

Bert Tanner interviewed by Renee Gouaux on 22 July 1984 for the Smokejumper Oral History Project. OH #133-105.

RG This is an interview with Bert Tanner on July 22, 1984 during the smokejumper convention. The interviewer is Renee Gouaux. First I'd like to ask Burt: What attracted him to smokejumping in the first place?

BT In 1962, I had my first job away from home, which was... I grew up in Madison, Wisconsin and I was young and just starting in my first year in school... college. I got a job as a water shed assistant out here in Missoula, Montana with the Forest Service and was up working on the site, one day saw a plane go over and some parachutes open up over near a lightning strike on a fire. And I just thought that was the most amazing thing, that anybody would get paid to do that kind of work. And I had no idea that there was even such a... that there even where smokejumpers, and it just stuck. And the next year, I wanted to... I just tried to do everything I could to try to get to be a jumper. Just looked like such a glorious job for a young male at that time. And I liked that kind of stuff. I mean, I liked [INAUDIBLE] and I really enjoyed the wilderness, and it was all part of a marvelous experience being out in Montana, anyway for the first time from Wisconsin. And so, anyway that was... I suppose it's the glamour aspect, or the excitement associated with that kind of job. Plus there's kind of a bit of a hero-image about the jumpers here in Missoula, anyway, with the... you know, with just... they were just, supposedly, a bunch of rugged, robust, dare-devil kind of image. That's why.

RG How old were you when you started smokejumping?

BT Um... well, what happened is, I never really... I didn't get into smokejumping, although the next year I tried. What they did is put me on an inter-regional ground... fire crew, because you had to have fire experience before you could even apply to jumpers. I did get on at Nine Mile inter-regional crew in the Summer of '63, and I in fact had... I would have trained as a jumper in '64, but wound up getting on a fight with my crew boss in 1963, and was pretty much black-balled from coming back to this area. And a whole bunch of the guys that I had been on the fire... at Nine Mile in our crew with wound up training in '64. They got... because they'd been on the Nine Mile fire crew, they got accepted as jumpers in '64. And I should have trained with all of them, but for that problem. So I started doing some field work back at the University of Wisconsin, did that for a couple of years, but I never... while I was going to school, back at the University of Wisconsin, and it never left my mind and by '68, I'd applied again and came out and talked to the right people and sort of mended the bridges because enough time had gone by and I wound up being accepted in '68... to train. And so I was... I guess it's the long was to answer the question, but I was eighteen. I was eighteen and a half when I came out here. Yeah, it was nineteen, I guess, the Summer I came out here. So, when I trained as a jumper in '68, I would have been twenty five. So I

was a little older, because back then there were a lot of young... a lot of people training when they were young.

RG Were there a lot of students who were smokejumpers?

BT Yeah. Fact is, back in the early... in those days... not the early days, but back in during the '60s, it was regarded as just an excellent summertime job. And there were a lot of forestry students, you know, kind of... because it kind of tied in... with the Forest Service. So guys would go to school in the Winter and then smokejump in the Summer. The thing that was interesting was, back then, there were just a whole raft of people that would only jump three or four summers, kind of just associated with their school years and the idea was that you had to get on with life and make something of yourself other than being a jumper bum. If you did get your degree. For the guys that were in forestry, they normally landed full-time, permanent positions in the Forest Service... a lot of them, after they gotten their degree, so they couldn't jump again, although they'd still be working for the Forest Service. But jumping was a seasonal job and it wasn't... it's a lot of... so and then, as time when on, by the time I was jumping in the '70s and that, you just started seeing a lot more people kind of making a... they... because back in the '60s, you know, maybe the average number of seasons at the base, for jumpers... I don't know, would be like, probably less than three years, average. By the time were in the '70s, there were just a raft of people that had six and seven Summers. They were real seasoned veterans. The jumper way of life lends itself, to some degree, to being kind of independent, in a way, almost being a jumper bum. Because the guys... if you're not trying to raise a family off of it, and there's a lot of the guys, and it still goes on today, that are single, and they travel a lot in the Winter. They earn enough money in the Summer that they can have enough to go travelling in the Winter. And a lot of them used to ski in the Winter, and it was kind of a... but almost all of the ones that I jumped with and I'm seeing now, that's 80% of them do have families. Now there's a younger guard that's come in, it's kind of like we were back then that are still single and spend their Winters traveling, or going to New Zealand, or last year three... three different guys went independently to Nepal trucking, so it's an ideal job for that sort of thing.

RG What kind of wages did you make when you started, and then, how did that compare to what you make when you... your last year of jumping... which was in...?

BT '77 was my last summer. Well, it was a GS-5 your first year, and that we were in '68 and then if you came back the next year after your rookie season and you got your career appointment that they had for the jumpers, and you went to a GS-6. And I can't remember what those pay scales... because when I ended, I was still a GS-6. I mean, I never put in to be an overhead and so I never became a squad leader. You had to be a squad leader to get to be a GS-7. To get the next pay increase. But I'd

always... I'd always had a background outside of jumping. I was involved with research and I, in fact, when I was working for the Navy Oceanographic Office after my... the first year I jumped in '68, I was a GS-9. And then went to GS-11, and so when I'd come back to jump, I'd get... go back to a GS-6. But then they would... so I would get pretty low, because they would try to... in the civil service structure, they would try to protect your wages to the degree that they can. The job had to be a GS-6, but there's steps within... there's ten steps within the thing. And, like, a GS-6 step eight winds up earning more money than a GS-7 step four, and then the pay scale is all complicated. And so, the last year I jumped, after I had been a GS-9 already for the... I was also a GS-9 research meteorologist for the Forest Service in Berkeley... when I tried to take a real job... permanent position, and I actually quite that and came back to jumping in '77. So because of the Forest Service, that was a six step top. I, in fact, use to love the fact that I earned more than some of my foremen; much to their dismay.

RG Right. Huh. That's interesting.

BT So I don't know, it was like five... I think when I started it was like \$5.00 for GS-5... it was \$5.05, or something like that.

RG And you also got overtime?

BT We got overtime. It was... it was time and a half. Boy, you know, I'm trying to remember. I think in '68 we got straight time for overtime hours, I think all that changed sometime in the last... in the last part of the '60s. That the Federal Government came in for firefighters, too, and said if you work overtime it's time and a half. I mean it's one and a half times your hourly rate, rather than just the straight hourly rate. I think in '68, when I trained, we didn't get paid the time and a half rate for overtime. We got paid straight time for all the hours we worked. And by the time I came back, it was pretty lucrative. If you got... I mean, that's why you jumped... it was the overtime. You had to have fires, though, to make any overtime. But it was in the \$5.00... by the time I ended, a GS-6 was probably was something like \$6.20 an hour. I mean, the scale had just gone up with inflation, or whatever they do with the civil service annual... annual rate. It was still the same level as GS-6.

RG What kind of training did you... did the smokejumper organization give you before you made your first jump?

BT They trained you in all aspects of learning to parachute. If you had previous parachute experience, it didn't mean anything, because they wanted everybody to... and they were capable of training everybody. And it was a... it was very intensive training. I... I always remembered, I played football for the University of Wisconsin in the Big 10. And we use to have this very arduous double sessions at the beginning of the

season, and we would be practicing. And the only other thing I could compare it to is when I was in Army basic training. And I always remember when I was in the rookie training out here, I always felt that that was probably tougher than either one of those things that I could compare it to. But it is excellent training, because they would take a bunch of guys off the street that didn't know anything about going out the door of an airplane, and within five weeks they had you [INAUDIBLE] underneath a parachute with hazardous training.

RG Did you feel pretty well prepared for your first jump?

BT Very well prepared. Yeah. They... because they run you on those units out there everyday for two weeks. You're simulating almost every phase of the parachute jump from... you practice your exits jumping out of this thing and you do fall, and you're connected in on your harness... there's some wires up above that catch you, but you're actually practice your exit going out the door. So by the time I came to my first jump, I was just awake, and like [INAUDIBLE] I really wasn't that nervous on my first jump.

RG Really?

BT It was my second jump. After I knew what the first jump was I was more nervous about the second jump than the first one.

RG [LAUGH] Uh-huh. What was your first jump like?

BT Well, we jumped right out here... by Blue Mountain, is it?

RG Uh-huh... uh-huh.

BT Over here. And it was exciting, but it was big, wide-open field. They gave us a lot of room to try to get into it on our first jump. And I just got... you know, I can't remember whether I was the first guy out on my stick. They jumped two-man sticks, and I can't remember whether I was the second guy or the first guy out the door, but I just lined up... I was a little nervous, of course, I was gonna be the first one, but I actually was thinking so much about all the training we had, just making it be like I was down on the units again, that when the spotter slapped the guys leg and we went, it was just out the door. And the thing that hit me more than anything, that they don't simulate on the units is they can't simulate the prop blast of air coming off of the end... the prop of the plane. And you're exiting the door that's behind the prop. And this... and so... and they can't simulate that. You're going through the air at 95-100 miles an hour in the plane when you leave the thing, and so there's this incredible blast of air that hits you. And I remember that I did not... and that's why they want to you have good exit position, so you don't get spun around while your chute's opening. I remember going out the door, getting hit by that blast of air, and maybe my exit position wasn't that good, because I know my legs blew up over my head. I was just sitting there waiting for

that chute to open, to feel the pop where the chute had opened. And it seemed like a little while, and it was that blast... that prop blast, is why I was more nervous about my second jump. Because I didn't know what to expect on the first one, and that thing, it was disorienting. Because I got flipped upside down and then the chute opens and you kind of swing down like... a bell clapper in a bell, dangling from the chute. But other than that I... I just went out the door like an [inaudible]. Because all training we had down on the units.

RG Would you say that jumping out of a plane is one of the more attractive aspects of the job?

BT For me personally, it wasn't all that much. If you didn't have the jumping... the parachuting aspect, it wouldn't be quite the degree of self-imposed elitism that goes on out there.

RG Right.

BT So it's an important aspect of what binds you together in terms of the comradery. Which is really amazing, the comradery that exists out there. But... so you need that. But for me, the things that to me were the greatest aspect of it were... we got into some amazing country, and I like country. And I jumped fires from eighty miles north of the Mexican border to above the Arctic Circle. And I would never have had the opportunity to get into that much country all over the West. So that was a big aspect. The people that you worked with, and just the comradery was a big aspect. And the bottom line, the most important part of the whole thing, really was to be good at putting out forest fire, you know, to be good fire fighters. That... the jumping was the means to get you there.

RG Right.

BT And... so I never was all that thrilled about all the jumping. I mean, I never sport jumped. The only I jump I've ever made in my life was as an employee for the Forest Service. And I never really could see the... I've never been able to see the thrill of going up in an airplane just to go out of it. But the fact that it was part of the job made it... legitimized it for me.

RG Right.

BT It was just something that you had to do as part of a job.

RG Right. Would you say that most of the smokejumpers do a good job of being firefighters as well as parachutists?

BT Yeah. They were excellent. I mean, that's where the pride... I mean, that's where the pride really came. I mean, it was hard to sit... I mean, you could pride yourself on jumping on some nasty terrain and being able to come out of it, and some of that kind of stuff. But where the biggest element of pride

probably came from is being, probably, a damn good firefighter, and the jumpers were good fire fighters. They were excellent. And the Missoula group was excellent. And I'm sure there's variability... that's gone up and down through all the years, but in general, they were competent, skilled firefighters.

RG How many smokejumpers were based in Missoula when you were jumping here?

BT It was around 120. I think in the year I trained, in '68, we probably had about 120. It varied. It would oscillate 105 to this one year, I remember, we had 133.

RG Were a lot of the people in the... stationed here in Missoula from other parts of the country?

BT Yes. Oh, do you mean that we had outside... people who didn't live in Missoula jumping?

RG Right.

BT Oh, yes. They came... it was a melting pot. [INAUDIBLE] That was one of the aspects that was so great about it. We had a little bit of everything.

RG Did you make any rescue jumps when you were a smokejumper?

BT I jumped one, and I didn't go in... I didn't go in to work with the people. I went in... I went in, I think, to help fall trees if we needed to get a heli... helicopter in. I went in with a group to help. And that was a... that was a long, long time ago. I was... I'm pretty fuzzy on it. But no, I didn't make that many. I didn't make real rescue jumps.

RG Were you trained to make water jumps?

BT Yes. I was part of it. In fact I had a fairly active part of... in that. I was a GS-6. It was a GS-7, Jerry Lubsac (?) that was in charge of developing that program. And I worked with him quite a bit. We did it as a... a limited number of us did it after we worked out procedure, and then we did it for the whole base, to give them the water jump. I was in charge of having canoes and everything else out there so that we could be giving people assistance if they got in trouble at the water.

RG What kind of parachutes were you using when you...?

BT When I trained, we were using the 5-A and then in the early '70s they started to switch over. There was about two or three years I jumped there where we were using both the 5-As and they were trying to work in the T-10s, which were a little bit more of a maneuverable chute. And I didn't jump long enough to use the this experimental or this one now that they're using, that's quite a bit more maneuverable. So, it's 5-As and T-10s.

RG Uh-huh. So the basic difference between those two would just be maneuverability. Were there any more risers that you would have to operate or...?

BT No. Uh-uh.

RG Just different design?

BT Right. They... yeah, it was a bit... jeez, you know, I hardly know the difference. But I think the slots were a little bit longer on the chutes so there was a bit... they had a bit more forward speed. The T-10 had a bit more... a bit more forward speed than the 5-A, and was more responsive in making a turn. But by sport chute standards, all of the chutes were pretty sluggish, they were real conservative chutes.

RG Were you ever injured during your smokejumping?

BT Um, once. And that wasn't from a jump. I was never injured on the jump. But it was on a fire up by Thompson Falls. We were digging line and a snag... a tree burned off and came down without making a sound. Hit me. Broke my arm and knocked me down the hill and beat me up pretty bad. Could have been a lot worse, but a guy yelled at the very last minute. And nobody knew who he was yelling to, but I spun and it was kind of... I just spun, because he was yelling "Look out." And so by rotating my body like that, I left my arm out behind me and the thing came down across my helmet and my arm... snapped my arm. But if I hadn't had spun, it would have gotten me dead on, and I could have been a lot... pretty serious otherwise. It was just a silent tree that went down [INAUDIBLE].

RG What do you see... or did you see as being some of the major concerns of smokejumping? Major concerns and also threats as a smokejumper... to your safety?

BT There was no doubt about the fact that if you were jumping into tall timber, that was a nervous situation. Because you didn't... some of our worse accidents that happened were as people were coming into... fairly high... tall timber. Either... either and not hang their chute right up on it. They'd come come down into the canopy of the... of the timber... er, into the tree and they would... if they started to come down the side of the conifer, for instance, it would collapse their chute and they wouldn't hang up in the tree... the chute wouldn't hang up in the tree. And so then they would wind up falling with a collapsed chute... down through. And so tall timber... if you were jumping tall timber and you thought you were gonna hang up, you really wanted to put your chute over the top of that tree, [LAUGH] to make sure you hung up. You didn't want to do it part way. So that was... that was a concern. I'd say the major concern... the biggest thing that provided any uneasiness when you went out to make a jump, was not going out the door of the airplane in any way. That was just pretty automatic. And the chutes had a very good safety record of not malfunctioning. Just percentage-wise,

you had... everything was working for you on that. But it was what you were jumping into. How bad the wind was, how rocky it was, I mean, some sites were just a lot worse than others. And if you looked down there and saw that you were going into some beautiful high alpine meadow, and it was going to be easy to get into, and it was going to be a nice landing, it was just basically... it was just gravy. But if you saw that it was tight... it was a tight spot, [INAUDIBLE] and it was nasty, and rocky, and stuff like that, you'd be a little bit more concerned.

RG Did you always have quite a bit of confidence in your spotter?

BT Yeah. I had a lot of confidence in Missoula spotters. I... when we use to get a bit nervous... I guess every base might have been this way, or when I did, is if we got sent to another base. And there were times... there were times at some of the other bases that I didn't appreciate the... their philosophies and their spotting philosophies. Missoula had a reasonably conservative spotting philosophy. Where as some of the other bases were a bit more macho about it and, you know, they say, "Hell, we can jump anything" kind of thing. And our spot... our overhead... I always gave our overhead high marks in terms of their concern for safety. Yeah, I had confidence in the spotters.

RG Did you ever jump out of other bases?

BT Uh-huh. Quite a bit.

RG What... what other bases did you jump out of?

BT I jumped out of... well....

RG What were some of... I should ask you, maybe then, if you have jumped out of quite a few other bases, and what were some of the more memorable occasions of jumping from other bases?

BT Well, Alaska was thrilling in as much as it was just I hadn't been to Alaska. So it was just thrilling to be in Alaska. And one of my... one of my most memorable occasions ever was a fellow, who now works here at M.E.D.C., by the name of Dave Pierce. But he was working up at the... he trained, I think, in Missoula and jumped someplace else, and then he wound up getting on with the BLM [Bureau of Land Management] jumpers and ultimately was their loft foreman. So he's a very good parachute man. But he and I were together up there in Alaska, and he and I got on assignment where... and this wasn't a jump, but they flew us in on a Twin Otter and set us down on a sand bar in the middle of the Kelley River... I believe. It was way up north, it was above the Arctic Circle, and it was close to the Arctic Ocean, so it was over on the west side... northwest side of Alaska, and it was above the Arctic Circle. And we were right below the Brooks Range, which is the... you know, big mountain range up there.

RG Right.

BT And most people never see it. And we got sat down on this sand bar by the Twin Otter and got told that the next day there was gonna be a chopper come in and ferry us to clean up some smokes that still existed off of a big, big fire. It was like 5,000 acres tundra fire, but it had been rained out, but they had some deep smokes that they'd flown a scout on that were still going on the perimeter. So... I mean, I was in heaven. In comes this chopper, he's under our direction, were up there by the Brooks range, were in this gorgeous water that... you know, fast flowing river... I mean, it's the kind of thing... well, back where they put us down on the sand bar, people paid a lot of money to these guides to fly them in there so they could fish.

RG Right.

BT Dave had his fishing pole, he caught greyling, and he caught Arctic chard. We cooked one up and there we were, reconning around on the Brooks Range. I mean, I just thought I was in heaven.

RG Right.

BT I couldn't believe they were paying me for this. And that was... and I talked to BLM jumpers that jumped up there five... six... seven... eight years, and they never got a deal like that up on the Brooks Range. So that was my [INAUDIBLE] and other than that, I've been more on the negative side. I jumped out of Redding quite a bit, and I always enjoyed that, because we use to jump up around Shasta... Mount Shasta and some of those places, they were real pretty in Northern California. But my last summer, in '77, we jumped out of there on a fire and Steve Stutzbach, from the Missoula base, was the overhead on the fire, and we were having quite a bit of fire in the area, a lot was going on. And we were... didn't have all that much manpower. From the moment we jumped on that thing, we were calling for more people. And it was just nasty. And we jumped it, and it was in the thick brush and just an ugly fire. Just the kind of ones you get about one out of ten like that and make you wonder why in the hell you ain't... a smokejumper. I mean, there were those times that... and that one, we wound up... they wound up dropping two more Otter loads of people on, so we had a total of twenty four chutes up there, and we never could catch that thing. And we were jumping at the head, up on top and having to come down the slope and we were trying to get it down from underneath it and try to get it lined. And that thing... and we probably shouldn't have been jumping in at the top of that thing, but that's where the spotters were putting them. And that fire went over the top and it burned up everybody's gear. I mean it burned up all twenty-four chutes and jump suits and everything. And that was probably... there was more cost involved in that than there was in any of that damn brush that was getting burned up. They probably shouldn't... that's what it deserved to do, is get burned up. But that was one I remember just as it was such a

nasty, ugly fire. I don't know, there was just not all that much from jumping... other than just getting into their country... seeing new country. The Cascades. I went through that Hell's Canyon area... I jumped... I jumped in the Hell's Can... right at the top on the slope of the Hell's Canyon with the Snake River. I jumped onto the ground. Boy, that was a... that was amazing country.

RG Were people very often called to go to other bases or go to jump out of other bases from Missoula?

BT Yes. Because Missoula was the biggest base and had the most people. And certainly early on, they were the number one base that provided booster crews to other bases. Conversely, every once in a while, Missoula would have a... Region-1 would have a hell of a fire season, and we would, in fact, be bringing people into Missoula to booster us. But we... Missoula's a good base to jump out of to get to a lot of other bases. I mean, you just never knew. We could be slow here with nothing going on in Region-1 and we would still have a pretty good fire year because we'd get sent to where the action was.

RG What kind of planes have you jumped out of? And what kind of plane did you most regularly jump out of?

BT The DC-3. The venerable DC-3. And it's for sure I jumped most out of that. But they were still using the Twin Beeches when I trained, and so I jumped them. They were small, they could only deliver four jumpers to a fire. I jumped Twin Beeches, DC-3s, Twin Otters, and we experimented for a couple of years with the Caribou, which was a big, rear-entry plane that they used... we used a lot for kicking cargo over Laos and stuff in Vietnam days. And that was an exciting plane to jump. You just went right out of the back end of it... the whole back end was open. The tail came up high above it, so you exited underneath the tail. And....

RG Was it easier to... easier exit from the plane?

BT Yeah, it was an easy plane. Because it was just wide open at the back and you just hooked up and went out the door, or went out the tail end of it. But that's all. Boy, then I also... then... at the end they were using these Beech 99s over here at Region-6... Oregon, anyway. And I jumped... I did jump that. I never jumped the Ford Trimotor, which was the old... I think that they quit using that... the last year that they used it was the year before I trained. That was one of the ones... the old timers they use to jump the old Ford Trimotors probably more than anything, other than the D-3s. And I didn't jump the Ford Trimotor.

RG On the average, how many people would you go out with to fight a fire?

BT Oh, that really varied from the years. The thing we always

loved... the most coveted smokejumper fire was the two man fire, because it was just you and a buddy. There usually wasn't a... there wasn't any overhead, there wasn't a big crew action fire that just, you know, you were just part of the whole cog, and... just a small cog in the whole system. And the two-manners were great because it was just you and a buddy and you'd do your own organization on the fire and just do your work. And put the two man... it's a small fire. Those are just small lightning strike fires that haven't gotten big, and they can handle them with two men. But I jumped... towards the later years we were jumping a lot of crew action fires. Full DC-3 loads... sixteen man, and those were on the bigger fires. And generally those were the ones that are just gonna... it's gonna be a lot more active and a lot more work and stuff. So it was all... you know, sometimes I jumped four-manners. But I jumped a lot of crew action fires. In last few years, it seemed like we weren't getting a hell of a lot of two-manners around here. It was, like, sixteen man loads.

RG When you weren't jumping fires, were you involved in any kind of on-base activity?

BT Yeah. Well everybody, to one degree or another... I mean, you gotta... there's something you gotta be doing when you're not on fires. And....

RG What kind of work?

BT Well, early on, in '68, I actually got myself detailed over to the fire lab, because I had a bit of a science background. I have a math and physics background... that's what I got my degree in at the University of Wisconsin. And so I went over and just piddled around trying to be of some use to them. I use to also get de... get myself detailed to the forestry sciences lab. It is the U.S. Forest Service, but it's on campus here, with a guy by the name of Roger Humberford. And he had a project and there was a couple years I worked with him to some degree. Probably wasn't very effective, though, because I... I wasn't could be relied on all that well, because I'd be there trying to do something and I'd be gone for maybe a week or two. But they got... they got you for free on those kind of things so they didn't complain because it was the fire budget paying for you. So if they could get anything out of you, it didn't come out of their budget.

RG Right.

BT I did work in the loft a couple of years... two or three, and I did get my parachute rigger's license and worked in [Hal] Samsel's loft. But I just... basically I just screwed around.

RG Did you ever have an option to do project work out in one of the districts?

BT Yeah. I guess, for myself, I had a tendency to avoid going out and doing much project work. [INAUDIBLE] something else.

In retrospect, it probably would have been better for me if I had gone out on the project work. But we did do a couple projects that were just lovely. One year a jumper had just gotten out of jumping and taken a wilderness ranger job up at Shaffer Meadows in the Bob Marshall... up in the north end of the Bob Marshall. And we didn't have much going on. I believe that was... well, that was 1975, I think. It wasn't... there wasn't much fire, so we were getting put out. And we got together with him, and he needed some help building... rebuilding bridges and stuff. And because it was in a wilderness area, everything was unmotorized, and so if you built bridges, you did it with saws and everything was hand done. And we had a mule that was pulling the... grading the... fixing the road, the gravel roads and stuff. And the... my wife got to... well, it was great. It was just great, because we all jumped in... they gave us a jump to just let us jump into Shaffer Meadows. We landed on that little grass airstrip, and she wound up hiking in. And so she stayed right there in the ranger camp with us and helped cook. There was eight of us and we.... it was just... we stayed in there for ten days working on that and she got to go fishing every day and [INAUDIBLE].

RG Great.

BT It was great. That was a real super project.

RG Yeah. Did you ever work on any other projects?

BT Um, yeah. We'd go up and thin in some of the areas around here. Like I said, I ain't... I always had this little deal going that I could either get myself assigned over here, or at the fire lab, or something like that. And so I didn't really do a lot of the project work.

RG Did most of the smokejumpers enjoy doing project work or not?

BT There seemed to be a tendency to... where there was something you could piss and moan about. So, it was just part of the... it was a good candidate for grumbling and bitching.

RG Right.

BT But I don't want to be too strong on that, because there were a lot of guys that recognized that, you know, we're going out and working in the woods, kept you in shape and that it was good for us to be able to be responsible on project work because it helped sell the smokejumpers. You got to remember the smokejumpers here don't belong to the forest. And so in terms of continuing... you know, you're looking at budget cuts, or cutting back and stuff like that, we got used... if we were useful to the forests, they would hire us, or call for us when there was a fire, or could get project work out of us. So there was a fair amount of responsible... responsibility amongst a lot of people to go out and do a good job on project work because it helps sell with jumpers. Whenever there's a lot of project work there's gonna be a bunch of grumbling, because it means you're not having

a fire season. In general, if you're having an inactive fire season, which is the number one reason these people are here, it's gonna be... somewhere there's gonna be more grumbling and moaning.

RG What did you do during the other seasons of the year when you were a smokejumper?

BT During the Winter?

RG Uh-huh.

BT Um... well, in the early '70s it worked real nice because I was getting a Master's degree and my research project could be accomplished in my field work or my Master's could be done in the Spring of the year, and so I didn't have to be around in the Summers to work on my Master. And so it worked really nicely. And so there was at least two years that I was in graduate school. And then another year we... I went to Nepal, we trucked. We were just kicking around for three or four months... four months during the Winter in Nepal. So it's just screwing off, basically. And then... that's pretty much what I did. I didn't work, and I didn't try and stay here and work. I always had other things to try and get worked during the Winter and I would either... and I guess it was mainly because I was in graduate school.

RG What did you go to graduate school in?

BT Biometeorology. It's micrometeorology, but it's kind of like... it's one of those.

RG Right. Do you feel that smokejumping has had any impact on what you maybe did in graduate school or on any other career that you've had since then?

BT No, other than... other than that after I got my Master's and I was trying to apply for work in that area, as a meteorologist resear... I wanted to be in research... and it was a research meteorologist. It turns out that the place that had a slot, or that wanted me, was also within the Forest Service. The Forest Service has a fairly small research side to it that's a completely different organization than what the jumpers come under in the National Forest system. And... so that made it easy to... once they liked my credentials for that position, made it real easy to get on. I didn't have to go through the civil service register. I, in fact, transferred because it was within the same agency. I just transferred down there as a research meteorologist in Berkeley down in California. And... so I guess that had an impact, because it was easy to get in and I didn't have to take the civil service register. It was just a direct transfer. And then I, in fact, went from that job... I worked there two years, and missed a couple other Summers and then I came back and jumped all Summer in '77 because I quit that job, just transferred right on back into being a jumper.

RG What was it like to come back after a two or three year hiatus?

BT Yeah. That would have been my first one, see, because I... I trained in '68 as a new man and the biggest difference was coming back between '68 and I didn't get back again until '72. And that seemed to be like a pretty big difference. Are we rolling?

[END OF SIDE A]

[BEGIN SIDE B]

RG This is side two of an interview with Bert Tanner and... on July 22, 1984. He's going to continue to tell me about what it was like to come back to smokejumping after a three year hiatus. So, continue.

BT OK. I trained in '68 and then I went to work in the Navy oceanographic offices as a geophysicist and didn't come back from that until '72. So I missed three Summers and the thing that I was impressed with, from leaving it in '68, is that in the '60s things were still pretty much a sort of a hard-core macho image going on out there and just kind of salty, tough old characters. And the thing that was interesting, in '72 was that I could see that things were starting to kind of... we started refer to it as, "We're starting to green-out..." in terms of a little bit more environmental awareness. One of the things I really appreciated is that we'd come out of some of those in the '60s and you just could believe how badly we trashed things up. Because of the food we used to use, a lot of the time were cans and C-rations and we were just... no awareness what-so-ever of leaving all that trash and junk and sometimes on jumps we'd even leave stuff... if it was a big pack-out, although it might not have been policy, the fact of the matter was it was standard practice to leave, possibly, a cross-cut saw buried... stuck under a log here and there trying to lighten your pack, or even your pulaskies to some degree. In '72, people just started being a lot more aware of not leaving trash in the woods, and hauling everything out. And there was just a general spirit that... it's nothing different than what was happening with the nation after having come out of the '60s. And a lot of the... sort of national consciousness change that had occurred there, I mean... and you could see it occurring out there at the jump base. And I appreciated that.

RG What kind of sleeping bags did you use?

BT Boy, I remember going the whole route. We used on my first jumped... they used to have these old Army surplus feather bags that weren't too big, and they worked pretty well. They were excellent. And then we went through an era where we used to use paper sleeping bags, so that we could... then you could burn them up when you were done. They were disposable. And they were kind of somewhat obnoxious. And then we went to the synthetic bags

and started buying honest-to-goodness recreational hiking-type bags that were synthetic. And those would, of course, be recycled. And I think that's what they're still using.

RG As a smokejumper, how do you feel about some of the let-burn policies that are part of fire management now?

BT As a... well, as a person, I think that it is wise. And was always aware of that, that that was wise. But as a firefighter, it used to be difficult because I jumped fires where we were told the... what we were suppose to do is kind of herd the fire around. And I don't know quite what that means, "Herding the fire around." You either get on it and try to fight it or you sit there and let it sputter and go along until all of a sudden it goes over the hill on you. And then it... and then they didn't want that they didn't it to... they wanted you to kind of be stopping it at a certain boundaries and things like that. Well, fires don't necessarily lend themselves to that. And... so, as a jumper... maybe they've got things better defined on what your supposed to do on those kind of fires now but at the time that I was... when I was first running into those kinds of fires down... jumping down on Yellowstone Park and then also Lake Teton Wilderness Area... is where I ran into it... there was difficulty in terms of how you operationally implemented what the hell you were supposed to do. I think it's a good policy in wild lands like...

RG Are there any changes that you've become aware of in the smokejumper organization that you'd like to comment on? Or do you see any changes?

BT Well, I don't because I've been out of it since '77. But the thing I... and so... I don't know whether my comments should be discounted or not, because I'm not living it... through it.

RG Right.

BT But I definitely hear a lot about the fact that over the last few years that it's grown in it's bureaucratic structure. And there's now just several levels of bureaucratic structure that didn't exist there before. I know that, myself personally, I don't feel that that contributes much to the whole reason that we were out there, which is being smokejumpers. I mean, your not running any more jumpers now than they did in '68, when you had two personnel secretaries. That was it, and everything seemed to run fine. And now it's like there has been this little dynasty-building occur to further the... that's how administrators further their career, is by putting a bunch of bric-brac, you know, bureaucratic levels on top of what was the main function. Now, to their credit they have developed a couple programs that... that I think are good. And that is that at some points they realize here you got a bunch of people out there that have an amazing number of years of fire experience. Also a large percentage of them are degreed, I mean, they, you know, they have at least a four year degrees, and so they... something that they

did that I think, is to their credit, is that they got a training... they started utilizing these guys. They're primarily at the squad leader level and up. But they broke out kind of a section that we used to... that would go about the fire training for Forest Service personnel. And... and I don't mean going out and teaching them how to dig fire line, I mean talking about how you perform initial attack, what... on a fire, what parameters you have to be aware of that goes into your manning of a fire, and how the fire is... and what's the most likely way that the fire's going to behave. And there just is a lot of expertise out there in terms of fire knowledge, and they started utilizing it and having formal training group now within the jumpers that go all over the region teaching it at the district and forest level. And so I think that was an effective move, to use some of that expertise. And that, of course, adds to more bureaucratic structure. So some of the bureaucratic structure's legitimate.

RG Do you think that the level of expertise and the quality of smokejumpers has been improved because of the high rate of recitivism... returning jumpers?

BT Yes. Yeah, that... yeah. We made... I made a comment earlier on that, that when I trained, you just didn't find very many four year people. And now, you know, jeez, there's just all kinds of them that got six and seven and eight and longer. Actually, by all standards, I'm probably not that experienced. There was a time that I would have been regarded as a real old salt. But hell, I've been out in '77 and there's still a bunch of my friends there jumping. You know, I trained with them. And so, yes, I think that the fact is that the competence... that that experience does manifest itself as more competent people.

RG Do you think it changes the kind of spirit of the organization?

BT Yeah, I think it has to have an effect. I think that if you didn't ever have new blood coming in, that would be bad. I think there will be a tendency to possibly, if it was the same people going around year after year after year... the fact of the matter is, is after so many years, I don't care who you are, you burn out on fire. By the time I finally quite... or after my last summer, I had to recognize that I didn't really like fires anymore. And I was probably not... and I wasn't doing as good a job as I probably should have been. And so that would be a danger if you just had the same people. But if you always have a mix and are bringing some new blood in periodically, they look up to the older people for their experience. But the older people in the meantime... and they'll look at how they're pushing... physically pushing on fires and it helps... I think it helps the old people put out.

RG What are your feelings about women smokejumpers?

BT Well, I... again, didn't ever jump with any because women smokejumpers occurred after I got out. My... I think they were

still talking about it by the time I was getting out. My feeling on it was that I really don't care if... if, I mean, if the women can do the job the same way as a man. There shouldn't be any... shouldn't be any difference in your attitude about that. The fact of the matter is, though, it that I think that some things have been watered down to be able to accommodate women. And... I know that back on... in the earlier years, we would get pack-outs and probably, of all the stuff involved in jumping, it would turn out that the pack-out was just about as terrible experience as you were gonna have.

RG Right.

BT Because you physically had to carry 115 pounds, often times off of a trail... not being on a trail so it meant that you would be bushwhacking down steep slopes, and hell, there were a lot of males smokejumpers that didn't do well on that. And people just aren't built to carry 115 pounds. And... and I would find it very difficult to believe that a female smokejumper could handle that. And there is a difference [LAUGH] in our physiology and I think that today they may be getting away with that because there may not be near the amount of pack-outs and they, in fact, in their training may not push that phase of it as hard as they use to. And I think from talking to the people that are out there now that I'm still friends with, it is my opinion that the physical aspects of the job have been diluted a little bit. And it may be to accommodate that, because there's an awful lot of pressure from the top to, you know, to accommodate... er, to have woman smokejumpers, just like there is minorities.

RG Right. And this quota system didn't exist when you were smokejumping, did it?

BT No.

RG Do you have any particularly exciting stories or experiences from the times that you were smokejumping? Or recollections about people, thoughts about people that you worked with, or people that supervised you, some of the place you went.

BT Well, it's probably all the kind of thing that I have a lot of them that just occurred over time as I remembered them. But in terms of for the interview, there's... I have to, you know, I... there's... I'd have to be thinking about them. There is one that leaps... leaps to mind kind of was a fairly active occurrence, and a fairly interesting one, and that was we jumped down here by Superior once, on Bald Mountain, and there was... which is this big, high, grassy thing--you see it from the interstate and the fire was just going up this... it was in this grass and roaring up there and there was timber on top and it was gonna get into it. And we came in to jump that, and there was just a whole series of event that occurred over that fire that made it a fairly notable one. One of them was that I had a new... a rookie smokejumper, this was his first jump and he and I were going out the door together, he was my jump partner. And it

looked pretty nasty, because there was literally smoke coming in the door of the airplane. And... so when you look down, you just couldn't quite get oriented and where you were supposed to go and you didn't like it. It almost looked like you were going in the fire. And it's very turbulent and we were getting rocked around a lot. And so everybody was getting sick in the plane. And fortunately I got out the door, because they jumped the foreman and the quad leader went out as the first stick, and then me and this kid, or maybe they got another stick out and then me and this other kid got out. The last thing I told him, I said, "Listen, it looks horrible down there, but it's gonna be a piece of cake, because you're on a steep slope." And actually landing on steep slope's not... not real rocky. It's a very nice landing because you don't try to roll. I just hit and slide in.

RG Right.

BT What you don't want to do, is you don't want to drive your chute into the hill. You don't want to be driving into the thing. And the last thing I said to him was I said, "Listen, there's only one way you can screw this up. It looks shitty, but don't worry about it. There's only one way you can screw this up and that is to run your chute into the hill... to drive in the hill." And I don't know what happened, but he just did exactly that, and he came slamming into that hill and just bounced about eight feet. It knocked him out, gave him a concussion so he... and he really couldn't fight on the fire. I was amazed that he just didn't break it into pieces the way he hit. And then later on, McIver... this same guy I told you... on the interview, Roderick McIver went out scouting... he was the the squad leader on the thing... he went out scouting the fire and wound up getting him... the fire blew-up behind him, he wound up getting trapped. And he was sitting out in the middle of a grass meadow all by himself. And we were back there, and we didn't know what the hell was going on, but we saw this thing blowup. It crowned out in the timber. We were real worried because we knew it had cut Roderick... Rod... McIver off from us. As it turns out, what happened is that it roared up through this timber and started coming into the meadow that he was in and it was dry grass, and he started feverishly lighting matches to do a back fire to just burn out fuel right around him in the grass, so that he would hopefully have enough of it blackened and burned out by the time this thing came roaring in that it wouldn't get him. Well, he did manage to burn that big an area by the time it came in. And it was about twelve or fifteen foot high wall of flame. And it's a very fast flame, the flame front isn't very deep because it isn't into heavy fuels. It's just going through grass, but it's very hot and intensive right at the thing. He was laying down covered up, with his head pointing towards it, and just knew that he was... he was... the heat was just getting unbearable. Finally in his mind he just says, "If I'm gonna die, I'm gonna die running through this stuff."

RG [LAUGH] Right.

BT "I'm not gonna sit here and get chard broiled."

RG Right.

BT And he sprinted up and managed to run through the flame and get out on the other side and save himself. But he did burn himself. He burned his hands, burned his face, burned his ears and stuff like that. That whole thing... there was enough that went on on that fire, that that whole thing... somehow an independent writer got a hold of it and wound up actually publishing the tale of that thing. It was fairly melodramatic the way he wrote it, but it was published in Reader's Digest. And so I was always pleased to have been associated with that one, because there was a fair amount of notoriety that came out.

RG Right. Huh.

BT The other one would have been... well, now, there's just a hundred of them, there's nothing that's all that exceptional, but just... just stuff, like, I can remember a very nasty fire that four of us jumped. We were out of people and we were down in Silver City [New Mexico] and there were only four of us that could go on this thing. We were calling for people from the minute we hit the ground, but there were no people to be had. Everybody was out, the base was empty. We were calling for retardant, and the damn water quit at the retardant shop and we couldn't get any retardant. And the four of us were just flailing and flailing and flailing away and losing the line and cutting more line and burn over that line. And finally after all this, we were starting to get heat exhaustion, because the four of us were just flailing away on this thing. And... and it wound up burn... and it wound up burning over our gear and out personal gear and our parachutes and all this. That was another one that we got burned over on. And for some crazy reason, our cuba-tainer (?), that held the water, somehow it got over to it and burned... even though it was water, it burned it enough so that it leaked it all out. And so now we were out there and we didn't have any water. And that was kind of dumb, I mean it was our fault, for letting that happen. But we were flailing away on the fire so hard, we just weren't taking care of business. An then, all of a sudden... all of a sudden we saw the plane come over and eight chutes come out and all of a sudden these guys... they... they had to jump a half a mile away because this is in a real nasty area and they just couldn't get the people in to be right on the fire. And what had happened, there was eight of these guys that had just come off of a fire they'd been fighting all night the night before, they didn't even change their clothes, they just... they got them back to the base, they just said, "Suit up." Because [Michael] Plattes and Turner and [Ronald] McGuinnis and Duke Joslin there were... this was the... it was the East Fire, was the name of it and it was 1974, I believe. It was down in Silver. For us four it was just more fire than we wanted. And all of a sudden over the hill comes these eight grizzled veterans. And I mean every one of them had... they were just all classic jumpers and they head six... seven years

experience on their belt. One of them was Johnny Harper and I remember... and we were in the state of heat exhaustion, and I remember Harper coming over the top of this knoll packing eighty pounds of water.

RG Wow. That's incredible.

BT And something like that, you just love them. That's what it's all about. Because here comes Harper packing eighty pounds of water in this damn thing. We were in trouble, because we hadn't had water for four hours and we had beaten on this thing and we were getting really weak and getting heat exhaustion. And here comes this crew, and boy, there was such damn much confidence in those guy's ability and they were all just heavyweights. Defano (?), and Jack Deeds, and [David] Custer, and Harper, and I'm probably... I'm leaving some of them out, but they were guys who were just legends anyway. And there were just things like that. That's what the job was all about. That's why you liked it.

RG Great! Well, I would like to thank Burt for sharing his experiences with me today. This is the end of this tape.

[END OF INTERVIEW]