

Interview with Charles Whitt by Kim Taylor on 21 July 1984 for the Smokejumpers Oral History Program. OH #133-115.

KT This is Kim Taylor interviewing Charles Whitt at the University of Montana July 21st, 1984 for the Smokejumper Project.

[INTERRUPTION]

KT Can you give us a brief biographical sketch?

CW Well, I was in the service in World War II... do you want me to start there or...?

KT That's fine.

CW And returned from the service and met a Ranger at Cascade, Idaho who informed me about the smokejumpers. And I talked to him and I decided that would be what I would start out doing the first Summer I was back from the service. In the meantime, I had started to the Boise Junior College and a forestry major, and so this kind of worked in very well with my objectives of education. And I went ahead and completed a degree in forestry at the University at Idaho and obtained my bachelor's in forest management and went back to do graduate work and did a master's in fishery sciences. When I graduated, I was unable to obtain employment by the Forest Service, so I worked seven years as a fisheries scientist for the State of Idaho. And finally obtained a forester's position in 1959 with the Forest Service, worked on the Boise National Forest and the Teton National Forest as an assistant ranger doing timber management activity. In 1965, I was transferred to Missoula as the regional fishery biologist and stayed here until 1970. In '71 I went to Portland and worked on the Mount Hood [National Forest] as a forest fisheries scientist, and finally retired in the Fall of 1980. That's basically the background of how I got into the jumpers and my association with the Forest Service.

KT Were you originally from Idaho?

CW I was raised in Boise through the grade schools and high school and Boise Junior College. I'm a former Oklahoma product, but spent most of my life in Boise, Idaho being raised.

KT Did you get most of your college education in Idaho.

CW All... darn near all of it. I did attend the University of Niagara while I was in the service for a quarter, and other than that it was Boise Junior College and the University of Idaho.

KT How did you go about applying to be a smokejumper after you became interested in it?

CW Well, the details of how you apply are pretty fuzzy at this time, but as best I remember, Ranger Shaw... Howard Shaw from

Cascade asked me to go to McCall [Idaho] and I believe I talked with a gentleman named Thompson, who probably was the forest fire staff at that time, I'm not sure what his first name was, and, of course, they gave me the necessary forms and I applied. Then later I was notified that I had the job for the Summer. That was basically how I got into it.

KT What did your smokejumping training entail?

CW Here... I trained at the Nine Mile Remount Station and I thought the bulk of it was trying to get us into physical shape to do the actually jumping. And after being in the Army for three years, that part was pretty boring. But the technical training in preparing to jump I found pretty interesting and kind of exciting. The oh, learning to hit the ground and roll, and letting yourself down out of trees, rigging yourself with the long rope, so forth. Now that part was really pretty interesting. And the jumping part, we made the seven practice jumps at Nine Mile and they were unlike anything I'd ever done before and I knew I was going to enjoy the Summer. And I remember one thing that kind of interested me, too, was the fact that, if I'm not mistaken, it was some representatives of the French government were at Nine Mile that Summer. They, too, must have been interested in a training program or a program to do smokejumping work in France, because they brought a photography crew and writers. And I remember I was lucky enough to be one of those selected to show the different parts of the jump dress and then how you actually do the getting into those jumpsuits and so forth and so on. But it kind of... it was kind of interesting that other governments were getting concerned... not concerned, but interested in the program at that time and that it kind of impressed on me that this must be something of the future coming that we haven't even heard about before. So that... that was some of the things that I remember about the jump training here at Nine Mile.

KT Had you had any previous fire fighting experience?

CW Just [laugh] a very minimum. I believe in 1941 I worked for the State of Idaho blister rust program and it was the state program, not the Forest Service program, and they stationed us at Priest Lake, Idaho and spent the summer pulling [inaudible]. But they also gave us about three or four days of training in smoke chasing, and how to use the compass to find the fire, and all about the equipment to fight the fire, and so forth and so on. As it turned out, I don't remember ever having to chase the smoke but we did... the group or the crew that I worked with did get on a small forest fire and we got a little practice in how to get a ring around it and so forth. But that was my only previous experience prior to jumping.

KT Did most of the other fellows have any fire fighting experience?

CW You mean the jumper crew in '46?

KT Yeah, the jumpers. Uh-huh.

CW I'm sure that some of them did. I remember fellows like Ralph Wilde, who, I think, grew up in McCall, and I'm not sure whether his family was Forest Service people or not. But I would think that people like Ralph Wilde probably did have some previous experience. But I think most of them were GIs that... a lot of them from Boise and we had a few from back East even, but I think most of them were probably just as unprepared for what they got into as I was. But I don't think there was a lot of training prior to... or experience prior to jumping with that 1946 crew at McCall.

KT So what kind of fire fighting training did they have?

CW When we got to McCall or here?

KT Yeah.

CW You know, I'm not too clear on whether they gave us any real formal, I'm sure they did, but I think it was just the standard procedures on how to use the equipment and how to build line and so forth. I don't remember whether they actually set any kind of a practice fire or anything like that. But they gave us enough training so that when we did start jumping we were certainly well qualified, I think, to start putting out those small fires. I'm sure there were a lot of fellows that weren't really prepared for the big fires, you know, I mean there's a lot more than just putting a line around a fire. And, I suppose, when you get right down to it some of our squad leaders and foremen and so forth had had previous experience and so when we did jump on those big fires, and particularly when we jumped in with some of the ground crews that were coming in from the districts or the forests, there was some coordination in placing the jumpers in reference to the ground crew that came in. And I frankly think that these fellows, the foremen and squad leaders, probably knew a lot more about fire fighting than most of the jumpers in that bunch that year. But I'm sure they gave us quite a bit of good, technical training.

KT Was it more emphasis on the technical part of jumping itself as opposed to fighting fire?

CW I don't think so. I'm sure... you have to be able to do both of them and I would... to the best of my recollection I'd say that we were equally qualified but by the time they got through with us, if I remember right, we received most of the jump training and the actual fire fighting training within about a thirty day period. And whatever you can give a person in thirty days was what we went to work with because shortly after we went back to McCall for jump duty we were on the fires jumping and on our own. So I'd say that they were probably equally balanced between jumping and fire fighting techniques or principles.

KT What was your first training jump like?

CW My first jump was... was a snap because I didn't know what to expect and it wasn't really that difficult to step out. Totally unprepared, really, for that opening shock. But that moment that she's opened and you're floating down, it's unlike anything that I'd ever experienced and it was an exhilarating experience. As you get closer to the ground, you know that it's not going to be one like you see today with the new equipment, you knew you were gonna hit and it was just a matter of how hard. But anyways, I enjoyed that first jump and all I can say is that after that, they got increasingly more difficult for me, although I never had any problems stepping out. I just knew what I was getting into a lot more than I did that first one. So the first one was absolutely great.

KT What kinds of feelings were inside the plane when people were anticipating their jump?

CW Well, during those practice jumps I don't think anybody was too apprehensive. We had a nice open plowed field, and they were jumping us, I think, about 2,000 feet so we had plenty of time to do anything we had to do, and we were most of the time pretty busy trying to execute the instructions that we were receiving from the foreman on the ground with his bullhorn. But I've seen some real apprehension from the fellows on some fire jumps. As the Summer progressed, it didn't take too much experience to look down out of that plane and see that fire and know that you may be getting into some difficulties if there were a lot of talis slopes and rock and a lot of downed logs like an old burn or something. On the other hand, if you could see that you were gonna have a nice meadow or something to jump in, it was just a normal thing. But some of those, I think, including myself, little bit apprehensive as to what it was gonna be when we hit the ground. Not the fire fighting end of it, it's just that contact with the ground that made us a little bit apprehensive I'd say.

KT Where there ever any injuries from jumping in 1946?

CW Yes there were. We had... the way it worked that year, some of us that were in college came to Missoula... er, Nine Mile as a second group. We were all hired to jump out of McCall, fifty of us, roughly, and the first group came about thirty days before we came. And they completed their training and went back to McCall, and as they got back, we were then brought to Nine Mile to receive our training. And, if my memory doesn't fail me, shortly before we returned one of our first group jumpers was killed at... in a night fire when a snag fell on him. And that wasn't really too well received, you might say. It worried us and made us more aware of some of the dangers that were coming up. During the Summer, there were always a few ankle sprains and maybe a binged up arm or something like that. There was one fella, I remember, I think his name was Leo Compton that lit in a large... er, tall yellow pine, the chute didn't hold on it, and he come

off of it and he lit on all fours. And, I think, as best I remember, he broke one or both wrists and boogered up his ankles to boot. And, I think, that was the worst accident until I bought the farm. [laugh] And, I guess, I did get the worst injury of the year and that was Labor Day, September 2nd. I jumped with a... I believe it was Curley Ray, if I remember right, who was an ex-paratrooper. And we jumped on a... the main ridge separating the Salmon and the Snake Rivers. And I was the first one out of the Ford and Curley followed me out, but some way, some how he ended up below me, and I landed on top of his chute. And I had to go off of it pretty fast and we had been jumped at a minimum... er, yeah, minimum altitude because of the location of the fire. And it forced me to go across the main ridge opposite of the side I wanted to land on where the fire was. And I don't know what really happened, I've had some of the fellows tell me that my chute looked kind of like a wet dishrag [laugh] flopping up there, but I was pretty busy trying to pick my spot, and I really wasn't aware that I was coming in as fast as I apparently did. And I must have had my left leg a little straighter than the right leg and whatever happened, the left foot and ankle, several bones were broken and crushed. It knocked me out and fortunately, we had some more people in the Ford, they weren't sure whether it was going to be a two man fire, or four, or what. And it ended up they dropped a couple of more fellows and those poor devils packed me out several miles on a make shift stretcher. And they ended up taking me out to the hospital in Council, Idaho. Unfortunately the doctor in the hospital... the hospital was real small and the equipment was kind of obsolete, he took an x-ray and he said it was a bad sprain and he put a cast on it for thirty days. The time he took the cast off, all those bones had set. I ended up going through some surgery in Boise and I ended up in crutches for a year and drew disability for five years. And so I think I was probably, other than the gentleman that was actually killed outright probably received the lousiest injury that Summer. And if you stop and think that we all averaged at least seventeen jumps that year... fifty jumpers, I'd say the safety record was fantastic, really. It's gonna happen, and I just happened to be one of the unlucky ones. But... and I've watched over the years, and it's unbelievable that more people aren't injured or hurt seriously, because there's plenty of opportunity for it. If it weren't for the training, and the equipment, and the procedures that they put you through, I'm sure that it would be a lot worse than it has been. So I feel like they've done a hell of a nice job in keeping us from really getting hurt. So anyways, that's the story of my buying the farm.

KT Was there any ideas as to why you were coming down so fast?

CW Well, yes. They say that at the time of day that we jumped, there was an up draft on both sides from the major river drainages and they were meeting at the top of this ridge and boiling. And apparently I caught the down draft side of the boil and it apparently just took a lot of air out and... you know, it wasn't like a complete free-fall or anything like that, otherwise

I'd probably really bought the farm, but that was their best explanation is this boiling phenomena occurs at the top of the ridge and I just got on the... one of those down side areas of the boil and it just sucked the air out, and went in fast.

KT In your training, did they go... did they review over up drafts and down drafts and that kind of thing?

CW Yeah, I remember out here at Nine Mile they taught us the slipping maneuver, so that if we caught a thermal and if we were going to be taken up and we were gonna miss our jump spots by a great distance, we would go into this slip procedure in which we'd spill the air from the back of the chute and we would accelerate our descent and that way we could get over this up draft thermal effect. So... but there's nothing they can teach you to reverse that process. [laugh] If you're coming down fast, there's not much you can do about it, I guess.

KT How do you dump the air out of your chute?

CW Well, it was a process of grasping certain shroud lines and it's... basically you just climb up those shroud lines and it pulls, say, the front part of the canopy downward, and it leaves the back part of the canopy up, and it... the air just slips out. It's an over-exaggerated planing maneuver, in which they taught us to go forward by... basically the same principle, you pull down the front of the canopy and it accelerates you forward. And the slip is an over-exaggerated planing maneuver. And the turning part was involved with the slots and the chutes and the shroud lines to those were color coded that that we could grab one and either open the slot or close it and it would turn us in the air. So those were the three basic maneuvers that I remember: the slip, the plane, and the turn.

KT [pause] Did you ever have any problems in your let downs?

CW No. Out of seventeen jumps that I made that Summer, I treed once and fortunately when I treed it was in some young reproduction that probably wasn't over thirty some feet high. And actually, when I came to a stop, I don't think my feet were more than three feet off the ground [laugh] so I didn't have to go through any kind of a let down procedure to get out of that one. I guess I tried very hard not to tree when I was jumping. Sometimes you have no alternatives, but I either was lucky or I just managed to miss the trees. But I've seen plenty of my companions have to let down, and it's no big deal particularly in the country that we were jumping because the trees weren't all that tall and I think, if I remember right, that rope that we carried was ninety feet, so that normally was going to be enough to get you to the ground. It might not be in the Cascades if you were to tree up in some of those big doug[las] firs, which can go up there well over 200 feet, then you might have some problems. But I'm not sure that the jumpers in Region-6 that would be jumping in that type of forest probably didn't carry longer ropes. I would guess they did, but I never had to worry about

it.

KT Do you remember your first fire jump?

CW Yeah. It's very vivid yet. Without my log I can't remember exactly, but I think it was on the Nez Perce National Forest. Turned out to be a two man jump. Jumped out of the old Travelaire. Unfortunately I can't remember my jump partner that... without my log. But we had a small fire in some dog hair fir that had some big old monarch snags sticking up out of it. It had been burned over, probably, fifteen... twenty years before and one of these old tall snags sticking up out of that dog hair had been hit by lightning. And they jumped us on... across the... kind of across the canyon in a small meadow. And, I would guess that we were almost a half a mile from the fire. And so we made out jump and we got what equipment we thought we were gonna need and left the rest of it there in the meadow. And we spent the day trying to find that fire because you could smell it all day long, but it was so thick that... the dog hair fir that you couldn't see anywhere, and there was nothing to climb up so that you could get above it to see. All the snags were too big to climb. And I definitely remember that it took us hours to find that little stinking fire, and it was really by nose that we found that thing. [laugh] And when we got there, one of things that we hadn't really realized is that we would need a cross cut to get that snag down. And so the alternative was to chop it down with pulaskis. And we spent two days getting that snag down. And we were running out of food, and running out of water, and we didn't take our sleeping bags with us, we were sleeping with just jackets at night. And it was kind of a miserable [laugh] fire to start out on. But eventually we got it, and then we had trouble with the packer, he found our equipment, but he couldn't find us. And we ended up walking out to one of the Forest Service roads to a lookout, and finally made contact with the packer and the district people, and we got out of there. But it was quite an experience for the first jump.

KT Did you ever have any project work detail?

CW Our... in trying to answer your questionnaire, if we did, it's nothing like they have now. It might have been right around the camp policing or maybe keeping the warehouse in order or clean and restocking shelves for the food cache and maybe helping the rigger do some of the repair work on the chutes and harnesses and equipment bags and so forth. But like being shipped out to a district to do fence projects or something like that, I... we didn't do it. We stayed pretty close to the jump barracks in McCall. And fortunately, by the time I got back the fire season had begun, so there really wasn't that much opportunity for us to do any kind of project work. The first group may have been required to some of that, but the group I came in with, I don't think we really had project work as most people are experiencing today.

KT Were there a lot of World War II veterans that were working

as smokejumpers?

CW I'm not positive, but I don't think there was over one or two that weren't vets. And we had a sprinkling of everything. We had a couple of Navy pilots, [Mark ?] Nelson and [Robert] Gossett, and we had Marines, and we had Army and Navy fellas. There were about a dozen of them that were ex-paratroopers. And, of course, we kind of looked to them at first because they were the old heads at it, but they said it was a different world jumping in the service than jumping in the Forest Service. I believe there may have been one or two that were not veterans, so we were kind of an unruly bunch. The questionnaire in terms of how we felt about authoritative figures, the foremen, the squad leaders and so forth, in retrospect, none of us were too anxious to serve like we had in the Army where when they told you to jump, you asked how high and in which direction, and all that. I... I really truly think that we were a little bit rebellious against any real military authoritative line or direction and instructions. But at the same time, I think there was a little bit of an esprit de corps built up and as we proceeded, and I think we followed the Forest Service instructions pretty well. But sometimes there was a lot of grumbling and there was a little bit of rebellion now and then, but it wasn't anything that probably hurt any of the actual project. I'm sure that the modern day smokejumper is subjected and submits to this authority... authoritative direction a lot more than we did. We were kind of a rebellious group, being all veterans.

KT Was there any rivalry within the group?

CW No, I don't think so. It depended... I don't want to say comrade... certain fellows formed a group because maybe they jumped on the same fires a couple of times, got to know each other a lot better. And with fifty men at the base, I didn't really get to know them all as well as ones that I jumped with or spent more time with. So there were kind of groups... buddies and, say, in the evenings when we were off duty, it was pretty obvious which ones were the good guys. But there was never any separation, you know, a distinct separation of groups or anything because eventually we would all stand up for one and other [laugh] in various types of incidents. But I don't remember any rivalry per se. It was a good group.

KT These incidents that you just mentioned, can you be more specific?

CW [laugh] Well, I suppose when you get right down to it, this gung ho feeling we had being the smokejumpers and especially in a resort town near Boise, on Saturday nights when we'd go out, it was pretty obvious that we were the... we considered ourselves the rulers of the roost. And once and a while, but rarely, there might be a little bit of fisticuffs involved with some of the people coming in, say, from Boise or somewhere. And it developed into a little brawl once and a while, but nothing too serious. And, boy, if you were a jumper and you got into trouble, it

didn't take long before there were a bunch of other jumpers around to get you out of it. [laugh] So there was a great feeling being one of those people that were kind of the class of McCall, you might call it. [laugh] And, of course, everybody would talk to us and ask us about this and that, and it made us feel pretty good to know that we were kind of an elite group and I really enjoyed it.

KT What did the women think about the guys in this elite group?

CW Well, I think most of us probably had girlfriends after we got out of the service. I know I did and mine would come up on weekends and some of the other fellows and we'd go out dancing and so forth and so on. But the fellows that didn't have the so-called steady girlfriend, they had no trouble. The young ladies from Boise or local, they were more than ready to jump with a smokejumper. [laugh]

KT Is there... are there any specific individuals that come to mind that you worked with?

CW I guess probably my best friend was a fellow named of Bruce Egger because we went to school together and we graduated together and, of course, we jumped together that summer. Some way, some how it seemed like Bruce and I made several jumps together. And he was local boy, I think he was from McCall. And over the years we've really become very close friends. He later was Ranger in Region-6 over at Pomeroy [Washington] and I kept in contact with him, at Christmas and so forth. I've lost contact with him recently, and I think, probably, he, too, is retired because we were pretty much the same age and I'm sure he got his thirty years in, too. But there were a lot of fellows that I'll remember for one reason or another. I've had some real experiences with some of them. One I was talking about yesterday, was fellow from New York named Rodgers. And I weighed about 130 pounds when I was jumping, and another young fellow named Jones, "Slip" Jones, we called him, he and I always caught thermals and we were going up when everybody else was going down because these fellows were bigger. And this Rodgers was a tremendous hulk of a man and we made a jump up in the top of the Sawtooth, probably around 10,000 foot elevation. And I was in the first stick that went out, so I was on the ground when Rodgers jumped. And they were jumping us in a small meadow right up to the edge of a lake. And the air being as thin as is was and as late as it was in the day, these bigger fellows were really burning in bad. And I'm standing there and I see Rodgers coming in and when he hit the ground he was going... he was planing forward to hit that meadow... that grassy area. And I could hear the air go out of him. He just hit like a ton of bricks and he bounced about thirty feet, and then bounced a couple more before he stopped. And he had on what they call the single point release, as opposed to the old fashioned harness, and he's laying there... lying there completely out of wind, can't even move. And so I run over and I'm going to help him out of that harness so he could start breathing. And I forget...

forgot to give that round buckle a quarter turn before you pop it and releases all the points at the same time. So every time he'd get a little wind, I'd keep popping that buckle and I was trying to get it to come open, and I'd just drive whatever air he'd gotten out. [laugh] And he's trying to cuss me and he hasn't enough wind. It was just one of those things that you'll remember all your life and eventually, of course, we got him fixed up, but it made me feel real good that I wasn't gonna burn in like that, being the light weight of the group. As you can see now, I'm not quite the light weight I use to be. [laugh]

KT Was there a crew clown?

CW Oh, I think all of them were clowns. At least half of them were, some of them very serious, really. Very formal, you might say, when it comes to working and even in the evenings when we were on our own, there was always a... just really behaved and then the other half were all clowns. If we had a group clown, I couldn't pick one out because there were a bunch of them. In my estimation they were clowns. [laugh]

KT What were the crew leaders like?

CW They were great. They were absolutely great. I can't think of anyone of them that ever really bothered me like, say, some of the people I ran up against in the Army. Boy, there you get some real knot-heads. But the squad leaders and foremen at McCall were just really great fellas and since most of them had been in the service, too, they weren't about to try and dish out that same type of military command to you. They were tremendously concerned in the jumping procedures and making sure that when we were down, we were well taken care of. Some of the fellas, like Wayne Webb and Dale Picol (?), "Smokey" Stover, those three I remember quite clear were just outstanding people. And, I guess, most of those stayed with the smokejumpers for their careers. But we had some other squad leaders that were just real fine fellas. We were all about the same age, so it kind of helped things, but some of them had that ability to command and they were pretty imposing people. We really enjoyed them. I don't think we really had any problem that way at all.

KT What were some of the off duty activities?

CW Well, there really wasn't terrible lot to do in McCall. When we did get a chance, we might go swimming in the lake or if we knew somebody that had a speedboat or something, why we might be lucky enough to get a bunch and go out on the lake with the speedboat. I don't think that any of us were doing any water skiing in those years.

[END OF SIDE A]

[BEGIN SIDE B]

CW There really wasn't an awful lot to do. Oh, and once and a

while we'd grab our fishing poles in the evening and run down to the river or lake somewhere in the nearby vicinity and do a lot of fishing. But most of the off duty activities, I think, centered more or less around the local pubs. [laugh]

KT What were some of your favorite pubs in town?

CW That's too long ago. [laugh] McCall was nothing but a series of bars and pubs, being a recreation town. So, we had a couple that were our favorites, but I think we frequented most of them one time or another during the nights. We'd go out carousing around. Just can't remember any names.

KT Were most of the other guys you worked with, were they students, too?

CW I think a fair number of them had plans to go ahead and go back to school, but I don't think that there were more than three or four of us that went into forestry. If they did, they went to other schools, but most of them had an idea that they wanted to get into other endeavors than forestry. It was just a Summer job to them. And I really don't know what they finished up as. Can't tell you much about it.

KT What kind of reactions did you get from friends and family when you became a smokejumper.

CW Oh, not a terrible lot. I think my step-father and mother were kind of pleased because they were very close to this Ranger that I've referred to at Cascade, Howard Shaw. And they thought that that might be a little too dangerous, but I think they were kind of proud. My twin brother was in the service, he was a pilot in the Air Force and so he wasn't really around to know what I was getting into. We've since talked about it and he's said that, for example, that jumping wouldn't be for him. He may have worn a chute every time he went up, but that would be his last resort because he really had a fear of having to go out and pull that thing. He said he'd thinks he'd rode the plane to the ground. So we [inaudible] a little bull about it and I think he was pretty interested in what I was doing. The people at Boise Junior College were the ones that were pretty impressed. And I was, of course, one of those that were walking around on a crutch and I had the smokejumper patch on my leather jacket and so a lot of them... a lot of the students knew what we were and what we did and it kind of seemed to set us out in a way. Not above or anything, but they were pretty interested in what we did. I felt like I was a little [laugh] on the elite side when I was going to school.

KT What was the typical smokejumper attitude about his job?

CW Typical attitude? I don't know. I think most of us were there to make a little money and maybe enjoy the work that we were doing. We knew it was going to be pretty exciting. And that \$1.27 an hour was big money that they were paying us. And

we had heard that we were gonna get a lot of overtime in. I think most of them were gonna try to save some money so they could either go to school or maybe get married, I don't know. And they were pretty business-like about it. But it was kind of like being in the military. That esprit de corps built up and it... their attitude, to me, was, "This is great, we really like it."

KT What were some of the planes that you used at that time?

CW We only used two. We had one of the old Trimotors, and the other one was called a Travelaire, it's an old plane, and a small one in comparison to the Ford, and it was for the two man jumps. They could, I think, carry something like four jumpers and their equipment under certain conditions. But basically it was a little faster, I think, than the Ford. It was just to take out two man jump fires. And, I think, that, probably, about half my jumps were out of the Trimotor... the jumps... the fire jumps, anyway, and about half of them out of the Travelaire. And, of course, in the training sessions it was all... we were all jumping out of the old Trimotor here at Nine Mile.

KT What were some of the pilots like?

CW I had complete confidence in the two pilots we had. One gentleman was Bob Fogg and he was considered a bush pilot. He'd been flying in the mountains most of his career. And the other gentleman's name was Allison, and had had less experience. And, I think, if we had our choice, we'd of rather flown with Bob... Bob Fogg instead to Allison. But it really wasn't any great difference and they did a real good job. I think Allison scared me one day. We had jumped in on a fire on the Snake and he flew in and he wanted to take two of us back to McCall. And it was in the late afternoon, bad air, bad winds and the little airstrip that he landed on right next to the river there really wasn't much of an airstrip, it was kind of the up and down the hill type. And the only way he could get off was to go to the top of the airstrip and they actually tied the tail wheel to a fence post. [laugh] And he revved it up and we had somebody on the ground crews there that cut the rope or did something to release that plane after he revved it up. That was the instructions, he said, "I'm gonna put the power to her, and when you think I'm pulling the post out, you cut me loose." And there were two of us and some gear going out of there and we went down the hill and, boy, we used every inch of that thing before we got up. And it was probably the only time I really had any idea that we were in danger of maybe not making it. Most of the time, those old plane would just float in there and let us out easy. And I only flew back maybe couple of times from a plane... er, in a plane, or where they picked us up. And out of the... during the Summer when we were on fires, only one time did I ever fly back to McCall, they didn't jump us. I guess I made eleven trips out and ten of them, and the one fire they decided they weren't going to jump all eight of us, and they jumped, I think, four, and I happened to be on the tail end of the jump list. That's the only

time I flew back to McCall. [laugh] The pilots were great.

KT What was you're most memorable jump?

CW Well, of course, it would have to be the one where I got boogered up, but then I really don't remember too much about it except what I learned later. But I... each one of them is quite an experience, and I think I enjoyed the small fire jumps a lot more than the big project fires where they'd jumped eight or sixteen of us, or something like that. One fire, in particular, that I remember that I truly enjoyed, up to a point, anyway, was a jumped another fellow, again, without my jump log I can't tell you who it was. We made on the South Fork of the Salmon on the Prassel (?) Ranger District there, the Payette. And we had to jump across the canyon opposite of the road, and it was real steep country. And about the time we hit the ground, we had a thunder storm going through and it wetted our chutes down and all our gear and... including the sleeping bags. And we sat up there on top of the mountain, and for some reason or other, I had filled my supply bag full of canned oysters. And, of course, at the last minute we grabbed loaves of fresh bread and pounds of butter and sat up there on the top of that mountain and we fried those canned oysters in butter. And I thought: "My goodness, where else can you live like this? In the mountains, sitting up here on the top eating fried oysters," which were one of my favorites. And that was about as far as the pleasure went, because we... when we got the fire out, the district... I guess he was the F.C.O. [Fire Control Officer], or he may have been a guard, came in. He said he couldn't get horses into us, we're gonna have to pack that stuff out on our back, and it's all wet. And we had about a half mile down this steep face to the river, had to ford the river, and then about a half a mile back up to the road. And I guess didn't know if I was gonna make it out of there or not. My 130 pounds of gear which weighed just as much as I did, just a little too much for me. And we finally did get it out, but I don't ever remember ever being so exhausted as I was on that one lousy fire, wet chutes and all that. Fortunately the F.C.O., or the district man that brought us out was an ex-marine and he was built like a moose and the other fellow I that jumped with was pretty good sized and they had real heavy packs. I think that marine must have had close to 200 pounds. He was huge and he could handle it a lot better than I could hold my 130 pounds. But that was one of the most memorable ones that I can remember.

KT What was the biggest fire like?

CW Well I... it had to be the one there on the Salmon near Riggins, Idaho. I think they jumped... I know they jumped sixteen of us, and, I think, maybe they jumped some more, but not with us. The fire... it was primarily grass and ponderosa pine here and there, it must have spread out over, you know, like, several hundreds of acres, maybe 1,000 or so. And there were a lot of ground crew people coming in and they jumped eight of us together and we were kind of in a... on a cheap grass ridge and

we had to bury our... all our gear because we weren't sure whether the fire was gonna come down and get around our gear or not. And then we proceeded to go ahead and fight the fire, but that evening when we come back down, some... we were burying our gear in two man groups, [laugh] one of the two fellows... er, two of the fellows hadn't got theirs buried well enough. And sure enough, the fire had come back through where we jumped and around our gear and it burned up all their equipment. And the one fellow, I remember, had a brand new leather jacket that he was real proud of, and it just melted that into great big old gob of brown goo. And we stayed on that one a couple of days, and I was just tickled to death when the ground crews decided they gonna take over that thing, because it was pretty steep country, too, and it was awful hot, we were short of water, plenty of food, but kind of short on water. They're a little more exciting than a two man fire, where you really don't have that much fire to contend with. But I... that's, I think, the biggest project fire I was on. Pretty exciting. And since then, with the career... having made the career in the Forest Service, I've been on a great number of large project fires, several of them thousands of acres. Of course, my responsibilities increased, too. I've been fire boss on small ones, and division boss on medium size, sector boss on some of the big projects. Then in the last few years I started doing specialty, fire behavior work and really the last very few years I kind of promoted myself to a camp boss so I didn't have to climb the hill. [laugh] And you might work a lot more hours running a camp than you do out on the line, but I could handle that a lot as I got older. And by the time I turned fifty, I was ready for that type of duty. But the first jump... project jump fire was pretty exciting.

KT What was your last fire like as a smokejumper?

CW Well, there again, that was the one I got busted up on and I never fought that one at all. I was incapacitated. [laugh] And it wouldn't have been much of a fire, it wasn't all that big. And, as I remember, the three that jumped... the other three fellows that jumped with me and packed me out, they apparently brought in other jumpers and jumped that same fires, so that they could control it. The other... the four of us, the three of them packing me out forgot about the fire in a hurry.

KT Were you ever involved in a rescue jump?

CW No. No, we... we really didn't have any need for it that Summer. The fellows that jumped and rescued me was about the only time it happened that year. I'm not too familiar with how the young fellow that got killed before we come back from our training here at Nine Mile how they got him out, but there may have been some rescue work involved there trying to get him out. But that was the only one that I could think of, is when I got hurt.

KT After you got hurt, did you yearn to be a smokejumper again?

CW Oh, I'm positive that had I not end up with a disabling

injury I'm sure I would have continued to jump each summer to... as my summer employment. It was good training, good money, and a lot better money than I made in the years... summers that followed working on survey crews, I mean highway survey crews, or something like that. It took about five years before I could really fully use the left foot again, so I had to take some kind of employment that didn't really require a lot of hard walking and so forth. And normally that didn't pay well, so I'm positive that if I could have... was physically able to jump, I would have continued until I got out of school. It would have been a good... good job.

KT Having been a smokejumper, do you think that effected your attitude in what you were doing later?

CW No, I don't think so. The number of professional people in the Forest Service that were smokejumpers were a damned few, when you get right down to it. And it was... again, it was a little bit... well, I should have put it, I was a little bit proud that I began a career by being a smokejumper when so many of my counterparts in the Forest Service had never done it. Sometimes it irritated me with our fire control people and their attitude towards jumpers. It wasn't... in some cases our fire control staffs weren't really all that impressed by the fellows that were previous smokejumpers or had smokejumper experience. Many of them were, but I've run into fire staff that they'd be more than willing to stick it out as a crew man... rather than the crew boss even though they knew that you'd had this experience. And I... in general I don't think it affected my attitude towards my work other than the fact that I'd received some good training and I was proud of having been a smokejumper. So once you get into the professional end of it, you're on your own and your future is dependent more or less on your ability to do a job. I don't think having been a smokejumper ever bought me much in developing or furthering my career.

KT What do you think of the idea of the professional jumpers that they have today?

CW I think it's probably a very efficient way to run things. The one thing that bothers me, as it gets more professionalized, is the fact that we still have a lot of young people that are headed for college and universities with, say, the hopes of being in a related field and it certainly is a good source of income for them to supplement their needs when they are going to school. And if we take that away, I'd regret that a little bit. But really when you get down to bucks and cents, if we go to a full, professional jump status, that'd probably be the most efficient way to really run it. I'd certainly feel bad about eliminating that source of revenue for young students and so forth. But we're... we got so many other types of projects that they can do, the other fire crews... I'm trying to think of the terms we call our teams now are either chopper men or the run them in... hot-shot teams. Lord knows that's providing a lot of good income for students. And it doesn't require the same amount of skill

and training that it does, say, to do the professional smokejumping end of it. And so I suppose that we can really overcome the lack of having that job open to young students by other projects. And I guess when you get right down to it, our total summer crew needs... the number of smokejumpers that we're presently using is a small fraction of the total summer force that we usually put on. So it wouldn't be a big thing. But certainly it would be the wise thing to do, as far as the Forest Service is concerned. In my opinion.

KT What do you think of the uproar over decentralization?

CW I'm not sure I follow you there.

KT That's where they... in the late '50s they had the consolidation where they took the smokejumper bases and they kind of tried to bring them together a little bit more, and now there's a reversal to that. There's a trend to take the... have smaller bases scattered around again.

CW Well, when you get down to the dollars and cents of it, I suspect that by decentralizing it's gonna cost more to run several bases... small bases than it would a few large bases. And with the aircraft that we got and their speed and so forth and the areas that really are in need of jumper assistance, I would guess, this is just my personal feeling after many years in the Forest Service, that it wouldn't be to the Service's advantage to decentralize and set up the small jump units again. I've lived through both the centralized and decentralized and it was real nice for some of those districts that had a... was adjacent to the small jump units because they had access to some manpower there and so forth. But I'm almost sure... well, all through the last few years of the Forest Service, we've gotten away from decentralization with our Summer crews and so forth and I'm... I would guess that it's just not economically sound to set up all these minor bases again. My guess.

KT Did any of the guys ever play practical jokes on each other... on the crew?

CW Oh, sure. The old snake in the bed, or... somebody brought in a dead porcupine layed in on the foot of a guy's bed while he was asleep, and that sort of thing. I'm sure that there were probably a lot of them that I can't even remember now, but you can't get that many ex-GIs together without getting, as we said before earlier, half of them were clowns, you're gonna have those. And I just can't remember any except those, like the snake in the bed and the dead porcupine on the foot of the bed. They were pretty good bunch of guys, they wouldn't purposely do anything, I think, to hurt anyone or... just practical jokers.

KT While you were working, were there ever any problems with wild animals or snakes?

CW No. I think most people over react to the so-called

wildlife aspect of working in the mountains. It's pretty rear that anything's gonna happen. I've been on a few fires on the Boise where we have a fire going through cheat grass, talis slopes and ponderosa pine it would blind rattlesnakes, and it made it a little bit dangerous unless you kind of watched your step. And we had a few near misses or something like that, but that's about the only thing I can think of. That and yellowjackets. [laugh] My goodness I don't think anybody escapes a summer working in the woods that they don't get stabbed by a couple of yellowjackets. I don't remember any problems with bears or any of the large animals. I've had more experience, after I've gone to work on some forest like the Teton. I've had bull moose block my trail and me on horse back, they just won't let you through and so you have to go another way. I've been around a lot of bear and they've never given me any problem. Of course, we're always a little bit cautious when we get into old grizzly country for sure. Here in Montana I've run into a few of them, and there's a possibility, but if you follow horse sense to a certain extent, there's no real great danger out there. Not that I know of.

KT Are there any other smokejumper stories that you have to share?

CW No. If I sat down with some of these guys, we could probably rattle off stories for half the night. I think I've probably covered the ones that really stick out in my mind the most. There's... there was so much that went on that year that... one thing that I would maybe remark on is I've kind of repeated myself that there was quite a bit of esprit de corps. And one thing that really comes up about these fellows was that after I was injured and in the hospital there at Council, I think it's probably forty or fifty miles from McCall. The guys would come down to see me and they guys would also bring me a few bottles of beer. And, of course, the nurses and the doctors would really frown on it if they ever caught them bringing beer into the hospital. But I had a bed next to a window and it was an old hospital, the windows were rather tall and they went down quite low, and the hospital beds were high, so the... there was about a foot or so that was hidden behind my bed and one night the guys come down and brought me several bottles of beer and this was probably the latter part of September and the nights were getting cool and so I'd stick this beer down in this window sill and keep it there, sort of hidden, and keep my beer cold. And I really enjoyed that because hospital fare isn't all that great anyway. And the doctor came in one morning and for one reason or another he leaned over the bed and he saw the beer down in the window. And I thought he was gonna take my head off, and he yelled for a nurse and, boy, they took my beer away. But those guys were looking after me and I really appreciated them stealing... er, smuggling in the beer, and I didn't appreciate the doctor taking it away from me, but that was part of the ball game, I guess. And by the end of September most of them had gone back to school or home or where ever, but there was that cadre of fellows that stayed on for another month or two and those guys

were great. They'd come up to see because I laid in that crazy hospital all through Christmas and it made it a lot more tolerable to know that those guys really cared. That's one thing I can remember pretty distinctly, a great bunch of guys. And last night when I started shaking hands with some of these fellows you hadn't seen for thirty-eight years, I darn near got a tear in my eye. It just kind of chokes you up. You start thinking back, remembering what they did for you, or what we did together, and it's one of those more pleasant eras of your life that you can really think very favorably upon. It's a shame that you become so close in a short time and then you don't see these guys for years and years and years. And I... it's the same way in the military service. I met some very fine people that I would have loved to have stayed in touch with. But, boy, last night meeting these guys was a real experience, and I'm just dumbfounded at the number of people that have turned up for this reunion. Just dumbfounds me that they would. I just didn't think that it would turn out this way. And already I've met and talked to at least eight or nine of a fifty man crew. It's a great way to do business. A reunion of old friends, and I'm gonna enjoy it.

KT Are there any other comments that you'd like to make on the smokejumper organization today, or as it was?

CW Well, no, not really because I kind of lost track of the jumper organization when I got away from the Boise and from the districts. You don't really have that much contact with the jumpers unless your in a... on a district where they use them from time to time. When you work at the forest supervisor's level at the regional office, you really lose track of them. But it just seems to me that in Region-6, the last ten years that I was on the Mount Hood, we don't use them as often as I thought we would. And I'm wasn't too sure, but we might be phasing out the program. I just didn't keep track of it that closely. But it just... I didn't hear that much about the jumpers and their organization, and I just kind of got the feeling that maybe it was gonna be a thing of the past and we were gonna go to, say, chopper... helitac crews and things like that and just get away from it. But it seems like it's still alive and kicking and that there's still a need for it in some areas. It must be more needed over here in the Rockies in Regions-1 and 4 because we really don't have the access, I guess, to a lot of back country that you do on the coast. And that may be why we never used the jumpers as much as, say, the Mount Hood, as they do over here in the forests of the Rockies. So I'm still hopeful that the organization maintains itself. It's a very fascinating part of the Forest Service. I've certainly enjoyed my association with them.

KT Are there any other comments you would like to make?

CW I don't think so, Kim, that pretty well covers... you hear an old guy just reiterating a bunch of old war stories. Like I say, we can probably go to now 'til midnight telling them. But I

think I've, during one point or another, I've covered the points that I would like to make and I think that about finishes what I could contribute to this.

KT Well, I'd really like to thank you for you coming in here.

CW Well, you're welcome Kim.

[END OF INTERVIEW]