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Oral History Number: 133-006

Interviewee: Frank Borgeson

Interviewer: Kathy Root

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Project: Smokejumper 1984 Reunion Oral History Project

Kathy Root: Interview with Frank Borgeson on July 21, 1984, Smokejumper Oral History Project.

Okay Frank, if you could just tell me a little bit about your history, your personal history with the smokejumpers. Just a short overview.

Frank Borgeson: Well, Kathy, when my original experience with the smokejumpers was actually when I started flying with them out of McCall in 1958. I worked as a pilot for Johnson Flying Service there during 1958, 1959 and 1960, at which time I flew the Travel Air 6000 aircraft, The Ford Trimotor, The Beechcraft 1811s that they had down there for the smokejumpers at that time. And we flew into all of the back country hauling air freight, retrieving smokejumpers from McCall. And we covered all of the Salmon National Forest down in Salmon, Idaho at that time. We called on the smokejumpers in their area a great deal. And we would send numbers of, quite a large numbers of smokejumpers over and base them out of Salmon to work out of there. And then I would stay over there with them and jump. All the jumpers, [we would] retrieve them at Salmon or wherever on some of the strips like Flying B or Chamberlain Basin, the Root Ranch, the strips, Big Creek, Thomas Meadow. There is a lot of strips, all through out that whole area. And I would fly the jumpers from the time they started their training program in the spring down there until they finished flying the jumpers in the fall, which was usually, we always had a bet on it, down at that time. It was kind of unique in one respect. On a normal year we always felt the first rains in August, which is somewhere around the 20 of August. It would start slowing jumper need down and they would start terminating. Which at that time I would stay on with Johnson Flying Service at McCall until the hunting season and so on. And then after that slowed down, I would return to my home in Lewiston where I lived. But this was for Johnson Flying Service.

And then in 1960, I believe it was the year, the Forest Service had a terrible accident. Or well, well it was with the Johnson aircraft—a Ford Trimotor. It crashed at Moose Creek in the Nez Perce National Forest, and this accident, it was a couple of smokejumpers who were killed and the forest supervisor on the Nez Perce at that time—a fellow by the name of Blackerby. That time the Forest Service was thinking about doing away with the Ford Trimotors for smokejumping because of the situation that occurred and some of the people in Missoula—"Locke" Stewart and Bob Johnson [Robert A.], who is...owned Johnson Flying Service—felt that the Ford Trimotor was the probably one of their leading jumper planes of the time along with the DC-2, which was used a lot. That aircraft was flown by a fellow by the name of Milton Callaway [Mel] and he—I'll get into that a little later but—then they were coming along with the DC-3s. To get back to the Ford and the need for a larger aircraft to fill the need for the aircraft—that craft crashed. There was, at that time flying out of Grangeville, Idaho, they felt

they wanted another Ford over there. So the Forest Service agreed to put one under contract at Grangeville, and Johnson Flying Service said they would bring the Ford out of McCall with me flying it and I would fly out of Grangeville if that was satisfactory with me, which it was.

During that time, I started flying with the smokejumpers in McCall and we lived with them at the barracks out at the airport which at that time were some old buildings that they had put together and used for years over there. They were more like military type barracks. And one of them was used for our jump loft where they'd pack their parachutes and the other was...Part of one of them was an office building and it had a washing machine in it and restrooms and sleeping quarters. One room off to the side, next to the office, was available for me to stay there and because of that, we usually would do all of the smokejumper training in Missoula in the spring of the year when they came on around, oh, May—middle of May through June. And then right after the 4th of July, there was one year that I can remember I believe that we went over to Grangeville, and all the jumpers moved on over to Grangeville for the fire season at that time.

One year, I think it was right on the 5th of July when we arrived as all of us got over there, but I would always take over a load of parachutes and spotters and jumpers and so on like this. During this time, they would bring a Travel Air 6000 for a backup airplane when the fire situation got up to such that we needed two airplanes to go different directions at one time.

The thing that I found working with the smokejumpers over there, they were serious about their jobs—very serious. The outlying bases such as Grangeville, you might say, and McCall and where else they used them were always competing on who had the best getaway times—that is from the time the fire call came in until they go going on the fire. They try to tell us, even to this day that Missoula always had the best get away time but as near as I can figure out, one year when Doug Getz [C. Doug] was—he was the foreman over there—we got a fire call and we had a radio out there and we heard the dispatcher calling the fire orders in. And when that call would come into the supervisor's office for the forest supervisor or forest dispatch, I should say, to write it all down, we'd already written it down—had all the data. And I'd go out and get the Ford Trimotor fired up and the smokejumpers had their gear all ready to go and they'd be ready to go and by the time the—fire call was all written down by Doug. He'd come a running out and jump in the...in the airplane. I'd start taxiing immediately, and I'd already had my pre-takeoff check all made, gas, oil and all these good things, you know, and lights checked and such. Our getaway time, I think was the fastest ever done, was about a minute.

KR: And that's fast!

FB: That's from the time that Doug got in the airplane. It was just a short ways to taxi. The wind conditions were such we just took right down the runway and it was all cleared and we were gone. The group as a whole prided themselves in this type of thing.

And, in a way, they become “clanies,” you might say. “Grangeville jumpers are better than the

others," which isn't really true, but because they—any smokejumper from any part of country could come in and fit in from Missoula...from down at McCall. They could come to Grangeville; they all fit into the organization. They had the same training—the same safety standards, the same work requirements—and it was just a group of people that really wanted to do a good job and they did. I've always said, "Give me 25 smokejumpers, and I would tackle or compete with fire crew that they could put in the woods on any fire in the whole country." Because they were expertise...They were workers; they were physically fit and well put together. The organization was such, that they—when they got on a fire and they all lined out and knew what they were going to do. They didn't fool around about it. One of the things that made this very...I noticed was the fact—the jumpers have one thing in mind. They liked to fight fire. They made a little overtime when they were on fires and they also liked to make a large number of jumps out of each base each year.

If they could get on a fire, get it out, get back to the base again, which we would pick them up at Moose Creek or wherever—Shear, oh, down on Mackay bar on the Salmon River. And we'd pick them up...pick some up...Pittsburg landing. We picked up jumpers at Lattice Lake [unintelligible] Salmon River, before the old bridge washed out at—down out of Riggins. We used to use the Riggins fields. When we'd do this, they'd get back in and a lot of times they could maybe get out and jump again that same day.

Now in one year, I believe it was in 1961, Hal Nelson [Howard], one of the jumpers that was at Grangeville was called on a fire. They went in rotation and it was his turn to go. We dropped him on a fire on Corral Hill, just off of Corral Hill, not too far from the road. By the time that he got on the fire, they almost had it out. The district fire crew had come up and taken over the fire from them so that they could be released and go back and be picked to the closest road. Go back to Grangeville and be available for other jumps, because it was the quickest way in the world to get fire crews to any given spot in the whole area. And Hal hadn't been back very long that morning and we got another fire call and while he was gone, we had put out some more jumpers and it was his turn again. So, consequently, here he was up again, and when we took off, we dropped him that time on the—it was not too far from Silver Creek, on the upper Snake. The forest was on the Clearwater District there. By late that afternoon, he was back again. It was in the middle of the afternoon but he came in and took a shower and he was all cleaned up and he was shaving. He got about half through shaving, the fire call came, so he puts his—gets his gear on again and away we go. That time dropped him on Bear Butte which was clear back on, ah, the breaks of the Salmon River on the farthest point—almost the farthest point that you can get on the Nez Perce National Forest and on the east side of the...of the...Well, it was actually on the head of...near the head of [pause], near the head of the Selway River area was where he jumped, Bear Butte. That time he didn't get back that night [laughs], but as far as I know, Hal is one of the few guys that had the opportunity to make three jumps in one day on different fires.

When this...Also is a point that the guys done their jobs, they did it well, got back. They didn't dilly dally around about it. They were back and done their job well. Another thing you learned

by living with these fellows, is that you don't have problems. Oh, you have little personal problems a time or another. But, the thing you find out in a group of fellows working together like that, as close as they work, especially where their lives depend on each other, they settle their differences in ways by using just plain common sense. Through this—and as a pilot, living with them and working with them—very seldom would I ever hear any adverse things going on about...to each other or about each other. There was none of this back grabbing stuff like that when you have these [unintelligible] out like that. Ah, sure there's always some complaining about this and that or the weather not being good enough to jump, or there wasn't any fires, no lightning, no clouds in the sky. You heard things like this and they'd put them out on what they call different jobs on the forest where they could be retrieved again in short order in case they started getting fires again. It was real good. There again, on this project work, they called that, they would do other things. They would do their own chores: packing parachutes, cleaning up the area, painting their buildings, and so, all in all, they were always busy. Very, very seldom did you ever see them goofing around. It was really great.

KR: You have a lot of respect for smokejumpers?

FB: Yes, I do.

KR: So how long did you fly?

FB: Okay. Well, Kathy, you know, I flew the smokejumpers in...Let me, ah, let me back up just a little bit. While at Grangeville, in 1963, we had a fire we was going to in the Ford Trimotor and it was on September the 9th. We got almost to Elk City, with eight jumpers aboard, Bill Locklear [William P.] was one of them and Ted Nyquist [Charles T.] was the spotter. He was up in the front seat with me. One blade of the right prop on the right engine—right engine prop—broke off. It went through the cab of the airplane and Bill Locklear just happened to lean back just before that happened or it would have hit him. It took out the bulkhead behind my seat, went out through the left side of the airplane and up through the left wing. Well, at that point in time, right over Elk City, the town of Elk City, the engine came out of the airplane—fell about 50 or 60 feet behind the mill at Elk City, and in fact it tore it all out. But, when this happened, the smokejumpers jumped, all except Ted Nyquist who asked me what he should do. And I said, "Well Ted, you know your own business, but I'll tell you what, it would be a big help to me, after we take a note of what all we have left to work with. And if we do land at Elk City, I need somebody to throw all of the remaining cargo clear to the rear of the airplane because that way we can make sure that we can use our brakes and so on and so forth."

Well, Ted stayed with me. And in the meantime, while landing, we noticed—before we landed—we noticed that the prop had when the engine fell, had cut the tire and flattened the tire, so we knew we had a flat tire to work with. But, we did get the airplane stopped. No one was hurt and it was [a] unique accident in its own way. You can get more on this history through many of the smokejumpers. They can give you all of the names of all of them that were on there. It's just one of the few stories you hear about, that the smokejumpers—what they do,

how fast they can do things and they did the right thing by bailing out. They didn't wait because they knew that—immediately they lightened the aircraft and that way it was very...It was good for everybody, the way it worked out.

KR: Fast reaction. How long does it take them to make that decision, to bail out?

FB: As soon as the prop went into the airplane, I would say all of the jumpers were in a tuck and out of the airplane in less than 2 minutes. Not only that, they went out safely hooked up, with their static lines, the whole works. There was no one hurt, landing or anything else. It was just a normal routine jump as far as they were concerned, even though they were in quite a hurry. But, it all worked out well.

KR: What caused that?

FB: Well, it could be fatigue in the airplane caused by picking up a rock on the ground—with the wheel throwing a rock into the propeller and causing a little flaw or damage or something like that to it. So, it's one of the fluke things that happen.

KR: And you brought the plane down safely?

FB: Oh, yeah. We got it down safely, and Johnson's came over and put a new engine in it. It was about a week later, they came over and picked me up and I got in and flew it out again. Flew it back to Missoula and picked up another Ford and came over and was flying again. We never did lose any time really. When it happened, they brought another Ford over, and [I] kept right on a flying.

KR: Fantastic. And that was in '63?

FB: Yes.

KR: So, you flew until?

FB: I flew with Johnson's in smokejumpers until 1965, and then I went with the U.S. Forest Service as a pilot for the Forest Service. And then in August of 1966, I took over as chief pilot for the U.S. Forest Services that year at Missoula.

KR: And you flew with the Forest Service until 1974?

FB: No. Then in 1976, I transferred and took the...was appointed the first permanent—we want to use that word permanent—chief pilot that ever filled that position of permanent chief pilot at the Washington level. I was based at Boise at the National Fire Center.

During that period of time, I was in charge of the Infrared Detection Program and in charge of

all of the aircraft for the Infrared Detection Program. I was in charge of the three aircraft that we did all of this work with, and the Infrared Program was developed here at Missoula at the Northern Forest Fire Laboratory. Then I had the—all of the pilot and aircraft inspections for the air tankers—for all of the fire-retardant contracts in the United States. It was my responsibility to check all of the pilots and check the aircraft along with the maintenance people and radio people that done the inspection on the main contract requirements. That was my job to sign those off for [unintelligible]. And then, in addition to that, I had the first [unintelligible] in the supervising the—our own Forest Service personnel here.

KR: You were a busy person in that job. That's a lot to do.

FB: Yes. It keeps you busy. You don't have much time to goof around really, because in the Infrared Detection Program itself, that's a program that when you work with that, you fly to meet the requirements and everything that you have to maintain the flight hours. You can't over go—override those. But we could fly 12 days straight, but we weren't to exceed 12 hours a day, or 14 hours a day on duty and 7 hours a day flight time. Then we had to take a mandatory 2 days off. Sometimes that was difficult because you were away from your home base. You were away from...You could be anywhere in the United States, Canada, maybe Alaska, or something like this.

KR: And you had to take that 2 days off?

FB: Yeah, and while I was here in Missoula, it was a—I was in charge of the pilot organization here and during that period of time, I worked with a fellow by the name of Hank Viche.

KR: What was the last name?

FB: Hank Viche, he was the regional air officer at the time, V-i-c-h-e, who now lives here in Missoula and he's retired. He—Hank is very experienced in all Forest Service operations. He worked from about 40 years with them, or 41, I think it was. Someone would have to check that for sure because it may be longer than 41. He was very knowledgeable about all Forest Service operations. Hank was the Air Officer here when I went to work with them and before that. Then when he retired, Bob Robertson, who is now retired also, took his place.

KR: So you were stationed in Missoula here as...No, not Missoula. In Boise, as the permanent chief pilot on the Washington level from 1976 until what time?

FB: Until I retired in—my retirement became effective in, when I retired in 1979.

KR: That's quite an overview. You did a lot with your career. Did you jump...Were you connected at all with the Forest Service or the smokejumpers prior to 1958?

FB: Yes. I did a little work with the smokejumpers.

KR: Were you a jumper?

FB: No, I wasn't, but I done some work with them, the smokejumpers once, and I believe the year—I could look at my records at home—I think the year was in 1943 or 1944. If my records are straight, I jumped two jumpers on a fire on the Nez Perce Forest. I was always interested in that type of work and—but I'd been flying for many, many years.

KR: Before you came on board with the smokejumpers?

FB: Oh, yes.

KR: What kind of flying did you do then?

FB: Well, I had...I was in the crop dusting and spraying program and I was also a—we had a company. I flew commercially for a cattle company. I flew...We had an organization—there's Empire Aviation out of Lewiston and I flew for them. I flew...Done a lot of flying all the time and always kept [unintelligible]. Then I flew for the National Guard and actually, during World War II, I flew as pilot in the U.S. Air Force.

KR: Okay. So, all in all, you worked 1968-1978: 21 years with the smokejumpers.

FB: Mm hmm.

KR: What was it like that first year down in McCall, Idaho?

FB: Well, any time a pilot goes to work for—working with smokejumper organizations—the...all of the smokejumpers, the foreman and the Forest Service in general, takes a pretty good look at you, wondering how it will affect them, whether the pilots can do their job and can meet the needs that they would like to have to operate the aircraft in a way that they need to have it operated for their jumping program. Especially of dropping cargo because dropping cargo is something a lot of people really can't do. Pilots have difficulty, many of them, getting the precision need ed for low-level type drops, which is done—usually done—at about 200 feet above the tree tops, to pin point their cargo to them—their fire packs and such and tools and things like this—in a real close proximity, to save them the least amount of time to have their equipment on the fire. This is a dangerous operation in a way.

KR: Flying that low?

FB: Yes. Because it—there's two things that make it dangerous. Air currents is one of them. A lot of people think you are flying right over the fire, you're not. You're flying away from the fire area. It could be smoky though and things like this, but you're flying d own low in canyons, dropping coming d own hill, turning out of a canyon, this type of thing, whereby the cargo

dropper's in the back that are throwing the cargo out. The spotter, who normally does that, he's pretty vulnerable back there, being thrown around in the airplane. He could be tossed out the door, hanging on his static line.

And so, they're pretty cautious about accepting a pilot on the grounds just because he can fly an airplane. They want to know what his capabilities are and the pilots have to prove themselves. It isn't a thing where you just go out and fly an airplane, jump in, haul a bunch of guys out and let them jump. In skydiving, where they're flying high altitude, jumping out, free falling, it's a little different story. The smokejumper operation is a situation where the weight and balances are figured to the airplane, they know those. They load their fire packs to meet the weight and balance of the aircraft. The loading in the aircraft is done a certain way, so that everything is the same 90 percent of the time. There are occasions when loading has to be done differently. You might have to take more water, for example, in their 5-gallon containers but they always come to the pilot and say, what can we do to do this? We'd like to take more water, it's hot weather, and things like this. So, there are situations the pilots can change, down loading the fuel. For example, in the Ford Trimotor, the one we was flying over there had 300 gallons of fuel. So, I could down load 50 gallons of fuel and still have plenty for any mission we had to go anywhere on the Nez Perce Forest or off the forest, anything like that.

Consequently, this helped them and it's a give-and-take situation, you see. So when the smokejumper organization gets accustomed to one pilot, they don't like to change. They really don't and I can see their point. When I first moved to McCall, I had jumped a few paratroopers in the military, before I really jumped a lot of jumpers for the Forest Service in McCall. They would work with us as well as we'd work with them, throwing cargo out on the airport or a spot off the airport somewhere and then sandbags, whatever. Parachutes—they'd repack them, and we'd do it again. So that they were convinced that you could do a good job for them, and this was good, this made good relationship. So, it's something that—they were always in there pitching just as much as we were to get a fire call.

KR: So, when you're talking about the unity and the family of the different smokejumpers at the different bases and a little bit of the competition and pride, you became part of that family. You bonded just to get along with the rest of them?

FB: Even the pilots, when we'd go back in. I would go back in to Missoula for 100-hour inspections, quite often. When we were running 100 hours, I would go in the evening, after, oh, it was about dark, and I would fly back to Missoula with the airplane. They'd run the inspections on the airplane at night and then we'd go back to Grangeville early the next morning and be there before any fire calls. This competition, even within the same organization of all pilots, because they like to fly in jumpers over here in Missoula as well as we did at Grangeville and we were always rooting for our own team, see. But, we would take jumpers, many a time I've come into Missoula, have maintenance done on the aircraft, take a load of jumpers back and jump them on the way back, on the Lolo or Bitterroot Forest. Go into...on into Grangeville, pick up a load of jumpers there and go on. But it's teamwork, and the whole way through.

KR: You've known a lot of jumpers through all those years.

FB: Very few of them here I don't know.

KR: What makes, in your opinion, what kind of man is it that is a smokejumper—that goes with that profession, that job?

FB: There's two things that my thinking I always felt that a smokejumper had. One of them was the desire to be good at anything that he did. They didn't necessarily make a smokejumper. And the next thing was the desire to be physically fit enough to do the job. Then the...Have the mental capacity to grasp situations that may occur. Now, I'll give you an example of a situation that may occur in the training of a smokejumper, and that's when you have a line boss, or something like that on your parachute and the—he has to deploy his reserve chute. When you're jumping from—in training—from 12 to 1,500 feet above the ground, you haven't got all that time to do that, see. So, consequently, they have to be mentally alert and I think these guys that you see as the desire to make money enough to meet their educational needs, and this is the bottom line. The job does provide a future also, because there are many, many smokejumpers who have gone on up through the ranks. I can name you many of them, like in McCall, Dale Cantland, Wayne Webb [Wayne R.], Harry Roberts [Harold L.], who used to be here, oh, Floyd Barkley, just numerous of them. Bob Rayfelt, Forest Supervisor. There were many of them down the line, if you go down the line.

There was a means to make...to have a summer job that they could come back to each and every year and come into training, take the refresher jumps—refresher training—and go. They were ready for the work. This also helped the Forest Service because they didn't have the problem of retraining a whole cadre of smokejumpers every year. It got to the point there, for quite a while, whereby smokejumpers, they would only take...have 20, 25 new smokejumpers a year. I'm not sure on the exact amount, but they would be very low at times, hence, certainly, the smokejumper program, some years they'd have more, some years they'd have less and some years, due to finances or the hope of a poor fire season—they used to say poor fire season to the smokejumpers. A real hot season with lots of lightening is a good fire season, to firefighter that is. A poor fire season is where it rains all year and you don't have a good fire season. This is their situation. But, needless to say, they came back to this training and it was always good to hear the stories they'd tell, the things they did as they came back, would tell the new men and all this type of stuff. But, in general, the fellows that were in college, and I could name many of them who are now schoolteachers, attorneys, businessmen in all walks of life. And then a lot of them stayed with the Forest Service and made careers out of it.

KR: When you were flying jumpers and you're taking them out to jump, would you be able to see them land or were you into a bank turn to come around and drop cargo?

FB: No.

KR: Did you watch every single one of those men go down?

FB: Yes. Yes.

KR: What was that like for you, between the time they jumped out of your plane and they landed?

FB: You see, normally when you jump out of the airplane—they jump—this is one thing about why I like to fly the old slower planes such as the Travel Air, the old Fords. You see, normally when we had jumped the smokejumpers, we had jumped them right at 1,200 feet above the treetops. After they would jump, usually they would go out in two-man sticks, they called it, two men at a time. As soon as they jump, they would say, jumpers away!—the spotter would. I could look back and start a turn at the right and I could watch those jumpers all the way around out the door until you make 180-degree turn from where they went out and you're headed back, then you'd lose them out the door of the old Ford. I could just sit back there and watch them. Sure, there was always concern in where I got them. In many cases—and I could give you a good idea of what I'm talking about here—in 1960, we were...late in the fall but it was a real hot fall that we had, and we had a fire on the Payette National Forest that was near the breaks of cliffs and stuff like this.

We checked the streamers many times, which we used...I haven't explained those, but a smokejumper will probably explain all that to you. You drop your streamers and they kept going right straight in. Wind currents in the backcountry like where we were at, at that time, was in the—next to the middle fork of the Salmon River, and it was rocky, craggy type country. And we never intended to take any chances or anything. And many, many times spotters would come up and even ask the pilots what we thought of putting the men there, and we'd always agree where we were going to drop their cargo. We would drop the cargo after those jumpers went out. The reason we did this was that we...They knew and could see where it went normally, and what it was—the cargo was dropped. So, this one particular time, one of the spotters dropped these jumpers and we dropped them one at a time on this particular fire situation. Normally, it wasn't a dangerous situation, but that gust of wind that came up and picked him up and started him drifting. Because it was...Had he not known, and here again, those fellows have to know what they're doing in relation to steering their chutes and turn them around. They can turn them on a—around left real fast—to change your position and everything. But this one guided his chute in and actually from the air, it looked like he was right on the edge and we asked him later and he said he was about oh, somewhere between 20 or 30 feet from the edge from where he landed. But, his chute, draped over a tree, just the greatest thing that could ever happen because had he drifted the other way, it could have pulled him off over the edge of that cliff. The way it worked out, and so. Then we dropped a radio to him and from there on, we dropped the other jumpers, he went up. He moved back up on the hill and he would watch the wind currents and everything and tell us what to do from the ground. Well, this is good, so consequently it worked out real well.

[Break in audio]

FB: But, these are the things that you got to outguess. Many times, it isn't really a guess, it's a—

[Break in audio]

KR: —you dropped jumpers. What are some of your most memorable cargo drops or man drops? I mean, are there some funny stories?

FB: Yeah, there's quite a few funny stories that you laugh about. I'll start off with when I was working out of McCall. Wayne Webb [Wayne R.], who later was foreman down there, and he's retired now. One time I told him I'd like to have a...Well, I'll back up a little bit. We received a fire order to drop cargo on the Salmon National Forest on two fires down off of the main Salmon River below North Fork. I went to Wayne and told him what the situation was and I asked him if he would like to pull himself—well, he was a jumper—pull himself off of jump status and go with me as cargo dropper.

That would relieve the rest of the jumpers to make their jumps and all this stuff and go ahead. Wayne did this and he's still got his little book on this and him and I laugh about it every time we talk about it but we...It was before we had a flight time restriction for a day, so we could fly for the number of hours each day. Earlier this time, we didn't worry too much about pilot fatigue because the bottom line was making a little money and that's where we were all paid, so, it was a little bonus too. But anyway, one 5-day period, Wayne and I flew 43 and a half hours, dropping cargo. And this was on the Salmon National Forest, and we would fly cargo in the morning until about 11:00 until the air got so squirrely that we couldn't—that we didn't want to fool with it again and then we'd start dropping again. But, there was 100 and some odd thousand pounds of cargo that we hauled in those 5 days. And Wayne and I—we totaled it all—flew together and I can look back now and chuckle because I was a qualified instructor and everything, and all summer I was teaching Wayne how to fly the Ford at that time. [laughs]

KR: A little private lesson along the way? [laughs]

FB: So, but you know you get tired and he could fly it coming back, things like this. We'd be up, have an altitude, and it would work out all right, no problems, and I was always there to do it. And then one year, which was also in 1960...No, it was...Yeah, 1960, the last fire jump of the season that year was over on the eastern side of the Payette Forest, not too far from the Boise National Forest on the east side there. It was up on the breaks of the Middle Fork of the Salmon River. But, we didn't have a spotter and we had the cargo for four jumpers and everything with us. But, so, when we got over the fire, it was a little bigger than we expected when we left McCall. All the jumpers had terminated, except these four fellows. So, Wayne says, "Well, tell you what we'll do." He says, "I'll spot the first three of you," and he says, "Then I'll throw out the cargo." And then [laughs] he says, "I will tie a rope onto the static line and give it to Frank,

and when I jump, then he can pull in the static line." [laughs] And this is what we did.

This was back in the early part of the years, but you didn't do these things. It was something that wasn't dangerous because we had it under control, see. Everybody knew what he was doing and if I remember right, on that fire, after they got it out that night, they got about 6 inches of snow. [laughs] So it wasn't on the best fire that those fellows could ever have got into.

KR: No, I don't think so. You talked about the crash at Moose Creek, Nez Perce National Forest. What was that crash all about? That was in 1960?

FB: I believe it was 1960. I forget what day it was. It was an unfortunate situation; history of it is well written in the—documented in a couple of books that was written about the accident. It was a Johnson airplane. It was piloted by Bob Culver, who is now a FAA Inspector in Alaska, and it was a situation where I think wind conditions, characteristics of the airplane, and—happens. They was landing into Moose Creek. I think the wind condition pushed the airplane, or coming up the Selway increased the speed and shoved them into a bunch of trees at the end of the runway of Moose Creek, on the old field.

KR: So, there were no fatalities in that or—

FB: Yes. There was...I'd have to look at exact records, but Mr. Blackerby, and one of the smokejumpers, one of them was seriously burnt, the pilot, and another two of the smokejumpers, I believe it was, got out. The pilot was burnt and—but there was some fellows on the ground, who was pulling them out of there too, but it did catch fire and burn up right there at the end of the runway.

KR: And that's when they took a look at the Ford Trimotor in terms of its—

FB: They were taking a look at it because at that time they were thinking about newer type aircraft becoming available on the market, either through Army surplus here and this type of thing, or other aircraft on the market, like the Twin Lauder for example. They were using DC-3s a great deal then in 1961 and back in the late 1940s and so on, also, but—or I should say late '50s. But this was one of the things that was brought up. But because of the cost of operation, the Nez Perce Forest and the Forest Service at Missoula felt that it would be to their advantage to retain the Ford a couple of years, or longer, in Grangeville. We didn't have any real problems with it. They're a good old airplane in their own right, however they have their characteristics which can be unsafe, just like any other airplane that's built.

KR: So, it's just...got to be aware of those weaknesses when you're piloting?

FB: Yes. They have now, they've got rid of them, and they...One that...I found out last night that I flew a great deal, 7861 is in the museum, the Navy Museum in Pensacola.

KR: You talk about dropping cargo and cargo being dropped at maybe 200 feet above tree top, what's that like for a pilot? Are you comfortable with it?

FB: I always was. The reason I was— [pauses] I felt that I knew the airplane. In fact, I always felt that—just like driving a car. If you knew your car real well, you knew what it was going to do and it's just like an airplane, you don't have to watch what we call the gauges all the time to fly an airplane, which is mechanical in that a pilot should first learn to fly. You learn to fly the airplane, to be able to concentrate on what's going on outside of that airplane, in a smokejumper or a cargo operation. You got to watch the spot. You got to know when to ring the bell, when you poke the button to ring the bell for the cargo dropper to drop the cargo out the door. The timing has to be good, you ring the bell, you lead the spot you're going drop it, the cargo dropper kicks it out. Now, if he's late, then your cargo's going—not going to fall. It's going be past the spot where you wanted to drop it. You drop it low because of the drift and the chutes open, they come out, hit the static line, pop open and hit the ground. We like to have them pop open just a short ways above the ground so they don't go drifting off in the wind.

So, consequently, it's a...Here again, you get...You got a team going, you got the pilot, the spotter back there, and that spotter job is a tough one because a lot of times you're in rough air, you're dropping over a hill, or you're pulling out. He's trying to walk forward, drag cargo back. A lot of times you got to make you're turns wide to give him a chance, to walk, we always said, on level ground instead of being nailed to the ground by a pull up, see. A pilot can be, without knowing, in some instances, make the cargo droppers job extremely difficult.

KR: I can understand that.

FB: Centrifugal force, or if you go over a ridge and push the nose down, that raises him off the floor and he can't lift nothing. So if you work as a team, everything just goes beautiful.

KR: Did you ever have a spotter go out on you?

FB: No, never did.

KR: Are they hooked up to the static line, then as a safety precaution?

FB: Yes.

KR: They don't wear a chute?

FB: Oh yes, they do. They got what they call a spotter pack.

KR: So, if they go out, they jump?

FB: They can jump, but here again, at 200 feet above the ground, they don't have time really. If the static line holds and they can get released from that and pop their capons and go, or, you could get back here to land. You can take them up to where they can get altitude and let go, and away they go. This again is the expertise that those guys have.

KR: Did you ever have any of the jumpers go out when they weren't supposed to, maybe just the spotter fixed on of the belts on their equipment or on their jumping suit and they thought it was a tap and they jumped?

FB: Ah, yes. I've seen this occur a couple of times, whereby a jumper would be in the door and somebody would say something in the airplane and the spotter and the jumper are both watching the spot and something would be said and in the meantime the spotter would accidentally put his hand on his shoulder and he would jump too soon. This was...I've seen this happen a couple of times. In fact, I'm trying to think of who it was, but I can remember one fellow who we dropped, I think it was on the Nez Perce, one time. He was just exactly one ridge from where he was supposed to be because of this situation, but he got to the fire anyway. He knew where the fire was, and he knew where the drops was because he saw the rest of jumpers on the other ridge going down and so he grabbed his chute and away he goes. He goes over there.

The chances of injury is something you asked if we watched. Very definitely. They always put out their double Ls, we called it, if they were all okay. And we would never leave a jumper's spot until we knew that they were okay, or we could see their Ls, or they would be out on the hillside or something and waving at us and saying everything's okay, give us the right sign. If there was ever any question about what was going on, we always got a hold of them on the radio. In the later years, it got so we was dropping radios all the time, whenever they went out, oh, some of them wouldn't but most of them we did. There was two reasons for this, safety, in case they got hurt, they could call the nearest lookout, or the other one could go up and call the lookout. The other...This way they could also tell lookouts to call the Forest when they wanted to be picked up. The prerequisite, before any jump, is where the jumpers would leave their cargo, and where they would be picked up. I've seen some take some pretty long hikes because they missed a trail or something and this type of thing, but it's situation are very seldom. They were pretty well oriented before they ever go out the door.

KR: They knew what was awaiting them down there?

FB: Yes.

KR: Did you ever jump any doctors on rescue missions?

FB: Not with the Forest Service that I can recall, there was a doctor [pause], now don't quote me on this because he may have jumped, now...I was trying to think of who this was, but I think that he had also been a smokejumper prior to the time that he was a doctor. I think he was on

the fire...Not a fire. But he was on an injury and I can't remember where that was at, but the smokejumpers may have the history of him.

KR: You must have flown quite a lot of rescue missions?

FB: Quite a number, yes.

KR: For jumpers to jump in?

FB: [pauses] Jumpers, also...The jumpers were used a great deal for going in and—the people that was in the back country that were hurt or injured—to get them prepared to bring out, either on horseback, or pack them out on litters, or get them ready for helicopter travel, too. They were used a great deal, for those. They were used a great deal for serious injuries, such as, when the fire staff of the Moose Creek District, was...Well, he died on the way out, but he was hit with retardant on a fire up out of Moose Creek and they...We had dropped the jumpers, and they asked me to go into Moose Creek and wait and the helicopter brought him down and so they brought him down and I flew him out to Grangeville. But it was a case where they were there, they were trained in first aid, they know what to do, they got Demerol, they got enough of whatever they need to for the injured people; they know how to give it. So, all in all, they were always ready and willing to go, and this is when you a—200 percent of those smokejumpers. It was...I've seen them go into airplane crashes right away. It's the quickest, most expedient way to get people there that may be able to help or save somebody's life.

KR: In the beginning, when you and I were talking, you talked about all the airfields that you have records of, there in the backcountry. Were those built by smokejumpers for you to land on or how did they come about?

FB: Well, they came about from two different needs. In the early days of aircraft in the back country, in the outlying ranger districts to name a few, Moose Creek in Idaho is one of them, Dixie Ranger Station in Idaho is another one. Spotted Bear, here in Montana, Big Prairie in Bernard—these are just to name a few. These...Gates Park [Montana] is another one where there was ranger district. These ranger districts had fire crews in the summertime. Okay, they would build, work on airports and try to get a place for people to land back there. The smokejumper organization came along, and this became one of their projects that they would work on to build and improve, or improve these—not necessarily just go right from scratch and build them but to keep them improved and they were used by the Forest Service to pick up smokejumpers, many, many of them.

It became a way out. It also became a way to fly fire crews into fires in the back country and a lot of this was before helicopters ever existed and these are the air—pictures of these airports that I have. Many of them are in the early stages before airplanes could land in them, or just about the time they were built and the first airplanes could land on them. They're very unique, the pictures, and they're very clear.

KR: Are those airfields still useable today, do you know?

FB: There are a lot of them that are useable but the wilderness concept has changed and the Forest Service has done away with a lot of airfields that were once used because they were in the wilderness area itself. So, consequently, when this happened, helicopters became more available and hike outs became more available, to points where they could be reached. They were retrieved that way. So, it's...In the wilderness they're still hiking out a long way.

KR: They're still what?

FB: A lot of the jumpers are hiking out a long way. The longest hike out that I know of, that I can recall, was around roughly 22 miles with their full packs on after they had put a fire out. They did this in pretty fast time, part of it was at night.

KR: That's a long way to hike out.

FB: Yes.

KR: 1965, Johnson Flying Service ended its contracts with the Forest Service for transporting smokejumpers, is that right? 1965, 1966?

FB: No. That was in...The first contract, I believe, was in...You mean when they lost their first contract and started using different contractors?

KR: Well, you went from Johnson Flying Service in 1965 to the U.S. Forest Service in 1966. Was that the end of Johnson Flying Service?

FB: No. Johnson was very active in the Forest Service operations for several years after that.

KR: What prompted you to make that switch?

FB: Well, I was looking down the road for myself and family and where I wanted to go and what I wanted to do. I liked to be around the organization, and I felt that I could offer the Forest Service some expertise in the field of aviation, both as a pilot and probably a consultant for new ideas and new things that were coming on and progressing into the program—new aircraft, type of pilots. I was also quite sick. Pilot for smokejumping, all Forest Service. I think all the pilots right today that are working here in Region 1. I hired them when I was chief pilot here, including Nels Jensen, who's national, or the regional air officer at this time. Nels done a good job. Now, Milton Callaway, Kerkie we all call him, he flew for Johnson's for years and Hank Viche, and I, and we put out a questionnaire, job offering. And of all the names that were turned in, we felt that Kerkie Callaway probably had the greatest qualifications from helicopter operations because he flew them a lot, as anybody that we could get. So, I hired him in 1967

and he's still with them and he's probably one of the best helicopter pilots at the time we hired him, and he's very—he's precise in everything he does. He's a good pilot, always was. In fact, most pilots that have worked for the Forest Service, have been good pilots. They're masters.

KR: Have you seen any major changes from those early years, you know the early '60s, till now in the basic job of a pilot when they're transporting jumpers and cargo drops?

FB: There's been a lot of changes, I'm going to say in air operation and fire control activities throughout the...Many years ago, when aviation first entered into the field of the Forest Service, air operation was really only known by companies like Johnson and Grangeville Air Service, Grangeville. Johnson also owned a subsidiary, Johnson Flying Service of McCall. At that time, private companies had all the expertise in the field of aviation. Fire control people who were the people using aviation to the greatest degree relied on their qualifications, expertise, to manage—used to manage their programs that pertained to the air operation.

OK, as time went by, the Forest Service and I'll relate to Missoula at first because I know more about what the transition was—the Forest Service was—fire control activities, change of financing was changing, the need for faster fire protection in the region, the centralization of fire crews made it important that they could get into the wilderness, the back country a lot quicker. They realized this. It was a happening. So, they—Floyd Bowman, who was the chief pilot in Missoula when I first came to work with the Forest Service and Johnson's too, was the only person that they had in aviation actually flying airplanes, really.

KR: So, you were the number 2 man that they hired—the second man that they hired?

FB: No. Bob Clark worked for the Forest Service for some time and then he went to Region 4. He came to work, and Bob was with the Forest Service when I came here. Bob bought the—was down here on a part-time basis and what they call the WAE appointment. So, when I came here—a short time after I came with the Forest Service—they bought a new Arrow Commander. They contracted and bought one and that was one of my first jobs, to go with Elton Downs. He was also working here too and then he went to Region 4. Then we went back, picked up this Arrow Commander and we started using it. This was the entrance in Region 1 to get it into Forest Service air operation of hauling personnel, all weather type operations and you might say, excellent conditions to all parts of the region. Not into the back country on airstrips but to other regions and this type of thing.

In addition to using it for fire control activities and things like this, not as a jumper airplane at that time. However, before I came with the Forest Service, the first Arrow Commander we jumped out of was the one that Empire Aviation had. That we had when I was in the Lewiston operation. We jumped out of Enterprise, Oregon, in that Arrow Commander in Region 6. But, we didn't use them really here, we done some test jumping, which was fine, there's no problem there. Then the helicopter operation started coming into the program pretty rapidly. We needed a pilot who was qualified and trained in a helicopter. Okay, this brought about hiring

highly qualified people like Kerkie Callaway.

We were also getting in, strongly, into the air tanker operation for fire retardant programs. So, we needed more people to use to supervise the operations, and so that you had qualified people working with air tankers, helicopters, pilots, inspection of aircraft and all of these type of things. So, consequently, air operations throughout the whole United States, started to grow. With this in mind, there were a lot of people, and the Forest Service, which could see what was happening in air operations. It was a fast-growing organization and to be part of it, the only way they felt in fire control, was to manage them through fire control.

This created some problems and these were growing pains and it happens in any type of an organization's growth. Whereby, characteristic of the organization, if you're supervising a bunch of people and managing an operation, your pay scale is higher and your GS ratings go up and this type of thing and there was always this problem of the little bit of animosity, not only in Region 1, but all the regions throughout the United States. At that time the pilot salaries were in, you might say, in relation to what they are in the commercial field and these, right. These were changes that were coming about, and with air operations—the air tanker operations—and the number of air tankers being contracted was changing when the region used to contract their own aircraft. But the Boise Inter-agency Fire Center started up in operation, they took over the contracting in all the air tankers for all the regions throughout the United States. They would send them to these bases, they would bid on these different bases and they'd move when the fire season was over, like in Missoula or let's say down at Albuquerque, they'd send them up here to whoever had that contract. These were changes that were being made. So, then, through this type of thing, Johnson—the commercial operators like Johnson's—were losing pilot personnel to other jobs, going on into other things and they were losing their expertise. The Forest Service came out with—the smokejumper organization wanted aircraft with bigger engines, or better, newer type of aircraft, this type of thing. So, budgets, money, everything else kept going up and these changes became occurring where now, in the whole program, I think personally, that the whole air operations program has got to be pulled into where it's a more of a supervision role to contractors than it is for doing it yourself, in a lot of ways.

These are changes. Maybe someday the pendulum will start working the other way and contractors may come back into it, like now the Forest Service is contracting aircraft into pilots. Forest Service pilots are hired, are flying them. They call this contracting the aircraft, "dry without pilots", see and then the Forest Service provides the pilot, which, that way they have control of the program itself. Here again, they can train pilots to do the job the smokejumpers want. I can see for a number of years the smokejumper operation, especially when a new contractor comes into the picture...At the time that Johnson's were selling out their program to Evergreen Aviation and this type of thing, they were vulnerable to someone else outbidding them on a contract, that's mandatory under Forest Service regulations—

So, consequently, this whole thing, threw a different light on smokejumper program, the fire

control program, the aviation from regional level—from forest level, you might say, to the regional level to the Washington office level. It's...A lot of things they did good. In my estimation, a lot of things were just changes made because of change, not because it was good or bad. But, I think the expertise is in the jumper organization because of it has changed in relation to...I shouldn't say the jumper's expertise has changed—I mean the expertise of doing the total 100 percent or the 150 percent job all the time. I think...It isn't stagnation; I don't want to call it that. I want to call it...Well, let's put it this way. It's more like an 8-to-5 job, except they want the overtime, they'll work; they'll do the job. I'm not saying they don't. They want it, but it doesn't have the gung-ho operation that it had in it's—the upcoming. I think a lot of this is because of changes in the whole total program, that helicopters and in other regions, repelling is changing the program—where they let down out of helicopters, fires, this type of...In a lot of ways, people say smokejumpers may be on their way out.

KR: Do you think so?

FB: I don't think so because there's a need for a certain amount of smokejumping. Because of this, I think it's...Before they ever do away with it, they ought to take a real good look at what they got because they got a cadre of people that could fill a lot of areas.

One of them is injury and rescue work. This is...The more people we put in the wilderness area, the more need there is to get quick help. Now you can get a helicopter back there and you may be able to land, oh, within a half a mile or mile from the fellow that's injured, like in on the West Yellowstone River or something like this, or over in the high country south of Bozeman, but it takes somebody to be able to get in there in a hurry, to get that fellow strapped onto a stretcher, or whatever it's going to take to get him out and a spot cut to make it possible for him to get out of there. I see this as going to be a tremendous need. There's always a need for quick control on fires in areas that have a high fire index, it's very inaccessible, and out of the so-called let-burn areas that Forest Service is using, which at this time is very controversial.

KR: What are your thoughts on that let-burn policy?

FB: I think it's a good tool to be used. [pauses] The...If it's in the wilderness area, where our wilderness designation is. Now I'm going to take the Bitterroot Range, for example. For many, many years, dating clear back to 1910, when the fire started and burned clear through the Salmon River, clear north, Clearwater, clear on through this country. It developed some of the biggest brush fields in the world, as far as this part of the country is concerned. Yet, the timber's regenerating back there, up through the brush fields, but there's a lot of brush fields that hadn't regenerated yet. We've got to have...One time, we had the biggest elk herds in the world, were up there. The let-burn policy is a good way and a good tool to regenerate our elk herds as well as regenerate our forestation. Some people might disagree with me on this, but I think there has to be a medium between let-burn. And we also have been working with the Kelly Creek area, burning brush down there for the elk herds, and there's another big elk herd on that area, which could be a very good—I like to call them pastures for elk herds in the

wintertime.

That's the same way, in on Bear Creek and Cub Creek and all that country in the Moose Creek area, [unintelligible] Creek, because there isn't enough timber in there. I'm talking about big timber, to be justifiable to putting anything else on there. It's one of the greatest, most beautiful areas to walk through, and work your way through. You don't have to have a trail to get through the country, if you want to go. I think that has a definite plan in the future of smokejumper operations because take a helicopter out and drop a couple of guys off, that would be all right too, but there's a need for places they can't get to. I'm talking within—you can put a jumper out and get him on a fire within 150, 200 yards of him. Where a helicopter may have to land a mile from him and wind through brush and stuff. it's difficult to [unintelligible] to do this.

KR: I can understand that. It's vast, some of that country.

FB: But most of it is areas that were burned off probably many, many times before and I were ever on this earth and before our fathers or their fathers were ever on this earth. It may go back hundreds and hundreds of years. It may do it for the next hundreds of years, but it'll never change. It's the same as it was probably 500 years ago. It hadn't changed a bit that way.

KR: Thank you Frank. You've had some interesting things and a very full career. I appreciate your time.

[End of Interview]