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Interviewee: Bruce Jackson
Interviewer: Dan Hall
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Dan Hall: I'd like to start the interview by asking biographical information. Where were you born, and when were you born?

Bruce Jackson: Born in Portland, Oregon on April 25, 1950.

DH: Did you have any previous experience with the Forest Service before you became a jumper?

BJ: Yes, I did. I worked for one season in the 25-man interregional fire crew based out of the Redmond Air Center. That would have been the summer of 1968.

DH: Is that where you learned how to fight fires?

BJ: That's right.

DH: What prompted you to become a jumper?

BJ: Well, that summer that I was working with the interregional crew, the jumpers were based at the same location, their barracks were adjacent to ours, had a chance to meet with them, talk to them, knew about them, and decided that that would be a natural progression up from the jump or the line crews, go into the jumping. So I worked hard and was invited to join the following season.

DH: With the ground crews and jumpers based together, was there any kind of—

BJ: Rivalry, friction, hostility…

DH: Yeah.

BJ: Sure…sure, we were affectionately referred to as ground pounders by the jumpers. There was definitely an atmosphere of elitism on the part of the jumpers. They made no bones about looking down their noses at us and all of it, I think, part of the show. I was a green recruit when I walked off the bus from Redmond that first season. It was very hot, I was living up in Tacoma, Washington at the time and when I asked directions to the Fire Suppression Crew Barracks, they said, 'Oh, you're a pounder, huh?' And that was about the only reception I could get. We ended up working together on some fires that season and had a chance to meet and know some of the jumpers personally and of course that atmosphere didn't exist in personal contacts.

But it certainly did, the elitism was very noticeable.

DH: When you were on the ground crew, how did you feel about the smokejumpers?

BJ: I thought they were a terrific bunch of guys. I felt they were able to go in, because of their special capability of dropping into a remote fire, they were able to get on the fires quicker, the fires were smaller, they were able to cycle back through the jump list. It was the shock troops of firefighting and as a result they had some of the special privileges and opportunities that we didn't get as a ground crew. They didn't end up having to do the dirty work of all the mop up that we did on an interregional fire crew. Which was very tedious, boring work. They could get in there, knock it down, get it lined, pick off the nice, small, little fires, the picture book places, and then get back to the base and get on the jump list again and I thought that was a good way to go.

DH: How do you feel about them not having to do mop up work?

BJ: Well, at the time, I was envious. I thought that was terrific and that's why I wanted to get on the jump crew, one of the reasons.

DH: Where did you train to jump?

BJ: At the Redmond Air Center.

DH: What was the training like, physical work?

BJ: Yes, it was a two week, intensive two week training course that took place right there at the Air Center. It involved, not only the very rigorous, physical training, which at that time Dave Laws and Ed Wisenback were running. Which included the obstacle course, the pushups, the pullups, the sit-ups, the torture rack as it was called. Which was simply a 4-inch steel pipe rack constructed in concrete footings in the ground with nylon straps that you would clip behind your knees. Then you would fold your arms in front of your chest, bend over backwards, touch your head to the ground, straighten up, and you'd go through as many reps of those as you could before collapsing, or throwing up, or whatever. Ed used to run each morning, the P.T. session until at least two people were throwing up. And part of the P.T. session included a run from the training field, the obstacle course, out to the apron of Runway 22 and then run all the way down to Runway 28 and those were simply designators for compass directions, 220 and 280, approaches to the airport. And the round trip run was, I believe, it was about a mile and a quarter one way, so about two and a half miles.

DH: Were there a certain number of these like pull-ups and push-ups that you had to do in order to pass the physical to become a smokejumper?

BJ: It was no set number. Some of the guys were very strong in the push-ups or sit-ups, for

instance, but maybe weren't as…they couldn't do quite as many pull-ups. Others had a lot of strength in their legs and back and they could do a lot more of the torture racks, but maybe not as many push-ups. What they wanted to see is your effort and how much exertion you were willing to put into the training, and again, they pushed us quite hard.

DH: Can you describe a shock tower for me?

BJ: A shock tower was, I think, about a 60-foot tower constructed out of angle iron bolted together with a set of steps that wound in a circular fashion at the center, the core of the tower. That was the primary tool used to train us in exit procedures from the airplanes, either the Twin Beech or the DC-3 that we were then jumping out of. And part of the tower, there were two cables, strong, steel cables that ran down approximately sixty or seventy yards to a mound of dirt they called the berm. And when you reached the top of the tower, you would be in your full jump gear, the Nomex suit, pads, helmet, all of the gear that you would wear with the exception of your parachute.

You had your harness on and adjusted. You'd clip the risers into the cape wells on the harness and then you'd assume the correct position in the door and wait for the signal, which would be a slap on the shoulder or on the back of the right leg. Then you'd thrust out, they'd critique you as you returned. They'd tell you what kind of position you had, what kind of thrust and force you had in your launch off the step, this kind of thing. And it also gave the trainee the opportunity to get a little simulation of the shock of the chute opening. Get over and pass that hesitancy just to want to jump unsupported out into the air. The ride down to the berm gave you some opportunity to reinforce the training on keeping the feet together, snapping those heels and ankles together just before you landed. A lot of emphasis there, on a roll.

And all of this was done at a run. There wasn't anything that, in your training that you walked to. You got up from the berm, you'd unclip, there'd be a let-down line for the return trip back to the tower and you'd be expected to run down off the berm and all this gear with a harness on. Runback and then snap the risers back into the trainer's hands up in the tower and then either go to another phase of the training or return to the tower for more exit training.

DH: So is that a pretty apt, descriptive name then, shock tower?

BJ: Shock tower? I think that's a good name for it. It served its purpose very well as far as establishing that behavioral response to the exit signal. Beit a slap on the shoulder or on the leg. Right away you would just immediately, naturally go into the exit procedure and the right attitude and thrust and what not to give you the best exit out into the prop wash of the plane.

DH: What kind of stuff do they teach in classroom training?

BJ: Classroom training was pretty much devoted to fire weather patterns, first aid, radio procedures, some of the more technical aspects of your equipment. Basic lecture-type

materials on rules, regulations, the forms you were expected to fill out, and mostly your basic suppression techniques at fires, as they applied to smaller fires with smaller groups, two-, four-, eight-man crews, which is commonly what the jumpers handled. The actual day-to-day work at the base, all of the maintenance and construction of the equipment, the chutes, the packing of the chutes, the sewing room, the cargo room where the firepacks were assembled and cargoed for drop, the maintenance of the chain saws, the work over at the warehouse at the Redmond Air Center, all of this was done on-the-job training. Actually, take you down and set you with somebody that was experienced, and they'd show you how to do the jobs you were to perform. Then through the days. weeks, and months you'd pick up skills in those areas and if you had a particular ability in one given area or not, then it was likely you'd be assigned there to work on a semi-permanent basis.

DH: How well do you remember your first training jump?

BJ: Very well. It was a very unusual jump.

DH: Can you tell me about it?

BJ: Well, it was unusual for a couple of reasons, Dan, and I think that one of the things that made it particularly unusual is that when we all went through for our first practice jump which was to take place over Phlox Field and we were to jump at, I believe, 3,000 feet, was the first jump. I'd gotten dreadfully sick prior to the jump, several days prior to it. It was a virus flu of some kind that came through and I was flat on my back in the barracks. Puking every few hours, and it was one of those things that was not going to allow me to go make the jump, as much as I wanted to with the rest of the training crew. Which meant that they were already through their first jump, second jump as a matter of fact, I believe, and were out for the third jump when I was going out for the first one.

We went out in the Twin Beech, Bob White was flying the Twin Beech on that occasion. We had two pilots, Bob White and Paul Decorsey, and both of them were, I'm convinced a couple of ex-circus pilots. They didn't mind jockeying those planes any direction in the sky they felt they could. Tony Percival was the jump master on that run, and I was placed first into the plane which meant I'd be in the number four position coming out, it was a Twin Beech. I felt that that was just because they were gonna run the other three guys out of the plane on their third jump, circle back around, kick me out on my first jump after they'd thrown the streamers again and that would be pretty much standard procedure.

Well, as I got into position in the door and what not, my heart naturally was up in my throat. I remember Ed Wisenback giving some advice that the best way to just calm down was to hang your head out and stick it right forward toward the prop. Hang way out there and look right into that prop wash and take those few jerky, little breaths while your stomach tightened up. Then look down at your spot, check everything, and then focus on the vertical stabilizer on that port side tail section of the Twin Beech. Because that was your aiming point for the proper exit

out of the Beech. And all this was going through my mind, I was concentrating on the signal that I'd get from Tony Percival, who just withdrawn out of the door. The strap across the door had been removed and I was in the position, palms out on the outside of the door and my left foot leading on the step and just when I was expecting the slap, because Tony had come out of the door, up into position, I waited, I waited, it didn't come, and suddenly the plane lurched right up on the port side. Bob White stood that plane vertically on its wing, and then began to jockey the flap a little bit to shake it. I thought, my God, they're trying to shake me out of this plane. So I was scrambling for all I was worth just to hang on because I hadn't gotten the signal to go. I thought, well, maybe something's wrong and they're going back for another pass, and it would be a severe fault on my part to fall out of a damn plane if I didn't get the signal. So I left my handprints indelibly crushed into the side of that plane.

As soon as it came back to a vertical axis, right on horizontally, righted itself from the vertical, I pulled back in and I looked, and Tony Percival was laughing his brains out. I looked up toward the cockpit, Bob White was up there laughing his brains out. I asked Tony what the hell he was doing, he said they thought it would be fun to see if they could shake me out. And I said well, they shook me up real good and if you wouldn't mind giving me a straight signal on the next pass, I'd jump, which he did. I went out and it was quite an experience. Things tended to go into slow motion, I remember the chute billowing open, the drone of the engines of the Twin Beech as it continued on. Checked everything according to the procedure you'd go through, make sure your chute's inflated properly, you don't have any lines over, that your toggles are clear. It was a FS-SA that we were jumping at that time. Then looked down, get your spot, wind direction, and enjoy the ride down for 3000 feet. It was a very enjoyable ride, it took about three minutes.

DH: What's a jump master?

BJ: The jump master is the, the experienced jumper that was in charge of seeing that all of the jumpers in the plane were properly equipped. That all of their gear was in proper order. He would make the final inspection on their static line hookups to the anchor cables in the plane. He was the one responsible for throwing the spotting streamers on the first pass over the fire. He'd approximate the wind velocity and direction of drift, compensate by directing the pilot through the intercom on the plane, so that when the jumpers were released at a certain point, they would land closest, or with the best possibility of coming into the spot, or the opening or the clearing that they were aiming for. And then he was in charge of ground-to-air communication with those jumpers to make sure that there weren't any injuries on the jump. He was then the one that would hook up the cargo, kick the firepacks and food packs and what not, out of the plane, after the jumpers had cleared more on the ground safely. He'd mark them on maps, be sure that they were spotted correctly back at the jump base. These were some of the responsibilities he had.

DH: Okay. Did you ever make any jumps other than out of Redmond?

BJ: Oh yes.

DH: Where were they at?

BJ: Out of Redding, Cave Junction, La Grande, McCall, and of course, the North Cascades Smokejumper Base and then in 19, I believe it was 1971, I spent a month up in Alaska with the BLM, working out of Fairbanks, McGrath, Yukon.

DH: What was it like jumping up in Alaska?

BJ: Very different from down here in the southern 48, as they refer to it. Alaskan jumping was just a real joy because you didn't have the hills, the large trees that we encountered most of the time on the west slope in Central Oregon and Washington and down into Northern California. The weather patterns were more calm and predictable. The firefighting itself was absolutely ridiculous. Rather than the pulaski, chainsaw, shovels that we commonly would use to line the fire down here, they simply issued us a 20-inch belt machete and once we got to the ground and got out of our gear, we would team up, get our machetes out, go find a suitable spruce tree and cut it down.

Cut the top six of seven feet out of a spruce tree with this machete, limb it up so that you had a ball of branches on the top of the tree for maybe three or four feet. Then you'd commence to go to the line that was creeping through the tundra and beat on it with this top of the spruce tree in order to put the fire out. And all you were beating on was the flames that were fitfully flashing through some of the drier tender and once it was down and smoldering, it pretty much went out on its own in the tundra. An absolutely incredible way to fight a fire as far as I was concerned. Something that was unique and I had never encountered before. But it was apparently the only way to approach it up there.

DH: You mentioned the Yukon, did you jump up there?

BJ: Yes, went out of Fort Yukon on one or two jumps. The only way you really travelled around that country was by airplane or helicopter. We didn't get into any real timbered areas there. There were the scattered spruce stands and what not that you would get a chainsaw and cut your way through if there was any danger of that. But most of the fires that we dealt with up there were the tundra fires.

DH: How did you feel about going to so many different bases?

BJ: I thought it was terrific. We got to meet people from the other bases. Cave Junction was really the sister jump base to Redmond Air Center. Redmond Air Center was one of the newest, it was a newcomer compared to North Cascades or Cave Junction or McCall or La Grande or certainly Missoula here, and as a result it was fun to go to the other bases, the older bases and see their facilities and their mess halls and talk to the guys there and jump in the different terrain that they had. Redding had different terrain than we did.

DH: How do you think your facilities compared with everybody else's?

BJ: Oh, I think we had the most modern, the most comfortable. The day rooms, the para loft, the jump center itself, the warehouse, the mess hall. It was all very modern, very comfortable, and very easy to maintain and keep clean. North Cascades was much older, more of a community-type bathroom facility where you just line up in long lines for shaving and showering and the urinals and this sort of thing. And it gave, at least it gave me a sense of the conditions that were present at the time they built base. Which I presume was back in the late '30s or '40s, early '40s.

DH: When was the base at Redmond built? Do you know?

BJ: I don't remember what year it was built. I'm estimating early '60s.

DH: How about the jumpers at the other bases? Did you feel that they were different than you were because they were jumping from a different base?

BJ: Oh, I think we all shared the same common bond as to the nature of the work we were doing and the hazards that were attendant to that task. There always was a base-established pride, Redmond had theirs. We felt, of course, we were the best, that we had more jumps, more hazardous jumps in more difficult terrain with more difficult fire conditions and weather conditions than anybody else did. I think that North Cascades probably had more similar conditions as far as the terrain and the fires went, having jumped both bases. But everybody had their own base-established pride and that would be bantered back and forth in the mess halls. But it wasn't anything that created a hindrance or a hassle to anybody. We, in fact, we spoke often of Missoula as probably being the most…Well it, the base, because you had so many jumpers here, you didn't have the number of fire jumps per jumper that we did. There was one season at Redmond that I had over 23, 24 fire jumps, not counting the practice jumps during that season. So that's quite a high cycle through the jump list, which we could experience down there because we only had between thirty and maybe forty at the most on a jump list at any given time. Whereas Missoula had many times that and talking to some of the guys from Missoula if they got four fire jumps a season, they were doing about average. We had four fire jumps in a week, sometimes on a fire bust.

DH: Why do you feel you're jumping in more difficult terrain?

BJ: Well, the nature of the terrain in Montana, southeastern Idaho, and what not, was more open, rolling hills, sagebrush country. Naturally you've got some of your real mountainous areas here. But of course, when we were making comparisons, we wouldn't compare with those. We were comparing it with our Willamette Forest there, the Umpqua Forest, very treacherous forests to jump into by virtue of the nature of the trees in them. The trees were old growth fir, very tall and very huge old, brittle branches. And naturally, very few places through the canopy

where you could drop into safely. That meant that when you went to bag a tree, you were taking on the additional hazard of breaking out of it, and that's when most jump injuries occurred. When those big branches were hit, they wouldn't sustain your weight and they'd break free. They'd entangle the shroud lines of the parachute, and you'd begin to crash and tumble down through the tree and into the rocks and we had a lot of guys hurt that way.

DH: Did you ever see that happen with another jumper?

BJ: Yes, yes, a couple of times.

DH: Did it ever happen to you?

BJ: Yes, it did.

DH: Were you hurt badly from it?

BJ: No, I was fortunate, I wasn't injured badly. The guys that went in were. Ed Wisenback, the worst of the two on that particular jump. It was into the Willamette, out of Roseburg, and Ed crashed through a tree, the big limbs broke free and he came tumbling down and hit the rocks. He'd severed his tongue a couple inches back from the tip, fractured jaw, compression of the spine, fractured femur, hip, arm. He was, he looked like he'd been beat half to death with a heavy club. He was writhing around on the hillside when Billy Vaughn and I were the ones that jumped in to assist on that. There were, we were the only two left in the Twin Beech on that jump, and attempted to stabilize Ed with some injections of Demerol. Then worked furiously to get a helispot chopped off the ridge out of that giant timber in order to get a helicopter in there before nightfall to get him out for medical assistance at a hospital. Because we didn't feel he'd make it through the night which we found out later was probably true.

Fortunately, a Forest Service chopper wasn't able to make it in. He didn't have the power on his Bell chopper that he needed. He had to back away from it and a private chopper from Evergreen, running a Hiller 1100, an ex-Nam pilot, came swooping in there and put that chopper into a very tight spot. He was actually ticking the side of a tree as he came down to our landing spot, was able to stabilize it there until we could get Ed strapped to a runner in the litter and he got him out to the hospital in Roseburg. And he subsequently survived that, the injuries. But he didn't jump again after that.

DH: Do you feel that those pilots who flew the birds in Nam have more experience in landing in places like that?

BJ: Absolutely. I don't know if it was more experience. They might not have had more experience than at least the one particular Forest Service pilot in that case. But he definitely had more balls and he'd been into tight situations, and it didn't bother him. He really wasn't worried about stacking his company's chopper up in the effort, because he knew, or he was

taking it at least on faith from our estimate of Ed's injuries, that he wouldn't make it through the night. And the doctors verified that later. So he said, hey, if I stack the chopper up, then we lose the equipment and maybe I get bunged up too. But either way it's dark and it was getting more dark by the minute and he took the calculated risk to bring his company's chopper down in there, on authorization of his head people and we were very impressed. We got to meet the man later when we got out and shake his hand and buy him a beer and jump him up and down hugging him, because he just did a terrific job, super guy!

DH: How do you feel about the safety record as a whole of the smokejumpers?

BJ: I think it was as good as could've been expected. One thing that irritated all of us was, DC-3 that stacked up off the end of the runway in Alaska, killed all the jumpers and crew aboard. We knew the old goony birds were getting a lot of hours on the air frames. Their engines weren't what they should have been. That there were better planes available, and we were disappointed that the Forest Service didn't front the money to get the better planes.

DH: When was this?

BJ: I think it was '71, '70 or '71.

DH: Where were these guys based at? Do you have any idea?

BJ: I wasn't there at the time; we'd heard about it after the fact. It may have been McCall, but I'm not sure about that. It may have been the jump base in McCall.

DH: How did you personally feel about that when you heard about that?

BJ: Oh, I was moved by it. I realized that that was one of the risks inherent to this occupation. I was in a DC-3 later that season that had the port-side engine flame out on it. At the time, we'd gone over the contingencies among ourselves as jumpers, that if you had an engine fire on the port-side and it was necessary to bail out of that plane, there was a good possibility that in opening, your main chute may be on fire. And what would you do if you opened up and your main chute's on fire and you're going to be losing your draw very quickly. We decided the best way out of that was to break free from your capewells, free fall away far enough from that main chute, hopefully in the altitude that you had, to pull your reserve chute. We never had to do that. They were able to feather that engine and cut the gas supply off and bring it around and land it safely. But there was some real consideration about bailing us out and I think Paul Decorsey was flying the plane at that time. He gained as much altitude as he could in the event that we would have to bail out so we'd have as much air under us to work with as we could get.

DH: Did you ever have to deploy your reserve?

BJ: Oh yeah. It was, I believe on my 52nd or 53rd jump and it fortunately was a tree jump, a

practice jump in the, into Glaze Meadow. One of our areas up in the Sisters Mountains, and my main chute failed. Well it didn't fail to deploy, it went out. But it was just hopelessly tangled in line overs and was a streamer chute and there was no way it was going to flop open. So I quickly went into the deployment procedure for the reserve and threw it hard to my left. Which I think was the direction of my spin at that time and it quickly deployed, snapped me up and I was in a real unusual, unnatural attitude. Because the weight of your body is being spinned up by the front of your harness, rather than off your capewells at the top of your shoulders. So you're actually dangling at about a forty-five degree angle. The main chute kind of dribbled off of the inflated reserve and I was able to pretty much grab that and actually ended up reinflating once it came off. So I had two chutes up at that point and I wasn't able to pull the reserve in by the time I hit the trees. So I just bagged some small pine trees and managed to climb out of a tangle of brush and what not, it wasn't too bad. I did keep the reserve handle, which they had said if you're cool and collected enough to keep your reserve handle and stick it into your leg pocket, that they'll buy you a case of beer when you get back to the base. So I had that in my leg pocket when I got back with the stamp on it.

DH: Are tree landings pretty common?

BJ: It was for us. We'd try to make it into the clearings and the holes, but it seemed like quite a few times in the heavier- timbered west slopes and what not, yeah, we'd have to take a tree.

DH: Were there more injuries from the jump act itself or did most of the injuries come from fighting fires?

BJ: Jumps. Jump-related injuries far outstripped, at least for our crew, the fire-related injuries.

DH: What kind of injuries would you get from fighting a fire?

BJ: Mostly there would be a problem with maybe dead limbs coming out of a snag you were working on. Smoke inhalation was probably was another, close second to that. Twisted ankles on rocks turning, or the possibility of running a saw or hitting a foot or leg with an ax, pulaski. But those were operator-controlled things. I can't really think of too many injuries along those lines as compared to the injuries related to the jump itself.

DH: Did you guys have to pack up after a fire, or did they come and pick you up?

BJ: No, we packed out frequently.

DH: Did you make any long ones?

BJ: Yes. One of the longest ones I ended up making was with Jim Haas out of the Jefferson Wilderness Area. We'd gone back on a small lightning-caused fire and had it taken care of by the afternoon of the following day. We packed up these large elephant bags that we used, with

all of our equipment. It took us, I think we had, four and a half or five miles of some cross-country navigation in the wilderness area before we got to our first trail. Then we were able to, by orienting on the map and the compass, follow that trail on down to a road. And it was over twelve miles by the time we finally made it out to a road. Jim's pack, I think weighed about 122 and mine was 116, something like that, the weight on those packs. So there was a considerable amount of stuff we had to bring out with us and that was a tough pack out, I remember that one. Well, I repressed, I'm sure, a lot of it, the fact that it was made, I remember.

DH: After you made your landing, what was the sequence of events?

BJ: Well, we'd get our gear just stacked at the base of a tree or someplace where you'd be able to return to it and recover it easy enough. Then you'd go over and get your firepacks out. If the fire was such that it required a chain saw, then you'd get the saw. They were able to always drop our climbers down through because they streamered those in instead of putting them on a cargo chute, and if we had gear up in trees then the first thing that had to be done was to climb and get it. If you had to have a saw, then you'd climb and get the saw right away. But generally the cargo made it in, they'd bring that in low enough and fast enough that that would come on down through the trees.

DH: What was the largest fire you ever worked?

BJ: Well, it was during the 1970 fire bust up in Washington and I think it was the Chelan fire. I did work a part of that line, then was dropped on a small peripheral fire that had been started on another ridge line as the result of the weather system carrying embers and what not. John Twiss and I jumped on that, in fact, they brought a lot of Missoula jumpers over for that. And we remember kind of mocking and scoffing at some because they were turning away jump spots in the door, because they didn't like the wind conditions or the size of the spot they had to shoot for or the steepness of a particular ridge, this sort of thing. And I can't blame them, there was some really ugly terrain up in that fire. But god, our pride alone, wouldn't let us turn away a jump in the door. I mean, you had to go, almost. If the jump master declared that it was a jumpable spot and that the weather would permit it, the wind primarily was the biggest hindrance, then you went. And we really took out some scoffing and mocking on those poor 'Zooloos that didn't want to go on that. We didn't know who they were personally, there were so many of them. We were very upset at the pilot on that particular jump because he put us out too damn fast and it really snapped us hard. The only reason that the pilot goes that fast is he's concerned about the air and the drafts and what not. We felt he just, he didn't have the experience in that kind of very steep mountainous terrain and that kind of a heavy fire condition. So he didn't throttle back to a moderate speed when he put us out.

He put the cargo out so fast that it busted every chute. All of the firepacks and food packs were scattered over five-acre spot on top of this ridge. We didn't have water, we didn't have food, there was only one pulaski and one shovel that made it through unbroken that was useable. There were no radios at that point in the fire bust and the spotter, who was a Missoula spotter

had mismarked us on a map, it turns out. And we were stuck up there for four days before a spotter plane flying over located us. We were using a heliograph, a mirror, and had spread one of the chutes that we'd had. Again, that was quite a jump. The wind had carried us down over the ridge and we dropped way down on a steep side hill. I hit about halfway down and John had gone all the way down into the bottom, and it was a real steep climb back up to the top of that ridge. Once we got up there, we were killing grouse with rocks and the ax to eat, [laughter]. It was quite an experience.

DH: How long would it take you guys to scramble to a fire?

BJ: Depended where it was. You mean from base? Oh, okay. Well, we had the scramble siren and we were real proud of our getaway time. We had to be able to suit up in less than two minutes from the time the siren went off from any point on the base and most of the time we were there in a minute and a half. The planes were all fired up and ready to go and we'd get right into the air. Depending how far we, the flying time is what really determined time on the fire. But our scramble time itself was always pretty quick and we really hustled to keep that time way down.

DH: Did they drill you on that pretty much?

BJ: Oh yeah, particularly in the training. We went over and over and over that and of course the way our gear was lined up on the racks down in the deployment room, where the jumpsuits all were hanging. The chutes were ready to come out of the bins and be strapped down. Not only did the guys going out work very hard at it but the support guys that were grabbing the chutes, getting them hooked onto the harnesses, strapping them down, getting the ditty bags and the reserve chutes on the front and what not. We got out of there pretty fast, and that was a point of pride.

DH: Is that one of those things that you compare with guys when you're at another base?

BJ: Oh, I don't think, I don't remember ever sitting down and saying, "How fast do you guys make it?" It wasn't anything that trivial. Basically, when we were with guys at other bases, it was just good comradery, and we were interested in their equipment and the way they did some things. Some of the guys down in Cave Junction would carry 250-foot let-down ropes. Because they'd run into some trees that exceed what their 150-foot rope could get them out of. There were those jumps when we would do the same. War stories, lot of war stories compared. Who got injured, how they were doing, this sort of thing is what generally. That and maybe going out to one of the taverns or bars and getting a couple pitchers of beer and some pizza and this sort of thing. Harassing the hard hats or the loggers or the cowboys depending on where you were. That's where the rivalry really was, sometimes, if there was any, with some of the locals.

DH: Did you ever know any smokejumpers who carried a good luck piece?

BJ: I think Dan Dunigan did. I hope he shows up this weekend. I think it was a particular kind of coin and I can't recall exactly what it was.

DH: You wouldn't say that the smokejumpers are superstitious then?

BJ: Well, that's, as a class I'd say no, no, very pragmatic, very…fatalistic. Superstitious, no, no. Individually, there may have been a few. I know a few that just detested climbing trees and they'd always carry some money to pay for one of us that was willing to climb the tree for a few extra bucks to go get their gear down. And that was a personal aversion. And, on some of those trees, I couldn't believe it. It was just a lot of work and the limb overs and what not were…a very insecure feeling. But not particularly hazardous if it was done right.

[Break in audio]

DH: What did your family think when you told them you were going to be a smokejumper?

BJ: They thought that was fine. When I actually went in the first year as a suppression crew member, I got to tell them and write them about all the events and what not. My parents were such that they never restricted any of us boys. There were four of us in the family. I have three other brothers. They never restricted any of us as to getting into an endeavor of that sort. In fact, my brother, my oldest brother had been a smokejumper for, I believe, one season in '66 or '67 and so they were already pretty well used to it.

DH: How about reaction of friends when you'd tell that you're a smoke jumper?

BJ: Well, a lot of them thought that was interesting and probably pretty hazardous. They recognized that. Some were more forthright about it. They thought that anybody that would jump out of a perfectly good airplane into a forest fire had to be just stark, raving crazy. And in retrospect probably that's basically true. Curious, they wanted to know what was involved, they liked to hear some of the war stories, and I think a degree of respect at actually having gone into something like that. Because it's not something that everybody gets a chance to do. Like going into the Army or something.

DH: What did you do with yourself after fire season was over?

BJ: Went to school. The jump season was a way to support my way through school and the young family that I was raising at the time and pay for tuition and books. That coupled with part-time jobs during the schoolyear as well.

DH: Is it pretty good money?

BJ: Well, it certainly was at the time. My first year jumping I think was a $1.98 an hour. Or that

might have been on the suppression crew. Maybe it was $3.25 an hour on the jump crew, I don't really remember. But I do remember that it was straight time, there was no overtime for anything past your normal workday or your 40 week. And that came later, that they did provide overtime. But it did pay well compared to other jobs that I could have, just by virtue of the number of hours that you worked. There were lots and lots of extra hours, particularly when there was a fire bust.

DH: How do you feel about people who go into smokejumping as a profession?

BJ: I think they have picked a marvelous profession to go into. The ones that I know that have gone into it as a profession are very enthusiastic about the whole fire control effort. They feel that they are right on the cutting edge of that effort, and they are. They have taken the time and the effort to work themselves into positions of responsibility and skill and knowledge and leadership to provide the kind of atmosphere that they would like to see exist for incoming jumpers, new ones as well as returning veterans. They, my impression is that they have found a occupation, a niche that they really enjoy and intend to stay with. Most of them at some point, maybe after they've been in it X number of years and they get older they end up being a fire control officer for a district or maybe working at a regional office or district office someplace. A more administrative, administratively oriented task.

DH: Do you feel that there is any kinds of differences in ideology between the smokejumpers and the administration?

BJ: Oh, always, yeah. I can remember quite a few of the disagreements that were flaring at the time. But that was a very turbulent time that I jumped, societally. 1968 thru 1972 was an extremely rough time, not only on the campuses, but in every aspect of our society. Issues such as wearing beards and long hair were very big issues to the S.O. in Portland and to other administrators. There was defenses that this constituted an irrational fire hazard thereby a health hazard to the troops, this sort of thing. There were those that were very, those jumpers that were very insistent upon having their individual identities. Not being dictated by some red neck bureaucrat and there was always the head-butting and tete-a-tetes going on along those lines. But particularly then, I think, just because of the turmoil that existed in our culture during that period of years.

I remember I gave haircuts to the crew down there and charge a buck for them and I had the stuff. I'd been giving haircuts for years in the family and what not. One of the guys came and was so, he'd been confronted by one of the administrators of the base and he'd been given an ultimatum that if he didn't have a short haircut by Monday morning, they'd can him and he said, "Well, okay, he's not going to fight them on that issue," and he wanted a mohawk. [laughter] He wanted everything stripped off the sides and just this band of hair down the middle. So I gave him a mohawk and it was real radical looking. I guess they are more commonplace today, but then they were very radical. Oh, he got into all kinds of trouble on that and I got into trouble because I gave him the haircut and there was that kind of nonsense

going on. But I don't think any of it had any real long-term effect as far as the nature of the job or the degree of effort and integrity that the jumpers put into it was concerned.

DH: Do you feel that there were any other things going on in society that affected smokejumpers during the years that you jumped. Say the things that were happening on college campuses?

BJ: Oh, certainly. You know, the things like the Kent State shootings, the tremendous…really, the majority of us as smokejumpers were college students during the rest of the year. And we were taking this seasonal employment in order to pay our tuition and books. There weren't any radically, politically activated jumpers there. Most of us had the same idea, we were paying for this education, we wanted to go get it without being barred from the classroom, this sort of a thing. And there were those that had more liberal political opinions and those that had more conservative political. I mean radically so, one way or the other that would engender verbal arguments and what not. But that was, that would exist today. The things that existed at that point in our society were really attendant to the currents then. The real turmoil caused as a result of the confusion over our involvement in Vietnam. The fact that we had a lot of guys on the crew that had served in Vietnam or were serving during the off-season in Air America over there kicking cargo off Cambodia and Laos. They had very strong patriotic feelings and didn't like to see all of this turmoil. There were others that felt the opposite way and this naturally created some hard feelings even in the jump crew, as tight as it was.

Dope, again this was something that, I guess that was the tail-end of the acid age or I hope, that's the way I evaluate it. More and more people individually were dealing with this issue of whether they wanted to cloud their lives with narcotics involvement or not. Naturally that came into the jump scene as well. In the get togethers, the gatherings and these were issues that would not have confronted jumpers even a decade prior to that, maybe even five years prior to that. But they certainly did then during the late '60s and early '70s. As a whole and individually, the jumpers were individual enough and established in themselves enough to say, "Hey, if this guys doesn't want to smoke dope, I'm not going to put any pressure on him." That's high school stuff, that's juvenile and that didn't exist. If guys chose to, then they didn't expect to get hassled by the guys that didn't.

DH: What was the average age of the jumpers while you were jumping? Where you all pretty much college students?

BJ: I'd say, yeah early 20s, early 20s, 20 to 25, I'd say was the bulk of us and there were some even up to the late 20s and early 30s.

DH: Were there lots, the administration, was that mainly guys that had been around since World War II?

BJ: Oh, yeah. See now, our administration down there was well, Jim Allen ran the base, Al

Bouchet, and Hal Wineman, and Tony Percival were pretty much in charge of the jump crew and the operations at the para loft. Al Bouchet was the eldest. These fellows had jumped back in the ‘40s and ‘50s, late ‘40s and ‘50s. So yes I'd say that's correct, that's the era they came from.

DH: How did they feel about the changes taking place. Did they ever tell you guys, "Geez, it was different in my day.” Did you ever hear that kind of stuff?

BJ: Certainly, yeah. And a guy like Tony Percival who was laid back and just pretty much, I think very tolerant of the changes, it didn't affect him. Everybody could get along with Tony and Tony got along with everybody else and he was an ideal person for that position. Because he had the role of acting as the go between for policies coming down hill and complaints going uphill in the chain. But fellows like Al and Hal Wineman, they had a very difficult time coping with that and it made them quite miserable. Much more so, I think, because they were there as part of their career. Hell, we were just touching bases and leaving again. So it wasn't anything that had any long-lasting effect on the vast majority of jumpers. But I'm afraid it did on some of the administrators and there were some real hard feelings generated as a result of that.

DH: How did you feel when you, when it became known that they were going to let women into the smokejumping organization?

BJ: I was out of it by then. So…there were some rumors about it at that time and my feeling then was the same way that I feel about it now. Toward any capacity in the workplace, if they can do the job, then fine. Just don't change the standards. If I'm packing out 115-pound fire pack, I'm not going to make it 130, so she can carry less weight. If they can do it, great. It's just that, in my opinion at that time, frankly Dan, was that I didn't know of any ladies, at least any that I would want to associate with, that could go do that kind of heavy physical labor. And…we didn't have any that came through while I was there.

DH: Did you see or experience any kind of racial prejudice while you were with the organization?

BJ: Well, the prejudices that existed were really not racially oriented. My first year I worked closely with a black man that was on the fire suppression crew. And he had, just by his own proven labors and abilities, gained respect of the entire crew. And the normal rhetoric existed as it exists today. But referring to somebody in a racial slur, I don't, I've never felt, indicated that that person was a racist or prejudiced. It's just that he chooses that kind of verbal expression for a particular thing. When it came right down to the brass tacks of working side by side with these people, no problem, that I knew. There may, yeah, there's always a couple of guys that are going to have a knot in their nose and there gonna be jerks about it. But they'd be that way to anybody, it didn't matter what their color was.

DH: Do you feel that smokejumper organizations as a whole, kind of fits that image of being

white macho group of a bunch of guys that work hard, drink hard, and play hard? Is that a pretty fair picture to paint of smokejumpers?

BJ: No, it isn't. There's that element, like there is in truck drivers or loggers, cowboys, or any of the rest, but it's simply a percentage. There was a percentage on our crew that would go in every night and do some heavy drinking and come back and raise hell and run up and down the barracks and beat on the doors and stick hoses through your window and get you. [laughs] This was just part of the crew. Hell, percentagewise I doubt if there was more than a handful in that category and your talking out of a crew that we tried to maintain a complement of 50. But most of the time it hovered in the high 30s or in mid 40s. For every one of those guys there were two that were just content to go out and walk around through the sagebrush on a time off. Or take some innertubes down to the irrigation ditches and run the rapids or grab a 22 and go out and plink at jack rabbits, this kind of thing. Not go in and drink.

In fact, there was, I knew quite a few guys that didn't drink at all. One of them kept a B-B gun in his room and when the nuts would coming run up and down the halls, he'd get out and starting pegging them with pellets or B-B's and that'd scare them off. I wasn't in the group, and of course, there are the war stories about heavy drinking and eating 23 tacos and puking all night and this kind of stuff. But heck, the guys that were really the forerunners in that, they really were heavy duty macho guys and that was just part of their lifestyle. This guy wanted to eat a whole quart of hot chili peppers from south of the border and wash it down with a fifth of tequila, great. But that same guy kept pet rattlesnakes in his room in the barracks and would feed them white mice and laugh uproariously as the mice would run around the pen in absolute terror of the rattlesnake in there until it finally, the mouse hunkered in a corner and would be struck by the rattlesnake when it slowed down enough. Ed would just laugh his brains out.

But that was Ed Wisenback and so he was ideal for running P.T., for being the one that really, let's face it, it did me a lot of good. I wouldn't trade it for the world. When I got into that outfit, in 1968, when I started with the Forest Service and fire suppression, I weighed a 149 pounds and I was six feet tall. I had to stand twice to cast a shadow. I came out at the end of the summer 175 pounds and haven't fluctuated off of that mark several pounds one way or the other. It established a very, I think, important point in my life. My physical conditioning and my whole attitude toward work and toward life in general. I think that some of these other superficial considerations are transcended by the values and the virtues and the character developed by the sheer experience and comradery of having been a smokejumper. Hell, when I run into some of the very severe disappointments and setbacks that you're going to experience in the course of a lifetime, I can fall back on the realization that, what do you do when a fire blows over your line and the weather catches it. You don't sit down and cry and give up. You pack your stuff up and you head down the road and you get in a truck and you move another ten miles up and dig another line. You do it again and again and again until the weather either gives you a break and you can head that fire off or until you flat tenaciously have just done it. Something that would stand anybody in the face.

DH: Is this the kind of a job that, if your kid were to come to you and say, "Dad, I want to be a smokejumper". How would you feel about that?

BJ: I'd encourage him, sure. I realize the hazards, but I can't keep him in some kind of bubble of security. Well, he damn near killed himself several weeks ago on a motorcycle as it is. And he's only fourteen so if he expresses an interest and would like to do that then I would encourage him in it. I would expect that it would forge in him by virtue of the trials and the testings, maybe even a greater degree of character than it did in myself. And I know that those qualities have stood me in good stead over the years. The memories are good, there's bad memories, there were conflicts, there were fights, but very quickly all of that kind of nonsense is pushed aside. You recall the fun times, the challenges, the victories, the jokes and gags, wiring a urinal with a 12-volt car battery [laughter], just goofy stuff, you know. Then you have a few pictures left maybe, if you took some, to remind you of the faces and the places. So I'd say, yeah, I'd let him go and I'd realize that, that I had to deal with a lot of my close friends out there that were broken up pretty badly and the knowledge that there were those killed and the possibility that that's there. I had a line that went around my neck and fortunately, all I got was my helmet jerked off and it caught in the corner of the face mask. It could've broken my neck, too, but it didn't. There are hazards and it's a very hazardous type of job. But I wouldn't, on that basis, not to allow my son if he was really intent on going into it, to do so.

DH: I think I've exhausted my list of questions, is there anything that you think I've missed that you want to add?

BJ: Well, yeah, there is probably tons of stuff, but you'll end up, if you interview very many of us, with such a tremendous amount of information and insights. I think if I were to say anything, the real essence of this whole concept of placing men into very remote, mountainous, back country terrain to fight small fires before they get larger has not changed. That goal, that objective, and the essence of performing it remains pretty much the same. And I think the types of people that go into that, be they men or women, are going to share the same kind of common bond once they've done it and that's why it's good to see a reunion like this.

DH: Okay, well, thank you very much.

BJ: You're welcome.

[END OF INTERVIEW]