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Oral History Number: 133-076

Interviewee: Ace Nielsen

Interviewer: Dan Hall

Date of Interview: July 21, 1984

Project: Smokejumpers 1984 Reunion Oral History Project

Dan Hall: I'd like to start out, Ace, by asking you: when did you start jumping?

Ace Nielsen: Right after World War II. I was discharged in the fall of '45 and then in the Spring of '46, I started my career as a jumper.

DH: Had you had any previous experience with the Forest Service before you became a jumper?

AN: None at all.

DH: What had you done in the service?

AN: I was a Navy pilot and flying torpedo bombers.

DH: And when you became involved with the Forest Service, you were a jumper?

AN: When I...I never made any jumps, actually. No, there was no jumping involved in my military career.

DH: What made you decide to try smokejumping?

AN: I don't know. It might have just been a whim. Two friends of mine...A close friend that I flew with—had gone to college with and flew in the Navy—became interested in smoke jumping, and he and another friend introduced me to the idea, and I picked right up on it. I didn't have anything planned. I was waiting around to attend the University of Idaho that Fall. The other choice I had was staying home and working on the farm.

DH: Where did you train to jump at?

AN: In '46, we came to Missoula, Montana, here in Missoula to train. And we trained here for a month, and then returned to McCall, Idaho where I was stationed.

DH: Do you remember your first training jump very well?

AN: Very well.

DH: Can you tell me about it?

AN: In fact, it's interesting to me that it might be the only jump that I can, you know, remember quite distinctly, in that I can remember looking out the door; I can remember the jump spot; I can remember what things looked like as I descended. And if you asked me that of any other jump, I would probably not be able to describe it. But I do remember the anticipation, I can remember, you know, I've flown a lot but I had never been confronted with the idea that I'd have to jump out the door—jump out of the plane. So, it was probably a unique experience for me, more so than others. But it was an experience, and it wasn't, I don't think, all that frightening. I can even remember sitting inside the plane, and quite vividly, and my thoughts, and going out the door, and I think, relieving tension and all that. Once you went off, as soon as I stepped—got on my foot on the step and stood up—I started to yell at the top of my voice and I continued that throughout my career. [laughs]

DH: What were you thinking about when you took that step off the plane?

AN: That would be difficult to remember. I don't know if I was thinking about: Now, is the chute gonna open? What's the sensation gonna be? Would the chute strike the tail? Is the static line tied? Is...did I snap the static line? Or all that. But I do...I think we had so many thoughts going through our minds that, that it was kind of confusing to single out any number...any...a few of them.

DH: But when you got on the ground, how did you feel?

AN: Oh, I think it was elated, you know. I flew in the Navy, and I think I had some kind of the same feeling as, you know, the first time I landed on an aircraft carrier. You know, I was just...it was a...real uplifting, you know. You felt really you'd...it was something you had really accomplished that was significant.

DH: When you went through training, what kind of facilities did you have for training and for living.

AN: Okay. We were brought up to...We rode a bus up to Missoula, and we were put in barracks out at a place—I think it was Nine Mile, close to Frenchtown. And I never did fully understand whether 5 or 6 or 3 mile, or something like that, but it was in that area west of here, in Missoula. The barracks was a long barracks, much like the military, and we had beds with just sleeping bags on them. We got...As I recall, it was just sleeping bags, and we were pretty well out in the open country and I remember taking one walk—cross-country walk—and it was pretty open. But, the one thing I can remember, too, about the training was the meals. It seems like that we always ate well. Except, perhaps, on the fires. But, at that time because sometimes we had K-rations and this, canned juices and things like that. But I can recall that we had lots of roast beef. [laughs] It wasn't any question what the fare was going to be that night: we had roast beef. So, that's...Let's see, I'm a little embarrassed at the details of our training and some things that are not immediately—I can't recall.

DH: That's all right. What did your family think, when you told you were being a smokejumper?

AN: I think after I flew in the Navy, they...nothing surprised them anymore, you know. I think that it wasn't...You know, that's kind of strange. I think that they was glad that I was gonna do something for sure. I was gonna go back to work, as I had been out of the military about six months, and all I did was drive my dad's car around and run his gas out. He was glad to see me go back to work. [laughs]

DH: Did you ever make any mistakes while you were going through training?

AN: Yes, I thought, perhaps, the mistake I made is...No, I can't say that I made many, but I remember an incident when I was training up here, that...I think I was the only officer. You know I had been an officer in the military, and the rest of them were, you know. And I was an officer and a pilot that hadn't got any combat, so I really didn't really have any credentials there that would make me...should make me feel any better than anybody else, but they all thought I thought I was better, you know. And so I remember one night in the barracks, I made the statement, and apparently too loudly, that I just didn't appreciate the accommodations—you know, the sleeping bag and no sheets. And I said, "You know, I've never had to sleep without sheets." And here we had veteran paratroopers around that had slept in foxholes and in the mud, slogged around, and here I was, maybe thinking that I was better than somebody else. And so the next morning—the next day—I came in and somebody had either short-sheeted me or did something pretty obviously, kind of contemptuous. And I challenged everybody in the barracks that whoever the low life was, I was ready to do battle. [laughs] But from then on, I gained some respect from that, and I got along quite well.

DH: Most of the guys that were jumping were service men?

AN: Very, very many of them. I'd say, you know just offhand, 75 percent anyway.

DH: How many guys went through your training class? Do you remember?

AN: I thought that...There was about 20 in the first class that came up here and trained for a month and we were followed by another contingent out of McCall of another 20 jumpers.

DH: How many of those guys washed out?

AN: I can't remember anybody washing out. I remember an incident where, when we returned to McCall in the Ford Trimotor, this one jumper, he felt like jumping out when we got over the field. Because he'd been...He was a veteran jumper—military jumper, paratrooper—and he had never landed in a plane before. I thought it was interesting that he had taken off so many times, but he had never...He had always jumped out. Here he was gonna have to land in one and it was scary. [laughs]

DH: Do you remember your first fire jump?

AN: Yes, I've got a story in my album here of the first fire jump. We were on the way to a fire—it had been reported, oh, many miles over in the Middle Fork of the Salmon River country. And on the way, we spotted this—what we thought was a fire—on the way. They had five jumpers, and so they jumped us. They thought, well, boy, here we've spotted a fire on the way and we will be sure to get that. And it turned out that there wasn't any fire; it was just early morning fog. It was before 6 o'clock in the morning we jumped. And, I had spent the night at home; I had gone down the valley, Boise Valley, over the weekend, and I got to bed about 3:00, and I had to get up at 4:00. And [laughs] head for the Middle Fork country, only we jumped out 20, 25 miles north of McCall. North of the Upper Payette Lakes, and it was a real struggle getting our equipment back out to the road where we were to meet a pickup after we suppressed a fire, and that was a...downed logs and mosquitoes. You can't believe. I was glad to get back to town.

DH: Can you remember the largest fire that you fought?

AN: Largest fire? Was...I think we were just talking about that this morning. We jumped on a fire close to the mouth of the South Fork of the Salmon, above Mackey Bar. It was a small fire, early. It was—I think it started in the afternoon, probably lightning cause. And they say that it was a small fire—25 acres—but they say within an hour later it was 500 acres. It was windy, and I think the fire was creating some of the wind we had to jump in. It was a question whether we should jump or not. And I don't know. We've discussed it a number of times, especially recently since smokejumping has kind of been the main topic of our conversation that—kind of debating why I was used in this fashion, as kind of a drift chute. The spotter would look down there and the foreman would say, 'Hey! That looks kind of dangerous down there, we'll jump Neilson in there and see if he if he survives. And if he makes it, may be anybody else can.' Or else they'd say, 'Well, he looks...He's a skilled jumper, and I think we can get him down safely, and then we'll make up our minds about jumping anybody else.' So we don't know which one it was. Rather, they thought I was expendable, or maybe I could be a good test of the certain situation. Anyway, it was such a large fire, and obviously had grown to such proportions, that it was just a matter of packing our gear and going down to the airport on the...at the Mackey Bar on the Middle Fork and flying us out.

DH: Did you know what they were talking about using you as a test, as a streamer?

AN: I think I accepted the challenge, you know. I...like, 'Hey! Don't worry, I'm gonna...I can do her.' You know, something like that. So, I didn't feel that they were risking my life for some reason or other. But I...In fact I felt up to the challenge and the...I'd get down safely, so. But afterwards, you'd be thinking about it now, 'I wonder.'

DH: How many jumps did you make over your career as a smokejumper?

AN: Thirty-six, I believe it was.

DH: Did you ever do any flying for the Forest Service drop jumpers off?

AN: No, I didn't do that. The pilots would let me take the control of a Trimotor once in a while, coming, returning from the fires, about all.

DH: How was it like flying that Trimotor? Was that a pretty good plane to be flying?

AN: I think it was a... [coughs] Excuse me. It was a grand old plane and felt that—very secure and safe in it. I think it was probably the favorite of all of us. It was a plane that we jumped at its slowest speed and...No, we didn't have any complaints about the Trimotor. It was a...It had the short field capabilities, and going in and out of those mountain fields, and...No, we had nothing but good to say about the Trimotor.

DH: How many bases did you jump out of?

AN: Just McCall—solely.

DH: Just out of McCall. How would you compare the base at McCall to the base here at Missoula? When you were training here at Missoula then you went to McCall to jump.

AN: They were kind of alike, you know. You can compare the Marine Corps to the Army, or Air Force, or Army Air Corps. We were a smaller unit, probably more knit tight and more comradery with the smaller group, and had good relationship, I thought, between the jumpers. We were similarly recognized our place in history, pretty much. We were the first jumpers following the war and it was a new experience, and nobody had done this before. And I think we recognized that, and probably we felt proud about it.

DH: Did you see any returning service men who, went in the smokejump project, who came back from the war with the attitude that they didn't have to work? The government owed them a living, and they really didn't fit in very well with the jump organization?

AN: No. I...There was none of that. No attitude like that. I don't think that the...I think the serviceman, or the paratroopers and that, were hard working—had a good attitude about work. I think everybody did back then. I don't think that back in those days when jobs were hard to find, it was—hard work was easily accepted.

DH: Do you think that the Depression had any effect on your values towards working- the work ethic?

AN: The Depression? I lived through the Depression, so I think we came to know hard times then. And we had hard times, I thought lasted right up until the war, and the war was an interlude in there where, maybe, we had forgotten some of the hard times and...No, I feel that

the Depression was something that, if you can survive it somehow, isn't a bad experience.

DH: But did it affect your attitude towards your job anyway?

AN: I was pretty young during the Depression, I thought that—I think that the Depression, if anything, made me more appreciative of the job, because we were paid well, and we were paid better than most jobs. Of course, you probably have questions later on as to my overall impression of, and some impressions I had of the type of work, but we truly felt, and maybe in retrospect, looking back in later years, the opportunity and the once-in-a life-time chance . It was a job very unique. And I think we realized that fact, maybe. I don't know—we couldn't have...I think it was in retrospect because it truly was a unique job.

DH: How did you feel about having to do project work?

AN: Oh, it was interesting that...Maybe my experience in the Navy that it seemed that maybe I ought to be more closely involved in the actual flying part of it. And what would that be? It would be in the jumping and the chutes, and stuff, so I was made immediately a rigger, you know, working with parachutes. And I thought...I don't know if Wayne Webb remembers it, he became a rigger and eventually a foreman, and as I remember I talked Wayne into becoming a rigger. He thought it was a big responsibility, he didn't know if he wanted to accept the responsibility of men's lives like that: that they pack their chutes for them. And as everybody knows, Wayne became an extremely good rigger and parachute. Well, he could...with a sewing machine there wasn't hardly anything he couldn't do. I felt a little bit like maybe I pointed him in that direction.

DH: Do you feel there is some kind of an advantage to having a...someone who is an actual jumper being a rigger?

AN: I don't think that is really a necessity. I don't think it hurts anything. I don't believe that it would be any conflict or any advantage. I think that a non-jumper would feel the same responsibility as a jumper would. I don't think that we have any problems of...I think once you...You judge people's character more, and then assign them as a rigging job, and I don't think whether they jump, or don't jump, is a factor.

DH: What kind of planes were you jumping out of?

AN: Well, we jumped—I've jumped out of three different kind of planes. Of course, Trimotor was the big thing in '45, '46, and '47, probably into '48. But we did have a single engine Travel Air that would carry probably, generally, mainly our two-man fires. Maybe they could carry three or four at a time. And then I had the experience while I was training in Missoula jumping out of DC-3, which was a unique experience. And one, that if they even offered me that chance today, I'd be tempted to do.

DH: How many men would be in a plane when you took off to—for a fire?

AN: Very seldom did we ever leave the airport, especially in a Trimotor, with less than, maybe eight jumpers. But, I guess, there was time, four or six, but I don't think we ever left with two men in the Trimotor. But that was it, you know. We didn't have a DC-3 in McCall, so we're not...we didn't jump any more than eight on a fire, at one time.

DH: Did you get to know the pilots very well that were flying the planes that—

AN: I...maybe having been a pilot myself, I got to know them quite well. Bob Fogg and Warren Allison is two; and I think those were the only two pilots that I could even name that flew. I don't even know only two pilots that I could even name that flew. I don't even know if any other pilot was flying the plane that I jumped out of I got to know Warren better than I did Bob.

DH: Did you ever hear about any of these pilots ever having a problem with the plane?

AN: I don't recall a second that they ever had the slightest problem, that I was aware of. Maybe I might have been more conscious of the...having flown myself, that they were doing anything abnormal or having problems I didn't...I wasn't aware of.

DH: Did you ever get hurt smokejumping?

AN: I'll think about that one for awhile, but I don't remember a single scrape.

DH: Did you ever see any other guys get injured?

AN: Well, yes. I remember on this big fire I was telling you about that exploded on us. My cousin was a jumper at the time, and I know that he...when he landed he...his head hit a rock, and I helped bandage him up with first aid—some little first aid there—but—

Then Kenny Roth jumped on a fire, and he slipped and fell a few times and cut himself on the crosscut saw he was carrying. [pauses] No! He just fell, and the weight split his finger—the webbing in his finger. But I'll probably think later. My golly, don't you remember the poor guy that did—lit on his head, or something, but I— [laughs]

Nothing comes to my mind right now of anybody...Course, I know of there was people getting hurt on a...We talk a lot about some accidents on the fires, but boy, right now none of them come to my mind.

DH: Which would you say is more dangerous: the actual jumping or fighting the fire?

AN: I thought a lot about this, and a lot of people have accused me of when I jump that I purposely, self-consciously, tried to land in the trees so I wouldn't be confronted with the

hazard of rocks and down logs, which obviously was a big hazard. You never know when you jump out of that plane what it's gonna be—what your gonna land on. And lord knows that there's a lot of down logs down there, and there's a lot of rocks in certain areas. And boy, that old tree landing can be a real—jumping into a feather bed at times, but it can be awful hazardous, too. If it just spills the air and lets you free fall a hundred feet. But, on the fire, you know, all it takes on a fire is just a little—some safety precautions. I don't think fighting fires needs to be hazardous at all.

DH: Is it physically demanding work?

AN: It can be. I think one fire can be just...I was just talking to a friend of mine about we jump on Hells Canyon. That, I'd say, was a maximum effort. I don't think anybody worked any harder than we did to quell or control that fire, than he and I did. And then, another time...And that, of course, is the purpose of smokejumping: is initial respond, and being on the fire before it is more than just smoldering. Many times it is just child's play extinguishing a fire. And it's satisfying, of course, to know when you jump on a fire that, you know, if you got there minutes later you might have got a real conflagration. I'd say that, many times, I'm sure, there was fires when people were just dog tired, really dog tired, and they realized they were...they personally, were kind of responsible from it going into a huge project or fire. And I think that the response was always accordingly.

DH: What was the first thing you would do after you land on a fire?

AN: I think to get your chutes off and grab your shovels, the heck with anything else. And get over there and check on what the state of the fire was, and if there's any particular hazard, you gonna [have] hot spots—some things, put a trench around some things. The first thing was the fire. You didn't...Boy, you didn't want to waste any time getting over there, it was no...many...That should have been, let's say, that should have been the response; and many times it was. But I was reading some of my notes where I'd say we'd flipped a coin to see who'd gonna go check the fire and who's gonna retrieve the gear. So I think maybe we had our priorities mixed up, sometimes.

DH: Were you using silk chutes when you were jumping?

AN: Yes, yes.

DH: Was there any kind of special care that had to be taken with those?

AN: Not any...I don't know what other types of chutes there were other than that, so I don't know how...cared for all of them the same. The fellows that rigged had their own special non-standard chutes; we had some Eagles, and we had some...I can't remember some of the off-brand chutes we had, but there were some features about it that we liked. And it took

special care in packing and took longer, and had some...I think one had ears on it with guidelines so you could steer them better. Since we felt that we had to go to the...They were more difficult to pack and we had to take longer and more care, that maybe we ought to be the ones that jump them.

DH: Were you aware, when you came back from the service, that Forest Service had been using conscientious objectors as smokejumpers during the war?

AN: I think I found out about it. No, I didn't know anything about smokejumping when I came back from the service, so I couldn't have known anything about that. I didn't know anything about smokejumping until somebody said, 'Hey! Wouldn't you like to be a smokejumper?' And I said yes before I found out who had been the previous smokejumpers, and what stage it was. And so, I should have probably felt some animosity, perhaps. Especially if I had maybe seen some combat duty, you know, [unintelligible] and they were up here living the kind of life that, you know, in the forest and the lakes and the beaches, and may be having a nice job like that. But I don't remember any of those feelings.

DH: Were you aware, when you were smokejumping, that you were actually making history?

AN: I think we had a sense of that. I've had a sense of history about...I think I have a...I'm kind of into nostalgia pretty good, so it seems like that I reflect a lot on anything that I do. Maybe too much, and not what I'm gonna do. [laughs] But I'm sure we didn't, at the time, have that true sense...No, and I don't think anybody could have.

DH: What did you feel when you heard about the Mann Gulch fire, here in Montana?

AN: Well, that was a bad fire year. As I recall, that might have been in 1949, a year after I was out of jumping. In fact, it was such a bad fire year, I halfway expected or hoped that maybe they'd call me back in. You know, they was having such a bad year that maybe some of us old jumpers ought to go back and help out the situation. But it was interesting to me. It was probably something that I—made an impression on me as much as anything. And I could understand how it could have happened, and did a lot of second guessing, you know, too. Talking about well they should have done this, maybe they should have done that, how could it have happened. And then maybe at the same time realizing how easy it might have happened, and maybe it might happen again. Maybe it is more dangerous work than we realized. And then thinking, 'gee, now, maybe we were lucky, and maybe it is a lot more hazardous, and maybe it's gonna happen again.'

DH: The other guys who were jumping with you in 1948, the year before the fire, how did they feel?

AN: About the Mann Gulch...Mann Creek or whatever? Well, I didn't have...Since I was kind of isolated then. I had gone back to the farm, I'd finished school and was farming and my contacts

with ex-jumpers was minimal, and I really didn't have to...have a chance to really talk out...talk about it very much.

DH: Did they train you how to fight a fire, or did they just give you a Pulaski and say, 'go to it.'

AN: No, we had...Interesting enough, we had a practice fire. And that probably is the hardest fire we ever had to control. Because you know, the embarrassment of it, if it got away from us. And I think there was a few times that it looked like it was going to maybe on up the mountain. I felt that we were well trained and I many times thought back how qualified the people were that trained us and what a good job they did.

DH: Did you ever think about that maybe training smokejumpers is something that you'd might liked to have done?

AN: Oh, yes. I look back and thought that, you know, I should have changed my major at the time, since I did like the life and the excitement of it. I should have stayed on. I think I had the opportunity that probably could have fit into the program and maybe got full time work, so I think there's many aspects of smokejumping that I would have liked to continued in.

DH: Did you ever have to make any long packouts?

AN: Yes, I think I had my share of them.

DH: Do you remember the longest one you made? Or one of the longest?

AN: One of the longest ones, I think, we jumped over the mountains from McCall, and there was quite a bunch of us. We were talking about it at lunch today. We thought it was unfair. It seemed unfair to be so close to McCall and then have to have such a rugged trip out. We'd jumped over the mountain and had to climb back up the mountain to a road on the other side. And we were almost inspired, or motivated, to get up that mountain and down the other side so we could get the guy that [laughs] wrote up the best way out. We wanted to make sure we had our cross-cut saw with us—that we didn't lose it. We were gonna go to work on him...it was...it seemed like a difficult way out, and a long one, and up a pretty steep mountain.

DH: Did you ever have any packouts that were just a snap—a breeze?

AN: Oh, yes, yes. We had our share of those, too. But I remember jumping into, probably one of the highest peaks in the Sawtooth Mountains, and that was another fire I jumped on that I felt that I was used as a drift chute, because we jumped along the side of a lake. And I get to looking back, the air was, you know, at the elevation and the time of day, the air was thin, and we descended at a good rate. I, you know, I had that mixed emotions—later thinking about it—that...about how serious it would be to land in the lake with that kind of a suit on, and not having any kind of training to get out of water. But anyway, I can remember the trip out of

there. They brought a pack string to us, and we started out in the evening, and how beautiful it was to ride down the trails into the Stanley Basin, by Red Fish Lake. And, oh, there was really some great experiences coming out of fires.

DH: What kind of gear would you take with you to a fire, would you have on your person when you jumped out of a plane?

AN: Well, at that time—and I think it bears some comment—that even though we were in...Smokejumping had been, really, in its early stages it was amazing how well that, how far they had come along in the design of jumpsuits and the fact that they wore the helmets with the masks on them and the shovel and pulaski were ideal for fighting fire. We...I suppose we was well-equipped as they are today unless in some instances, I understand, that they might...I understand that soon after I terminated my employment that they had pumps, and they might pump out of creek to quell the fire. But, no, I think the pulaski and shovel is pretty standard equipment today and that's what we had then. But I would think that the big benefits today might be the improvement is rations and, oh, they've got to be...When they say the best way out for jumpers, they should know now really what's best. And maybe with helicopters they've improved on that, but as far as how a person is prepared for a fire and what equipment to take in, I don't think they've advanced very far—very much in that aspect.

DH: How long would it take you from...to exit from the plane until you touched the ground?

AN: Well, I thought that, right today, I probably if I...maybe the first question I'd ask somebody—a pilot or a spotter—and say, 'What altitude were we really jumping from?' And I think that we tried to jump, say 1,500 to 2,000 feet. And as far as descent time, I thought that probably we were on the ground inside of a minute and a half, or something like that. Sometimes it was interesting that when we hit thermals, we were suspended in the air, almost. That presented some interesting problems.

DH: What kind of problems did it present?

AN: Well, it could drift you away from the jump sight, you know. You might land at...down the hill, long from the fire and you have to pack long way to it, and you get...you lose time in getting to the fire. And it is kind of scary, sometimes, when you found maybe the only jump spot in the whole area and you got so intent on getting in there and then you can't—and then you see it drifting away from you. [laughs]

DH: How did you guide your chute down to your landing spot?

AN: Well, these were...even back in those early days we did have the slots—the slotted chutes with the guidelines that we could pull on and...to regulate the air that was...would be expelled or coming from the canopy. And we would be able to turn the chute; we could face the chute in any direction we wanted to and guide it. We could get some forward speed more by planing, I

think. Planing may not give you a lot of forward speed, but it would make you descend faster if you were drifting away from them—a jump spot. So, planing and manipulating of the guide lines and then, of course, the planing was the, kind of, pulling down on the shroud lines and collapsing the chute and giving it, making it descend faster.

DH: Did you ever have that problem of drifting away from your landing spot?

AN: Maybe, in every fire. [laughs] No, I think it always amazed me that you could—that we could—the spotter's done as, well, good a job as they did. I never did spot a jumper, and I always admired those who did. It must have been more simple than I gave them credit for, because it seems like the jump spot was always accessible whenever I jumped.

DH: How would the spotter let you know when to go out of the plane?

AN: Well, it was a yell and a slap on the back, and you just—you'd go.

DH: And how would a spotter pick out a landing spot?

AN: Well, he'd try to...it was a judgement thing. They'd try to get close to the fire, they wanted, I guess—not guess, but I'm sure they took into account of which way the wind was blowing from the fire. They didn't want you to drift into the fire from the jump spot; they didn't want the hazards. They'd probably weigh the hazards and the situations, and if they could find, if they could rationalize jumping you in one place over another with all the...constantly in mind, getting to the fire in a hurry.

DH: How would the spotter...what would he be doing during the flight?

AN: The spotter? He was kind of like a...he was kind of a motivator. You know, he was...I guess that maybe since he didn't think he was going to have to jump. He was probably braver than anybody else and I'm sure he sensed his responsibility, and was probably anticipating the jump spot as much, and anticipation of the fire, and the size of the fire and the jump spot. And I think he...I'm sure he felt that he's gotta get these guys down safely. And that's a real responsibility. And I don't know any of them that wasn't accepting that in that way.

DH: Okay, I'd like to stop here and turn the tape over

[Break in audio]

DH: What would you do after the fire season was over?

AN: Well, I was a student at the University of Idaho at the time, and we had to get back to the University for rush week. And it was just...It was almost like the fire season terminated just in time to get up there. We never...I remember one season where two fellows said, "Hey, we're

going back to school, can we get the next fire? We would like to move above you two. Can we get the next fire? Then you'd be here longer, and we'll go back to school." And so these two fellows—next fire, they jump. But there wasn't any more fires [laughs] so these other fellows didn't get to jump anymore that year. But no, that job was just almost designed for college students. It just was beautiful.

DH: Is that what most of the guys who were jumping that time, college students?

AN: Not really. I think that as time went along, this was the case. We had more the military, ex-military, and they...And of course those fellows, I think, had shorter career—jumping careers—because they were going back to regular jobs, and they needed some time to look around. And so a lot of those fellows, the ex-paratroopers that didn't return to college and those...A number of those, they might jump a year or so and then they'd find their lifetime occupations. But many of them, young fellows that had been in the military and started college and they were available, I know so many of them, 4 and 5 years in while they completed college.

DH: How did you feel when you learned that the Forest Service decided to let women in the smokejumping.

AN: I don't know if I really heard that. On the way up for the reunion, I was kind of surprised, and shocked a little bit, that there was a girl smokejumper in the McCall unit and might have been there as many as three or four years. And many questions came to our mind at the time, and we discussed it quit a bit. And I think the feeling was...I think we had a feeling that, why? You know, what's the point of it? You know, there's are jobs designed for men and there's are jobs designed for women. We don't want the center spread in *Playboy* and they don't—they shouldn't want to be smokejumpers, you know, there's the job. So, I think I'm really opposed to that—not radically opposed, but I don't see the point of it.

DH: What do you feel is going to be the future of smokejumping?

AN: The future of smokejumping. I thought, maybe, when...in the advent of helicopters that maybe smokejumping might be in danger of being phased out. But I think if it was going to be, that it would have been before now. No, I think it's a good future. I think that they probably improved training methods and they probably...I can't...It's inconceivable that they can advance any further, but even if they don't I think they got a good thing. It would be interesting to get some estimates of what the smoke jumpers actually achieve as far as savings of dollars and timber, and things of that nature.

DH: What would you do with your free time when you were not fighting a fire, or doing project work?

AN: Well, this was, when you're in a resort town like McCall, and you're single, you just wonder how many gals would be up from Boise over the weekend, you know. There were so many

summer homes on the lake that we would go into town, I would think, almost every night to have a beer or two before we came back. And then, too, I think we had that wartime—it had been that the war had just been over, and we had a little different attitude about life. You know, maybe have fun, and be merry, and things like that. I think we over did it. I think there was no question about that. And looking back, I don't think I was any...I don't think my performance on a fire was really hurt by anything that I was doing off hours, but I, but I know it did in any number of situations. But no, I think that...and you explained that by saying, 'hey! These guys were World War II veterans, and they were just letting off some steam.'

DH: How do you feel about the statement that's been generalized about smokejumpers, 'they work hard, and they play hard.'

AN: Well, it was sure true in our case. I don't think there was very many shirkers. When you get...I think they—the fellows—had a real sense of duty and responsibility. I was...I don't think I heard anybody make the statement that, 'So-and-so was dogging it on a fire.' It's kind of unusual and maybe people...and maybe we should have been looking out for it, but, no, I sure have to go along with that statement. I don't know how true it is today, but I know it was true back then.

DH: How do you look back at your years as a smokejumper.

AN: Oh, it was really unique. Maybe we didn't have an appreciation of it, like we should have. We should have, maybe enjoyed it more and realized more—maybe had a more sense of history and had...you know we didn't have to play that hard. We should have been thinking more of promoting smokejumping and had a little different attitude, in a way. Maybe we shouldn't have that ex-military, post war, devil-may-care attitude more about it and realize that maybe what we did would...had a lot of...to do with the hist...I mean, the future of smokejumping. If we were going to do the job, we did it well, and felt a little bit more responsible.

DH: Was there any kind of a rivalry between the smokejumpers and the ground crews?

AN: Oh, I think so, yeah. They were ground pounders, and we always felt that they couldn't touch us, as far fire suppression, even after they got on the fire. And the poor slobs, you know, we kind of felt like that, like maybe—I don't know what to compare it to, but no, I think there was a feeling that we were above them, and its...We got the good jobs, and we got here, and we were fresh when we got on the fire, we can do a better job, and we were...We didn't think we needed them, we could get the fire out. I think we recognized when we needed some help, but I think there was a superior feeling, no question about it. Having been selected smokejumper gave you a little superiority complex, anyway.

DH: Do you feel that your experience as a smokejumper in any way affected your life after you quit smokejumping?

AN: Well, I had a lot of...No, it really did, you know. There was maybe three accomplishments in my life that, you know, makes you more, you know, self-esteem. You know, it adds to one's self-esteem, along with, you know, maybe graduating from the university—getting a university education, a degree—and being...flying in the Navy. That added to one's self-esteem and...No, it all helps, and that was a big help.

DH: Well, I think I've run through my list of questions, I have to ask. Is there anything you would like to add, that you feel I have missed?

AN: No, I just thought that, you know, I was fortunate in my...that I...Like I mentioned earlier, smokejumping was unique in many ways. Something that very few people have the opportunity of doing and the life—living in the mountains, and jumping inside the remote lakes, and in timber where, truly inside Montana and Idaho, was wilderness area that you might truly say no man has trod before. And I had the unique experience of jumping on fires, even though I was stationed in McCall, I jumped on a fire in Oregon and one in Montana, one in Wyoming, and fires in Idaho. I thought for three years that was a feather in my cap, where I was lucky to be able to do that. I think maybe we...I've talked to fellows later who wished they had been a little more serious minded at that time and made it—had maybe a greater contribution. And it's just...And when I think back, I'm just amazed that we...Even though we give the overhead kind of a bad time, I think that the men recognize that they had some good men, you know. Like Lloyd Johnson, Ferguson, who was there at McCall when we...when we...back in '46, and they did an excellent job of selecting the men that stayed with them. I think the unit profited because of fellows like Lloyd and Fergey. You can't, in retrospect, be very critical of them, although they took kind of—they had a bad time. But it's a...It was an experience that was really a rare one, and I think that we look back and it was a...Enjoy.

DH: Well, thanks for the interview.

AN: You bet! I hope I said something different.

[End of Interview]