating, that might be a better way of putting it, was a fairly militaristic approach some of the trainers took to the experience.

FC: Don't you think that it's necessary when you've got life at stake, they don't obey orders?

JF: Well, I think it's necessary for people to obey orders. I think most of the smokejumpers, in fact, all of them were intelligent and dedicated people with fire experience, with a good grasp of what was necessary to protect life and limb and with a good grasp of the seriousness of the job that they were doing. And I'm not so sure that the militaristic approach was always necessary to further inculcate that. I think that also there was an element of hazing, for lack of a better word, directed at the new men, which in McCall are called Neds.

FC: Neds?

JF: Yeah.

FC: Weren't they trying to weed them out like in the Marines?

JF: They might have been. In our year, they didn't weed anybody out. And I think it's significant that the only weeding out, the only weeding out techniques that were employed were ones that were really physical weeding out techniques. There may have been some mental ones, if you know what I mean. But if people could pass the physical, that was really the only weeding out that went on. In other words, I'm suggesting that it was kind of overdone in terms of the

approach to Ned New Man and all that.

FC: You mentioned hazing, which I appreciate from the old days of college hazing.

JF: Uh-huh.

FC: What types of hazing?

JF: Well, it was usually carried out by the more experienced jumpers with the acquiescence of the overhead. You know what I'm talking about when I say the overhead. They would have the Neds flip to see who—well, for instance, I'll give you an example. One night, one of my first experiences once I got my training was to go over to La Grande, in fact my first fire jump was out of La Grande. We were in La Grande for 4 or 5 days or something. And one of the pranks that some of the older jumpers thought they'd pull on the Neds, was to make them flip to see who had to spend the night in the Beech aircraft out at Le Grande. Which is, I guess there are two ways to look at this kind of hazing. But that is one, one is kind of humorous and maybe helps build a sense of camaraderie. But on the other hand, I think it also has its negative aspects. I think that when I first started jumping, there was a tendency to do more of this than when I left jumping in 1974, in McCall, and later in Alaska. Ah, I think that all in all it was not a really helpful thing because it tended to build barriers between people or make one group, the newer guys put them in a category that they really weren't in. They were expected to perform as well as anybody else.

FC: Give us some examples of the hazing beyond what you've discussed.

JF: Well at McCall, they used the technique of flips, Heads Out, ever heard of that?

FC: No.

JF: Well, everybody takes out a quarter or something like that you flip the coin, all around the circle, and if you get a head, you're out and safe. But if you get a tail you're in and still vulnerable to whatever activity it is that's been designated for you to do. And as I say, it was often the older jumpers that would set the requirement, like crawling through a culvert in a really cold stream that might have 6 inches or 8 inches of air space in the culvert. Or there were some of them that were actually quite funny—that people had to do. Like wear a hat made of a cowpie with a necklace made out of horseshit festooned around his neck and go into a store and buy popsicle for the group, you know that kind of thing. It was just, I think, kind of an attitude that I didn't particularly appreciate that was I think at its peak during the training weeks. I think it tapers off a little bit throughout the summer.

But I think more importantly during the next 2 or 3 years with some of us that had gone through that, became the more experienced jumpers, we just didn't do that anymore. I think it just sort of faded away. I think it became more of a situation where new jumpers were treated

with respect and given encouragement rather than treated with ridicule and put in a category that was completely gratuitous, and not a category that didn't have much basis in reality. That's not a big item, I don't mean to make a lot out of this, but I am just saying that in 1970 when I started, I think what we were experiencing in the smokejumper organization was the beginning of something of an era of change. Where smokejumper organizations became somewhat more democratic if you can understand that. In fact, several of us at McCall as the years went by got more aggressive about taking positions as an organization or as jumpers with respect to the kinds of policies that were employed in firefighting and the kinds of project work that we were doing and so forth.

FC: No wonder you're a lawyer.

JF: Yes, well I've always been that way and I think I was looked upon as kind of a troublemaker in McCall. But I think there were some good things that came out of my era at McCall, and I'm not trying to take credit for them, a lot of people shared these views. Let me give you a couple of examples of the kinds of speaking out that I'm referring to. On one occasion I was the senior jumper on—a fire boss—on a fire in the Middle Fork of the Salmon. I was in charge of another jumper, Vince Masi—that is M-a-s-i—and also four Heli tack crewmen from Indian Creek or some such place. And we got the fire out and we were ready to pack out and the fire control officer of that district flew over in a helicopter and asked me to build a helispot on a certain place. And this was in the primitive area and I had a chainsaw.

So I hiked down there to look at the spot that he wanted me to build the helispot on and I radioed him back and I told him I would prefer not to build a helispot. Because first of all I felt: we could all hike out down to another area where we wouldn't have to build one, it would take us most of the day. But second, but we could do it, secondly and more important in my view I didn't want to have to cut the trees I would have to cut. I would have to take down about seven prime Doug fir and several smaller trees of fir and spruce and my position was that that was—

FC: Wasted.

JF: Yeah, it was a waste and it was something, it was an example of the kind of activity that sometimes smokejumpers found themselves in that was not helpful in protecting resources but was in fact destructive and gratuitously so. There was no reason to cut those trees. Well, we, I didn't really argue with him too much over the radio, I think I can take orders as well as the next guy when I am ordered to do something. And basically, I was ordered to make that helispot and I cut those trees.

Well after I got back, I mentioned this in one of our smokejumper meetings and even later mentioned it to the regional forester who met with us. And I think, I got a lot of support from the other jumpers in that point. So it came to the point where we really had a kind of policy at McCall. That first of all we hike whenever we can if the alternative is to build a helispot. And we cut down as few trees as possible in building helispots and so forth. So I think there was just a

kind of more an environmental consciousness that grew up in the early '70s and I was certainly a part of that.

FC: If it had been an injury or a rescue your attitude would have been different.

JF: Absolutely.

FC: But I can see your point on a hike out or something like that.

JF: Another point that we made, and I don't really know, this is in 1974. I don't really know whatever came of it. We stated our position. I think a majority of the jumpers did in meetings that whenever we were in the back country, particularly in the Primitive Area we wanted to use not chainsaws but misery whips [two-man crosscut saw]. Because it was less likely that damage would be done and we were perfectly willing to use those more primitive methods. I think there was a bit of a changing in the guard in the early '70s.

FC: You mention Neds as a new smokejumper. What's...N-e-d-s? Is that what it is?

JF: Yeah, Ned—new man. You'll have to find the origin of that word by talking to other old McCall jumpers. But I think there was at one time a new jumper in McCall; I don't believe his name was either Ned or Newman, but it might have been, one of his names might have been those. But in any event, he was tagged with that name because evidently, he was a real green, kind of a real nerd, you know. So that term stuck. I think almost every other base used the term rookie which is self-explanatory.

One other point about the change in attitude in the early '70s. I think less hazing went on, but also I think there was more opportunity for jumpers at McCall to speak their minds. There were more, there got to be more meetings of smokejumpers, regular meetings. Which I think is very important. Where the overhead got to hear gripes and to discuss changes in policy and that sort of thing. It was difficult in McCall because we still had in charge people who really believed that the smokejumper's place was more just to take orders and not to participate so much in making policy. Not that any of us wanted to be policy makers, but we wanted to have our gripes aired in a more routine manner.

FC: Understand the policy and that it was a sound policy.

JF: Exactly, that is exactly right. And of course, at McCall, there were other problems. There were undercurrents all the time with respect to personalities.

FC: Give an example.

JF: The obvious and most noteworthy example is Thad Duel. Well, Thad has throughout his smokejumping career—and it's been a long career, and in fact he's still jumping—has been very

controversial. He's just the kind of guy who raises a lot of people's ire. And he often had a real doctrinaire or approach to how things should be done, and was not adverse to meting out punishment and so forth. Sometimes in situations where people did not feel it was justified. He was always a kind of a topic of conversation.

FC: Was he considered an overhead?

JF: Yes, he was the project foreman for the McCall jumpers. So the McCall experience was an interesting one. There were always politics at every base and those are some of the aspects of politics at McCall.

FC: Continue with that, what else happened with him?

JF: Thad just...Pretty much every time Thad did anything or opened his mouth, either rightly or wrongly there were grumblings among some of the jumpers. Those who his comments were directed to and then others who as a rule just didn't agree with the way he operated. He would put people on the bottom of the list for doing things he didn't like, that sort of thing. And also he had his reputation on the fire line was that he didn't do much work. You know how those things go, it was just kind of a tension that grew up around him. Now Thad is a very capable individual and very bright and often is very pleasant to be around. But like many people I am sure you know he still has his rough edges and sometimes I think they sometimes resulted in unfair treatment of jumpers. That was always an issue at McCall.

FC: What else about training or culture?

JF: The best experience I had with training was just meeting a lot of new and quite remarkable young men. At that time the Idaho City Smokejumper Base had just shifted, this was 1970, it had just shifted, I think, in '69 to the Boise headquarters. Was no longer located in Idaho City. But in any event, the Boise jumpers and the McCall jumpers trained together and did refresher training together. The Boise and McCall jump bases were actually quite close, in terms of friendships and camaraderie. And we would often end up on the same fires together as well. And that was always a source of great pleasure for me because I found, I guess you could say. If I could make one generalization about smoke-jumping and how I felt about it, it was a feeling of tremendous pleasure and fond memories for the people I had met who were my fellow smokejumpers. These guys were almost to a man intelligent, hardworking, unique, funny. people. And great sense of humor, great sense of adventure, many of them. And rack on tours, who were, many of whom are still really unparalleled in my experience. People like Rod Dow, Murray Taylor, Mike Silva, Evan Simmons.

FC: What sticks out on each one of those? Were they pretty well lumped together as great—

JF: No, they're all unique, they are all real individuals. They're all, all of these guys are just some of my—Rod Dow and Murray Taylor are still two of my closest friends and Evan Simmons.

Wayne Fields, a fellow I had trained with. I grew up in Hope, Idaho up near Sand Point, and is just as honest as the day is long, unafraid to speak his mind, has a great sense of humor, and liked the same kind of music that I liked. We trained together in 1970 and Wayne and I just became fast friends. And played harmonica together and listened to Woody Guthrie tapes, Bob Dylan. And stayed up late went out and did our practice jumps the next morning. Wayne also was really gifted with his hands, as a lot of the smokejumpers are I found. He could carve a log chain out of a survey stake in about a 3-hour period. Just a real interesting guy. He lives down in Texas now, I was hoping I could see him at this event. Rod Dow is—at least a rumor in his own time, if not a near—legend. He's been smokejumping since 1968 and is still jumping up in Fairbanks.

FC: Why is he a legend?

JF: Just because he's a great storyteller; he's very funny. He always seems to be in the center of some of the most bizarre activities I ever saw occur. We had great times together.

FC: What were some of the bizarre activities you saw?

JF: Well, there are many that I could talk about. But one comes to mind is really just sort of a picturesque description of two guys banging around a strange town and having a great time together. Seems like Rod and I did a lot of that. I remember one occasion when Rod and I were on a crew in 1972 we shipped up to Fairbanks to help up on a fire bust up there. The two of us got to know this young lady up in Fairbanks. She was about 17 I guess, who liked both of us very much. We ended up the three of us just cruising around Fairbanks for the better part of a week when we weren't out on fire. And we stayed out at her place and she stayed with us. And it was just really a wild time.

She decided she wanted to come back down to the lower '48 with us and she had family with Oregon. She thought she'd make her way over from McCall over to Oregon if she could catch a ride with us. So we were set to go home on a DC-6, so we—I had an old, one of those Stetson open road hats. And I gave her that hat, she put her hair up under that hat, we dressed her up like a smokejumper. And she kind of pulled the hat over her eyes and we got her up on that plane. Well, of course the plane was filled with smokejumpers, there were smokejumpers from Missoula and McCall and some from Boise.

Almost all the smokejumpers knew what we were doing. But the overhead, with the exception of one guy, Jerry Galatner, who was a wonderful guy from McCall and one of the squad leaders from McCall I had the most respect for. Jerry knew about it because he had recognized her when she was getting on the plane. That this wasn't just any smokejumper; this was someone built a little different than most smokejumpers he'd seen at least that year. And so this woman, whose name was Stacey got on the plane. I have photographs of her sitting there with her hat pulled down in a middle seat, halfway back in the plane. And we were just warming the engines getting ready to take off and we thought we had this thing pulled off when Gerry came back

and said really we probably ought to put her off the plane. So we agreed it probably was a little bit crazy so she was left behind standing on the apron there in Fairbanks as we took off. But that was kind of a typical experience with this Dow.

FC: That was before female smokejumpers started in '81. You could probably get away with it now.

JF: Yeah, I think you might get away with it in this era. That was another thing we always had pushed for in the mid-'70s—'73,'74,'75 we started to see more women on these interregional crews in California. Particularly in Silver City, we would go down there and spend 3 weeks or something down there. I often saw women coming through on the crews down there. I always encouraged the women to jump, to apply. Although I think some jumpers, maybe the old guard in particular, just thought there was no way women could or should be jumpers, I don't know how many of those women, IR members, I spoke to over the years and encouraged them to apply. Again, it was just kind of my outlook. I felt the jumpers could be an even more dynamic and interesting organization than they already were if there were some women. I think it would help to make smokejumping more a part of mainstream America, if you will, or what was happening in America with respect to women's rights. So I encouraged that.

Ah, I think, as far as experiences jumping out of McCall, fire experiences, I think the most remarkable, really was my very first year, 1970 and the big Wenatchee fires all around northwest Washington. From Wenatchee, Washington all the way north up through Winthrop and Twisp, and all the way heading west literally over to the Olympic Peninsula. I have a friend, Larry Hide, who's no longer with us. But Larry, I remember jumped, he was from Winthrop, he jumped with a friend of mine from McCall, Mike Hill. They jumped a two-manner on the Olympic Peninsula during that fire bust. Which is incredible, the Olympic Peninsula virtually never burns.

FC: Too much rain.

JF: But in any event, I remember there were nine project fires going at one time on the Wenatchee Forest alone. We went to Washington on two occasions, both about 2 weeks long, in 1970. And at one time, the crew were something like 300 smokejumpers working out of Winthrop. Smokejumpers from literally every base, and I don't think smokejumping has ever seen quite such a display. We had people packing chutes around the clock. We had 16-man loads going out, one after another, starting at first light in the morning. We had all kinds of commandeered aircraft, from Aero Commanders to twin Beeches to Otters, anything they could get to drop jumpers out of in twos and fours and sixes. And it was 2 weeks, and then we went home for about 10 days and then back for 2 weeks. So I spent the bulk of my summer on these Wenatchee fires.

FC: These were both jump fires and project fires?

JF: These were all jump fires.

FC: You didn't get in on the crew action then?

JF: No, we didn't. At least I didn't do any ground pounder, meaning ground crew action on any of these fires. In fact, I think no jumper did. The fires were starting with such regularity, and in such remote areas, that they, even in some areas that weren't so remote but they couldn't get crews to them, that they would jump them. This was a situation where two guys, for instance, Bill Newland and Jerry Ogawa from McCall would jump a 2-and-a-half-acre fire as a two-manner. Which was pushing things at that point anyway. And it would go to 10,000 acres and burn up their gear. That happened to them twice during that—those two.

[Break in audio]

JF: On two occasions with nothing but their masks from their jump helmets filled with buckles and D-Rings and connector links from their gear, all their gear was burned. Almost everybody over on those fire busts was jumping with at least 10 or 12 or 13 other men out of DC-3s on big project fires. They would jump them in to build a line on a portion of a project fire, pull them off, bring them back, jump them into a similar situation the next morning. People were jumping three or four fires a week, maybe more.

I got the reputation during the fire bust for being the two-manner team because while everyone else was jumping these project fires with entire Doug loads of jumpers I managed to jump I think four fires the first trip over, and I think three or four the second trip. The biggest one I jumped was a four-manner.

So it happened that Tom Collier, who was another Ned, and I were just kind of—we were kind of on the end of the list. So they filled up three of four Dougs and then there were two guys, the two of us left over. So they put us into a Beach with some Missoula jumpers and took us out and jumped 3 or 4 two-manners out of that load. There wouldn't have been four, I think the Beech held only six jumpers. So we'd come back and it seems like we always came back at the right time. There were no jumpers in camp, and they'd glom onto us let us take a shower, get suited up again, put us in the nearest aircraft and send us back out. So we ended up being sort of the utility crew that was picking up all the small fires. Of course we were the envy of everybody .

I remember one fire in particular near North Bend, Washington. We, the two of us, and Don Skei—that is S-k-e-i—who was a Redding jumper, the four of us got put on an Aero Commander. Which basically was not a jump plane. It had been used at various times, but it was an unsatisfactory jump plane, it went too fast, too much prop blast and it didn't carry very many people. But in any event, that was the only plane they had. We were the only three jumpers in camp. They put us on it, and we went out and jumped this three-man fire near North Bend in the cedars and the tall Dougs and deep duff on the ground and we were on that

fire for 3 days. We'd no sooner hit the ground and started to get that fire knocked down, then we started looking at our maps and we realized they had mislocated us. They had given me a legal description before I left the plane as to where the fire was. I could see that legal description was at least 3 miles off. So we figured well, it looks like we're on our own. We did have an accurate map of the area so we, after we finished the fire, and incidentally we had no radio, because they were out of radios.

So we hiked down to a logging road and then packed further down that road to another road which was a forest road. And lo and behold there at the confluence of those two roads was a Forest Service engineer's pick-up, locked up. Well, we were out of food. We'd been out for 3 and a half or 4 days so I suggested that we just break into this truck, hotwire it and drive it to town. It was about 40 miles to the ranger station. Well, Tom Collier is a fairly conservative and fairly nervous fellow, he was all opposed to it. But Don was for it. So I got a piece of wire from the back of the truck and we jimmed open the lock through the window and got the truck open. Then I took a headlamp, cut the wire off the headlamp and made a three-pronged wire, which I had learned in my youth was handy in hotwiring vehicles. So we hotwired that truck and drove it about 40 miles to town. Tom Collier, the entire way talked about how we were going to be in big trouble for this, and there was no way we'd keep our jobs after this. And we kept telling him not to worry. And then he got even more excited when we stopped and picked up a hitchhiker, some back packer. Because it says clearly on that jockey box, on that deck on every Forest Service vehicle that you are not to pick up hitchhiker, but we did that anyway. Tom was pretty much beside himself. We finally made it to the ranger station, the little house the ranger lives in, at about 1:30 a.m. And we pulled up and we were unloading our gear and here comes the ranger in his robe, walking out on the porch of this house and he says, "Well, I see you boys found the key I left you on the air cleaner of that truck." [laughs] We of course had to admit we hadn't found that.

FC: They had left the rig for you though?

JF: They had left the rig for us. They had realized that they had mislocated us and they flew over the same afternoon we jumped in a Cessna and tried to drop a message to us. But they did a horrible job dropping the message.

FC: But you figured you were stealing a rig?

JF: We figured we were stealing a rig, but obviously we were not. The message had said, "We realize that we gave you the wrong location. You can find a truck on such and such a road, and you can hike out, and there will be a key on the air cleaner." But they did such a bad job dropping the message that we never found it. And we really hadn't given much thought to the message because we'd been out there for 3 and a half days since that plane had been over, it came over that very afternoon. So we just figured we were on our own at that point.

FC: Did you tell the ranger the real story?

JF: Oh yeah, we told the ranger the real story and he thought it was pretty funny. We did no damage to his truck so he was happy. Tommy Collier was able to rest easy that night. But I think the fire, I think anybody who was up there in Washington in 1970 will agree that was a really extraordinary experience for the jumper organization. They kept a chart for the number of fire jumps. In the first place there were more jumpers in one place than there had been ever before, and probably ever since. Except for this reunion, [laughs] But more jumpers on active duty.

Secondly I think the, I can't remember the figures, but it was something absolutely extraordinary how many jumps, the number of fire jumps that we as a group up there carried off in the space of a month. I think the previous records for the number of fire jumps out of Winthrop was something like 180 or something like that. But by the end of that first week, we already had something like 290 or something like that. The new record is something like 500, or some absolutely astronomical number. So that was a real interesting experience.

That also brings up another point about smokejumping that I always really enjoyed, and I really liked. The attitude of some of the overhead when they would inculcate this trait. And that is independence, ability to make do with what you've got, make decisions, be a leader and that sort of thing. And I think one of the problems I had at McCall, it wasn't a big problem but I think there was an elements of this problem at McCall was the overhead there tended to try to keep people categorized between leaders and followers, and tended to try to reward people that they thought were trying to follow orders the best with leadership positions. When I think in fact smokejumpers, all of them, almost all, anyway, were all capable of being leaders when they had to and making tough decisions when they had to and of being very creative and very effective firefighters and managers of people. And I think the bases that did best were those that gave people responsibility and let them work it out for themselves. In McCall things were often much more structured than that and if you didn't happen to be in favor of that, you just weren't going to get the opportunity to do that.

But I think the reality was when people got out on fires, they realized that they had to rely on the competence of their fellows to get by. When I went to Alaska to jump in 1975 that whole issue, the issue of independence and leadership and pretty much equality among the jumpers was really brought home to me. Because in Fairbanks I think their attitude up there was, look we've got a huge job to do and everybody has to work together and we aren't going to get into any games about pulling rank or whatever except when it's absolutely necessary. Everybody up here has got to be able to man or direct fire boss, maybe several hundred people, native crews or whatever. Everybody here has to know his fire well enough that he can make big decisions with respect to whether to bring in a helicopters and retardant drops and that sort of thing. We're just too busy to deal with issues of rank.

FC: When you were in Fairbanks you were working through the Bureau of Land Management, a different agency, and you flowed into, if I can use that term, from McCall Forest Service into

BLM jumpers. Jumpers are jumpers, no matter. Maybe you might want to explore a little bit the difference in jumper culture between the two agencies. If there is anything, maybe there isn't because they're all great guys, they have the same mission, there might be something different and I'm not looking for derogatory differences, I'm looking for—

JF: I think there are differences; I perceive differences. In Alaska you have an interesting situation because you have an absolutely unspeakably large area that's going to burn every summer. An area so large it would basically encompass the entire northwest of the United States. All the jump bases you've got up there could be dumped into Alaska and you'd probably not have a man unneeded. But we had 75 jumpers in Alaska, working out of Fairbanks, in the '70s. And they were destined every summer to be scattered literally to the four winds. It was not unusual at all to see a good friend on the jumpers when you arrived in May and not to see him again until you were ready to leave in August. Because people were spread extremely thin in Alaska. Another point that I think it's important to emphasize is that in Alaska it is the seasonals who are truly the backbone of fire control. Yes, there are permanent overhead people, fire management officers, smokejumper foremen, and even a couple of the squad leaders were permanent in Alaska. But by far the bulk of the people in Alaska fighting fires on the—who were people who were people the BLM had to depend on were seasonals. So the fact of the matter was that you, when you flew out somewhere near Bettles and jumped a fire, it was most likely you would be reporting back in Bettles to a person who was also a seasonal. And maybe someone who didn't have as much fire experience as you did.

It wasn't like the more structured situation with the Forest Service where you have a very clearly defined structure of forest supervisor, fire control officer, district rangers and so forth. I'm not criticizing that system., I think that's absolutely necessary down here and appropriate. You have to see that in Alaska it put a whole different culture, if you want to, to use your word, on what was going on with the smokejumpers in Alaska. The smokejumpers in Alaska had none of this, or virtually none of this kind of—some of what I feel to be negative aspects of the militaristic kind of organization that I did see, at least in the early '70s in the lower 48.

What you had in Alaska was a situation where you had more experienced jumpers by and large anyway. They train very few people in Alaska. They are starting to train more I guess now. But in those days basically all the jumpers up there were extremely experienced people. They wouldn't really even consider anybody unless they had jumped for several years and had a pretty good reputation down in the lower 48. So you had a whole different scene. You had meetings where everybody spoke their mind and where new policies might be adopted out of what smokejumpers suggested, and that wasn't the case in the lower 48.

It was often amusing to see how the Forest Service jumpers would operate when they were in Alaska, boosting our crew up there. They were often much more structured in their approach to things and so forth. Whereas the Alaska jumpers had the style of operating on a much looser basis, if you will. Looser in terms of being willing to consider all sorts of ways of doing things because they had to. Up there you never knew what kind of situation you might be in. Down in

the lower 48, it was much more structured. Okay, you're on a fire, what does the district ranger want me to do on this fire. Well, in Alaska it was up to you, there wasn't anybody there. The people in Fairbanks depended on you to tell them what decision should be made about this fire.

So I think the real peak of my experience, or the high point of my smokejumping, was in Alaska. Partly because of this more of a team effort rather than a more organized, stratified or structured organization. I had great experiences in the lower 48 too, but whoever writes the history of smokejumping someday should look at that phenomena in Alaska.

We had a real interesting situation up there. For example, a fire might get away from you and your three cohorts, and it was up to you to decide what you needed. If you needed a crew from Fort Yukon or Beaver or Ruby or someplace, you'd radio that in, and they'd give you the crew. They didn't question you, if you needed some retardant, you'd call that in. If you needed a helicopter, if they had it they would get it to you. It was...They relied more on the seasonals. And I think what happened up there was the seasonals rose to the occasion, if you will. I think in the lower 48 there was often a tendency to discourage.

FC: Suppress perhaps.

JF: Suppress individuality and decision making by individual jumpers. And as a result in the lower 48 I think, maybe old mistakes tended to be repeated because that was the way it was always done. In Alaska old mistakes often were not repeated because they were much more willing to find a new way in Alaska.

And I found that very fulfilling and something that was very important to the development of smokejumpers as decision makers, as leaders, and as really professional firefighters, which they had to have in Alaska because there was no one else to do it.

FC: What about the other years? Anything else about the '75 season up in Fairbanks, particularly fires, or shall we get into the highlights of the other years you jumped?

JF: I'll start with my '75 season in Alaska. My last fire jump as a matter of fact, I have what I believe to be the best fish story that any smokejumper has ever had. In fact, when I left Alaska, it was by far the best, and as far as I know it still holds the record. You want to hear about it?

FC: You bet, and I'll tell you one about some jumpers down here.

JF: [laughs] It was early September 1975. End of the season, things had slowed down, it was about 7:30 p.m., and I was sitting in the barracks playing my guitar and Al Dunton sticks his head in the door and asks if I'm ready to go on a fire, and I said, you bet. He was the foreman in Alaska, I think he no longer is. So I and four other jumpers, who were all that Al could scrape up at the time, he would have liked to have a full load of eight, but the five of us got on the Volpar,

and it wasn't until I was in the air that we found out where we were going. We were going south, way south down to the coast, down to the Alaska Peninsula, to the Alaganik River.

I was with Rob Collins, Jim Claremont, I can't recall the names of the other fellows. Steven Nemore was on that fire and there was one more, a kid from Wisconsin, I can't remember his name. But in any event, we flew down in a beautiful sunset, of course the long Alaska sunset which was going to last until midnight or so. It was getting late in the season, so we were starting to get a little bit of night. Particularly farther south, you'd get a little bit of darkness between midnight and three or four or so. Anyway, we flew down right past Mt. McKinley and Mt. Fouracre, down to the site of the fire. The fire was burning right next to the Alaganik River, in fact it had been started by a camper who had in fact been burned and had been evacuated by floatplane from the area. His campfire got away from him, I guess burned his tent and everything. But the fire was burning by the Alaganik River up into a triangular piece of land which was bounded on one side by the river, and on the other by a slough that came out of the river. The Alaganik is a big river, maybe 200 yards across, quite deep and quite fast. We were only about 12 miles from the coast.

It so happened this site was the site of an old settlement, an old Russian Orthodox settlement. There was an old overgrown graveyard there and many overgrown-type dugout structures. They had all caved in, but there were still old barrels and things buried down in the tundra, you know how the tundra kind of grows over everything. There was also a sort of lean-to on the bank there which an outfitter used infrequently for fishing.

Well, we jumped at about 10 o'clock at night. I was the third man, before we jumped, we looked down and took one look at this river and the one question in the plane was who brought fishing gear? And one of the five of us had brought fishing gear which was a little J.C. Penney's telescoping rod with a light reel and 8-pound test line and a couple of lures. That's what he had, something that you could get in your leg pocket. We noticed that two of the other three jumpers who should have been with us had left their personal, several jumpers actually were on the first load and they had left their gear bags on the plane so they would be ready to go faster. Well, some of those guys were on this load, some were not because they couldn't be found at 10:30 at night when Al was looking for people. So we rifled through their p.g. [personal gear] bags and came up with one more fishing pole, in fact it was owned by Scott Bates who was a jumper, who was also with me in McCall in the early years. But we lifted Scott's fishing gear from his p.g. bag so we had two full sets of gear, both with 8-pound test line.

We jumped, I was third out of the plane, and I remember the first thing I hear when I hit the ground was Jim Claremont exclaiming, "Jeez, these fish must be 3 feet long!" The fire meanwhile was kind of meandering along up toward the point of this, well it was going in two directions. It was going in one direction toward the point of this triangular piece of land and out the base of this triangle forming a bigger and bigger front. So of course, we fought the fire until about 4:00 or 5:00 in the morning and got it lined around the base of this triangular piece.

Went to bed and next morning got up and got to the real work of the day which was seeing if we could catch some fish. [laughs]

So two guys, including myself, I had Scott Bates rod. I cast out and immediately hooked a Chinook salmon, and the Chinook salmon immediately went for the current and stripped the line off my reel and broke it. So I had just lost all my line and one of my two lures. Meanwhile Jim Claremont had hooked another one on his light outfit, his J.C. Penny outfit. I'll never forget the spectacle of Jim Claremont, who was a very large guy, running down the bank with Steve Nemore using his woodsman's pal to cut black spruce down that were along the edge that Jim couldn't get his pole that caused barriers. Because this fish was literally pulling Jim down the bank. The bank was about 10 feet up from the surface of the river. So Jim fought that fish for the better part of an hour and finally it broke his line too. So there we were. We had no fish; we had disabled gear. So I went to work and got an old cargo chute that was pretty beat up and cut the lines off it and took all the 25-pound test guts out of the lines and made a tremendous long, tied them end to end, line out of that. Rod Collins then wrapped that line around a shovel handle, of course it wouldn't go through the reel, so we ran it through the rod that I had. Of course, it wouldn't cast either because those knots and the heavy line wouldn't pull out through the guides. So we rigged up a complicated system of casting.

We found an old nail, and Steve Nemore whipped the line around and flipped it out there and damned if we didn't hook a Chinook on the first cast. I fought that thing with Rob Collins wrapping line and having line strip off the shovel handle like crazy. We probably fought that fish for about 45 minutes, and we finally brought it in, it was a 40-pound king salmon. About this time, we decided we'd go fight the fire a little more. We went out and knocked down a couple of hotspots and worked for most of the rest of the day on the fire. Of course, I'm telling you this part, so it sounds like we really did some work out there. [laughs]

FC: Yeah, how tough the duty is in the smokejumpers.

JF: Sometimes it isn't very tough, sometimes it's a bitch. But, so then we came back, and about this time, a Cessna comes over from Anchorage and asked us—we had a radio, of course—the Cessna asked us if we needed anything. We said we needed a pump—no, he had a pump on board because we had ordered one when we saw the fire. So he dropped the pump and then asked us if we needed anything. And we said, yeah, we need a spool of 25-pound test line and half a dozen big lures. He said, "Well, we'll see what we can do." So in the mean time we were catching more fish with this jerry-rigged arrangement we had. We caught about an 8-pound silver salmon, an 18- or 20-pound king salmon, and several Dolly Varden and rainbow trout and a couple of grayling. All on this bizarre rig we had.

Then we built smoke tents and smoked most of this meat using black Visqueen, which is a standard item for the Alaska smokejumpers—pretty much an all-purpose hooch material. The next morning, we awakened to the sound of a single engine plane overhead, and it's that Cessna. He's back and over he flies and out comes a small package with our 25-pound test line

and our lures. So we spent all in all almost 5 days on that fire and we caught numerous king salmon, some of which we of course put back in the stream, some of which we smoked. Came home with a garbage bag filled with smoked salmon. We caught something like seven or eight species of fish including whitefish and sheefish and grayling and three species of trout and all the salmon you could shake a stick at.

FC: And you got paid for it.

JF: And we got paid for it. Rod Collins and I waded out to a little island in the middle of the river and there were two motorized canoes out there which this outfitter had stashed. We got one running and took it up the river about 5 or 6 miles and found an old trapper's cabin up there and kind of explored around. It was a really great finale to my smokejumping career. We came back and eventually we were picked up by a floatplane and flown out. That's the best fish story that any smokejumper has ever told as far as I know.

FC: I'll tell you one, but it won't be on the tape.

[End of Interview]