

Maureen and Mike

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**Oral History Number: 133-024**

**Interviewee: Phillip Davis**

**Interviewer: Kim Taylor**

**Date of Interview: June 13, 1984**

**Project: Smokejumpers 1984 Reunion Oral History Project**

Kim Taylor: How did you get interested in smokejumping?

Phillip Davis: In 1947 several of us started off to drive up to Alaska, and we got up in Canada and our car was giving us too much trouble, so we came back to Kalispell and we were looking around for something to do through the summer. And we got a job out on the Coram District on Flathead, where we just spent the summer working on District. And the foreman that we worked for most of the summer up there had a son in the smokejumpers, so he talked a lot about the jumpers. And I knew a little bit about them because one of my older brothers had worked here in Missoula on a Forest Service Project where they were stationed out in Nine Mile, so they were living right with the jumpers off and on, so he knew quite a bit about the jumpers. I suppose those two things, probably made me apply.

KT: What was it you were doing before you got this job in Flathead.

PD: I'd just gotten out of the service. When I got out of high school, I went to college for about two quarters and got drafted and was in the service for a couple years during WWII. And I got out in '46, I guess, yeah, '46, I got out and in the spring of '47 I started back to college. From then on, I was either working for the Forest Service or going to school until I graduated.

KT: What kind of work was it that you were doing on the Flathead?

PD: Oh, we started out as just a brush crew, they had a pile of brush behind where the loggers had got in there. We started out on that. That was probably the main thing we did during the summer, however we did work a few trails and fires and what not, normal district work. But primarily we were just piling brush.

KT: What kind of prestige and reputation did the smokejumpers have? How did a project crew perceive them?

PD: Oh, I never heard much one way or the other, the foreman had a son out here in the jumpers. Fact is, his son, I got to know him very well later, and he was one of the boys killed in Mann Gulch. Of course, he was really proud, and he thought the jumpers were just the greatest thing and his son in the jumpers was just about the greatest thing in the world. Which kind of gave it a pretty good boost. And they did, right towards the end of the summer, they had a pretty big fire on the Flathead where quite a number of the jumpers came up and jumped. Twice too many, I know that. I don't know what. [laughs] They had all sorts of problems and lost their gear and couldn't find the fire. Great big mess, but that didn't deter me.

KT: So how did you go about applying for the smokejumper job?

PD: There were three of us, during the next year we were all back in school. I went to Montana State, and we were all back in school and I don't know, the three of us, my brother, my next older brother and myself, and another fellow who had worked on Coram District, on the Flathead the summer before, we were all living together there. So I guess we just got to talking it over there and we just filled out an application and that was it. Filled out an application and got hired, they must have been shorted or something because none of us really had the background for it. I guess we had all worked one summer for the Forest Service, but that was all. We didn't have any extensive background that would have gotten us a job fast.

KT: What did the training entail once you got hired on as a smoke jumper?

PD: We went out, we came right over here as soon as school was out in the spring. They started the new jumper group about a week after college was out, after the end of spring quarter. They had—gee, I don't really remember how long, but we started out with a lot of physical training, just like the army as far as that goes. Because you had to be in good shape, and then the specialized training that you had, as far as learning how to land and learning how to make let downs out of trees and all of that. They had certain period of the days allocated to lectures, that sort of thing. They had a lot of stuff on map reading and how to measure fires, because you had to turn in a fire report. Things, just exactly what you needed to know and nothing more, and this went on until—I don't really remember how many weeks it was, but we started, I suppose, about the tenth of June or thereabouts, and I would think that we were about done with our training, our accelerated training, I guess you could say, well that's all you did, by, maybe, about a month later, about the 10th or the 15th of July. That year, that was 1948, that particular year it was just this there were no fires, it was sort of for nothing, that first year.

KT: Was that disappointing to you?

PD: Oh yeah, we had a good time, we had a good job anyway, it was a real good job, even though it was a very poor fire year, or good, depending on whether you were wanting to fight fires or save the forest.

KT: What was your first training jump like?

PD: It wasn't anything spectacular, I guess. You spent so much time going out of mockups, doing dry runs and everything, that when you actually did it, it was kind of anti-climactic, pretty much did it by reflex action. To me, I guess, it was a little more, I had never been up in an airplane. I'd never been off the ground, and the first time I went up I jumped out. As a matter of fact, I guess I took off in an airplane eight times before I ever landed. Because every time you went up you jumped. [laughs] And so I didn't know what it was to come down in an airplane, all I ever done was take off.

KT: How about your first fire jump?

PD: There was just a two-man fire; it was over on the Nez Perce in Idaho. I guess I should ask—we filled out a ten-paged thing for the jumpers. Did you read that at all? That thing, just for this oral history project—they sent out a thing?

KT: Yes.

PD: Some of the things, just like that question right there you asked, they asked too, so I didn't know if I was repeating or what here. There was a two-man fire, and it was just before dark and we went over. It was a little south of Castle Creek on the Nez Perce and when we got there, when they had turned the fire call in and it was just a little fire, I guess. When we got there it was big, it was way too big for two men. It was kind of stupid to even jump on it because it was about a 15- or 16-man fire when we got there. But we went ahead and jumped, just the two of us and it was too late for them to get anybody else, because it was dark, and you couldn't jump after dark. We jumped just as it was starting to get dark or just before it got dark. But things turned out very well, the two of us took off for the point, one of us started down each side.

One thing I'll say, the training was really good, the fire training. You knew just about exactly what to do, even though none of us had never really fought very much fire, actual firefighting, the training was very good. So we knew just about exactly what to do, just about exactly what to expect and just about when the wind was going to change from going uphill to going down hill and as it turns out we got it, just the two of us. By morning we had it, we worked all night. and that was about it. Oh, there were a few things, when we jumped our fire packs hung up, there's a bunch of lodge pole there and our packs hung way up in the air, no way you could get them. So I signaled for some climbers, we had streamer signals you could signal what you wanted back to the airplane. And I put out the signal for some climbers so I could limb up the lodgepole and get a Pulaski out of the pack so I could cut the tree down and get the chute and the packs and stuff. See the Pulaskis were in the fire packs, we didn't have any means of cutting the trees down to get our packs down. So I wanted a pair of climbers to get the Pulaski so I could cut the tree down.

KT: What exactly are the climbers?

PD Just pole climbers, that power line people use and telephone people, just things to strap on you feet so you could climb up a tree. Because on a lodgepole there aren't any limbs down low so you could climb up like here, you could go out and climb a tree like that, like climbing a telephone pole, and you about have to have something to get them, and they did. Had a—I think I always remember on that, he, the fellow who was spotting us, after they dropped the second jumper, they circled around until we got down to see if we were okay I guess. I went out and put out my streamers to signals for the climbers which I had said before.

In the meantime, they came over and threw out a 5-gallon can of water with a little cargo chute on it. When it came down it went into some brush and punched a hole in the side of the can and I looked down there and the water was spurting out of the can, that was going to be our drinking water. So I ran down, to tip the can over and get the hole, so we wouldn't lose all our drinking water and totally forgot I had signaled for the climbers. I ran down there and stooped over and tipped the can over, so all our water wasn't running out through the hole that was punched in it. I hear the plane coming over, and I looked up and boy he was just over the treetops and the spotter leaned out and threw the climbers, right there. He was probably 300 or 400 feet high was all, but you could see him, see the spotter standing in the door of the plane. And just as I looked up, I saw him lean out and let fly with those, they didn't have a parachute on them, they just had a streamer hooked to them so you could find them. Boy, they were just coming right straight at me. I can just see it.

I jumped up and stood behind a lodgepole, that was the thinnest I ever was, [laughs] because that lodgepole wasn't as big as I was. And those dang climbers hit the tree right over my head, on the other side, and came halfway through the tree on the far side. If they had hit me in the head, they would have killed me, without a doubt, you know, or hit me anywhere they'd have gone right through me. That was the one thing I remember mainly about that fire. That was my first fire, after that I had sense enough to not run down where they were throwing stuff out.

KT: When there weren't any fires were you doing project work?

PD: Yeah, most of the time. It depended on, they had a fire list, and at that time, and I don't know if this went for a long time, but at least in those years, you didn't keep everybody in to jump all the time. Depended a lot on the fire season, whether it was real hot or not hot, or what, and you'd pull people in off project, either out at Nine Mile or down at loft at Hale Field, which is right down here where Sentinel High School is now. And then you would usually make two jumps, on two fires, go out on a fire and come back and go out on another fire before they sent you back out on project again. So they kept rotating all the men through, all the time. Then if the fire season got really hot, they ended up with all of the men being in, because you were all going just as fast as you could. If it was a real hot fire season, throughout the earlier part of the summer or in a year like 1948 they had to keep a crew down here ready to go but there were so few fires that there wasn't much to do.

So to get back to your question, I guess, if you weren't out on project, there were things to do. If you were here in town, and a fire call at Hale, you had to be within a certain number of minutes, I forget, of the airport. So we used to go up Pattee Canyon here and work in the campground, cut wood and cleared timber and clean them up. We sometimes worked down at the parachute loft making up fire packs, this sort of thing. If you were out at Nine Mile on standby, there were quite a few things to do, you didn't have to be quite so close out there, there were a lot of things to do. There was always building maintenance, trees to cut, there was always something to do even if you weren't on fire.

KT: So did you go back and forth between the Missoula and the Nine Mile base?

PD: Yeah, we had a little airstrip out there, in fact we built it in must have been between '48 and '49, the strip is still out there just west of the old Remount Station. I don't know if they use it any more or not, but towards the end of 1949 we were using that strip. But generally speaking we flew out of Hale field right here, right where the Vo-Tech is.

KT: So it just depended on which ever one you were closest to?

PD: Generally, during the time I was there we jumped out of here, so if—they had enough crew here at this one to supply the needs, there was usually somebody living right down here. And then, you sort of filled the needs here in town from out at Nine Mile, because you had the facilities out there, they had many more people. The set-up down here was pretty small, they just had a little mess hall and a small kitchen. The sleeping quarters were old buildings, I don't know if they are still down there, probably weren't any bigger than this house, couldn't handle very many people. So they just kind of thinned the Hale Field Complex from the Nine Mile one. Got pretty thick down here when you got a real hot period on the forest fires. Towards the end of August in 1949, everybody was on fire all the time. There was just a whole crew of them feeding in and out of Hale Field down here. Sometimes there were an awful lot of people here to be handled by the little mess hall they had, and the small kitchen facilities just weren't hardly big enough to handle the big crews. Of course, they always had the Nine Mile Base as backup in case they got in trouble.

KT: Do you remember any interesting individuals that worked with you?

PD: If you were a smokejumper you were an interesting individual. [laughs] I think it attracted the people that liked a good time and wanted to do something interesting. I don't really remember anybody who wasn't an interesting individual, people always had good stories to tell and were fun to work with. Really, it was a pretty high caliber of a crew, they—a lot higher caliber crew than, say, I ever worked with on district. Because, of course at that time, almost the whole crew were college students, the majority were going either here at the University or over at Montana State, there were of course quite a few from the East, but almost all of them were students that were just out here for the summer jumping.

But I think just the nature of the job, if a guy didn't want to work hard, he didn't apply in the first place, so you had a pretty high caliber of a crew. It was fun, when you went on project with a bunch of the jumpers, you really got things done, you had guys that really would work, there weren't any slackers. They were good workers and pretty sharp people, I thought, maybe I wouldn't if I looked at them now. [laughs]

KT: Are there any of those characters that stand out in your mind?

PD: A few, but mainly ones that you've seen a lot since then, ones that have stayed around

here. There are people who have stayed in Missoula, who just like me they are still here, who were out there then. I guess there was no particular individual I can think of I can remember more than any of the others. Some of them you really didn't get to know very well, especially after the first year. The first year you trained with everybody, the new people, and you got to know all the people who were new hires in the year you were a new hiree, you got to know them really well. But after that usually you were gone by the time the new crew started, out on project somewhere so then you only met isolated individuals if you happened to go on a fire with them or something. And so, those that were older timers than you, a lot of them you never got to know very well, and those that were newer than you, a lot of them you didn't get to know because you didn't work together, you didn't train together. Like the second year when you came back you had to go through some refresher training but it was not with the new hires. And as I recall it was started earlier than the new hires, so usually by the time the new hires started their first-year training you were already gone. You'd have finished your refresher training and have gone off on a project or something, so you didn't really get to know them.

KT: How did they match up people for jumps?

PD: Other than on a bigger fire, where you had to have somebody in, say, an eight-man fire or something, they always of course tried to get an experienced person, a squad leader, somebody who had been around a little while, fought quite a bit of fire, to go and sort of be in charge of the crew. Other than that they just had a jump list to start out with it was somewhat alphabetical. Just because when you were in training, they broke you up into squads, just purely by your alphabetic position of your name. I can still remember all the names on both sides [laughs] of me just from calling role. It was just the alphabetic, just right down the alphabet, but the overhead people in the office made up the jump list and I guess I don't know quite how they arrived at it. Like on later years when you weren't in an alphabetical group of any kind, I know the people that I was on fires with were not anywhere near me alphabetically, so I think they just made up a roster of the people depending on who was there and went down and got those that were the closest.

It was pretty fair. No one person got a lot more jumps than anybody else. You didn't have one person getting ten jumps and another one getting two, they were pretty well evened out over the whole crew. Other than the crew that went to New Mexico, they always got a lot of jumps because down there they get so many more fires than we do up here. That didn't count because they were sort of a separate crew anyway, they left and went down their way earlier in the year.

KT: How were they chosen to go down there?

PD: They applied for it. I don't really know if there were more applied then they had room for. It wasn't really a very big crew that went down there. I never did go. My next older brother went down there two years. But they went down a way earlier and usually, fact they left here to go

to New Mexico before school was over, before spring quarter was over. So any of us that were seriously going to college couldn't go because you had to leave before the end of spring quarter. So that's the reason I never did go, I think generally the New Mexico crew was made up generally of guys that weren't going to school or at least not very seriously. They preferred going to New Mexico to going to school spring quarter or something like that. I know that was the case with my brother, he would go to school fall and winter quarter. Then in spring quarter he would drop out so he could jump in New Mexico. Made pretty good money down there, better than we did up here because they got so many more fires. And your money, at that time was overtime, you got regular time and then overtime and of course when you go on fires you get lots of overtime because you work all night, walk out at night and everything. So fires mean lot of money or they did then, I don't know how they operate out there now.

KT: So can you give us kind of an idea of what a standard fire, what your duties were to put it out?

PD: Most of the fires that the jumpers went on, I say most because there were big fires, by and large the fires were small fires. That was the purpose of the jumpers, to fly in and get them while they were still little before they blew up out of control. I was never on a fire as a jumper that was, I mean where we went in and jumped in on it that was more than a four-man fire, so they were pretty small. So I'll speak only of the little ones like that. You went in, the average fire you were on was really a lightning strike, that was really what it amounted to, that depended if it hit a tree, it might be where the tree went down. I went on one that wasn't 20 feet across, I had it out in ten minutes. It would have gone out if I hadn't ever jumped, but you don't know that. Depending on the conditions, of course, they could blow up awful fast.

But when you'd go in you'd get your fire packs down and then you'd just start digging fire line around the fire to get it so it couldn't run and once you got it encircled with the fire line so it wouldn't run in the duff and the branches and stuff on the ground, you just started what we called mopping up. You just went in from your fire line, going in, making your line bigger and putting out, usually the middle was already burned out anyway, other than some stumps and logs and stuff, so once you had it completely under control, you still had to stay around until it was completely out, unless you were relieved. Occasionally there were some district people who would walk in and when they got there, then they usually relieved you and they'd go ahead and do the mop-up and they'd go ahead and do the mop-up and put out the burning stumps and stuff like that. So you could start walking out and get back to go on something that was more important, I guess you'd say, what the hell.

So you'd go ahead and mop them up and if nobody came in, when they were completely out to your satisfaction, why you'd gather up your stuff and you had a choice. We weren't required to carry ours out, but you really didn't have that much gear. You had a fire pack, and you had a parachute, sometimes they'd throw in other things like a two-man saw or something like that. You were supposed to take your gear to the nearest trail, or the nearest point where it could be positively identified where it was and leave it for one of the district packers to pick up and take



out, if you wanted to. I don't think I ever did, actually it's kind of dumb to leave it laying out there and make a packer go all the way in after it, when you can easily carry it out.

The amount of weight is nothing, usually by the time you go out your food's about depleted anyway, so what do you have? Just a couple of parachutes and Pulaski and shovel so we generally just carried everything out. Couple of times a packer came in and got there while we were still on the fire. So then we didn't have to carry anything out, because he was there, you just helped him load everything up and let him take it and we walked out.

KT: When you mentioned you were almost out of food, I was curious what kind of food they sent you out with?

PD: It was good. They had rations that were all prepacked, they were, depending on what kind of fire it was, they were somewhat like the WWII C-Rations. Which I was plenty familiar with, [laughs] having just gotten out of the service. But I didn't mind them, I was never touchy about what I ate, and it was good food. And they had a lot of things, like on bigger fires, they'd throw out boxed rations, like canned ham, this sort of thing, canned stuff. Never any fresh food. Really as a jumper you're never on a fire very long, because the whole purpose of the jumpers was to go in and get them while they were little. And if they got very big, by then the district people got there and it wasn't your fire anymore anyway. So whether you got it under control and didn't get it under control, you were off of it in just a day or so. Very seldom were you ever on a fire more than a day or two days because that's the way it was, you either got it out and left or somebody came in a relieved you. Your function was just an assault force to go in and get it quick.

So you really weren't there long enough to worry very much about rations. A person could easily have gone in for the length of time we were there without any rations at all. It's nice to have them and I know there would have been a lot of complaints, but a person could have survived easily for the day or a day and a half you were going to be in there without any rations. So it wasn't a thing you worried about. Rations were good, good food sometimes. One we didn't. [laughs]

KT: You want to tell us about it?

PD: Oh we'd, this was after—I don't know which fire it was, but they had a big project fire someplace and where they threw out huge rations that came in big wooden boxes, and after the fire, somebody had gone around and picked up all the stuff that wasn't used and put it in one of those boxes and nailed the lid back on it again. Somehow when that box came back into the jumper station, they thought it had never been opened so they put it back on the line with the rations. So we went over to a fire in Idaho, it was supposed to be an eight-man fire, there were eight of us that went over there, but when we got there it was too small so only four of us jumped. But all the rations they had were these big rations, so they pushed this big eight-man box out for us because that was all there was. [laughs]

So we went and put the fire out, it was a pretty easy fire so we decided it was time to go eat. So we took a Pulaski and ripped the top off that box, and what was in it was about 20 pounds of coffee, and there must have been 60 cans of condensed milk [laughs] and really nothing else. One little can of canned potatoes which we shared. A lot of sugar, I remember that. I don't know how many pounds of sugar. All it was was junk which hadn't been used on the previous fire. So we drank a lot of coffee. They had thrown water into us and we took a 5-gallon can—one of those square 5-gallon cans and cut the end out of it and set it on a burning stump that was in the middle of the fire. Filled it about half full of water and dumped about two pounds of coffee in it. [laughs] We'd go over a dip our canteen cups in that and dump a can of condensed milk and a bunch of sugar in it and drank it. We were on that one about a day and a half, and that's really all we had, very rich coffee. Mostly condensed milk and sugar. But that was really the only time we didn't have good rations, and that was pretty funny.

KT: At that time, they didn't rely on radio contact like they do now, did they?

PD: They had radios, but we sure didn't use them much, they weren't really very satisfactory. That was before transistors, all the radio gear was hot cathode tubes and when you throw one of them out of a plane it seemed like they very seldom worked. They just wouldn't stand the banging around. Nowadays they work fine I bet everybody could carry a little walkie talkie now because they are sturdy, but they did have radios, but I never had one on a fire. I don't believe I ever used one, I used one in training, but I never did use them, never was on a fire where we had a radio. They weren't really that important to us. I think they were especially good if maybe there had been an injury or something like that, they would have thrown a radio out so you could have given or taken instructions or so forth to somebody. There were very few injuries.

KT: Were there ever any injuries while you were a smokejumper?

PD: Not in any crew I was on, never even a sprained ankle, pretty safe crew. The main thing that is apt to happen is maybe scratches from coming down through the trees, maybe a sprained ankle, or something, maybe a broken finger from where you had your fingers through the shroud lines. That was not an uncommon thing at all, to have somebody break or strain a finger really bad. Because you're usually fading to get into a little clearing as you are coming down. And you'll have your hands up in the risers and straining and pulling to try to get 30 feet farther to miss a tree or something. And if that chute happens to get caught in a limb or something, and you're pulling down here, it just pops your hand back, just wang, because you have your fingers hooked right in the shroud lines. Finger injuries were kind of common, but nothing serious, just sore fingers.

KT: Were you aware of any social prejudices?

PD: I don't think so. For one thing I was only about 22—23, 22 years old, I guess, and I didn't think much about that sort of thing then. But I don't think there was really anything, maybe we

just didn't think about it. We were concerned about other things, I guess, we just didn't worry about it, [laughs] about prejudices.

KT: But in terms of the guys on the crews it wasn't evident at all?

PD: Not at all that I know of, there maybe have been, but there sure wasn't where I was. Between the district people and the jumpers there was, I think in certain cases, maybe a little ill feeling, between certain district people and certain jumpers. Maybe some of the jumpers thought they were a little elite, or maybe, [laughs] some of the district people thought they were a bunch of knothheads. But even there I didn't run into much of that where I was.

KT: What were some of your off-duty activities during training?

PD: Not very much, really. We did all our training out at Nine Mile, of course some of the people had cars, but a lot of us didn't. I didn't ever have a car while I was out there, so you couldn't just jump in your car and come into Missoula. You could probably get in, if you wanted to. I think that maybe a little of it was the group that you associated with. The bunch I associated with were pretty much a bunch of college kids that were trying to make enough money to go back to school one more year. So you really didn't go out and whoop it up much. So when you were off duty you pretty much just laid around and read, or, that's about it, laid around and read. But I suppose there were some, I know there were some, I know that there were some of the guys out there who were lot bigger partiers and they usually found a way to get to town for the weekends. But the group I was with didn't, they were pretty quiet. Good kids. [laughs]

KT: So during the off season you went back to school?

PD: Oh yeah, anytime I wasn't jumping I was going to college.

KT: And you would work with the smokejumpers just for the summer?

PD: Just through the summer. One fall, I didn't go back fall quarter, we, when they jumper season ended why we were working on a project way up south of Summit surveying. And the job was was going to keep right on going and we were making pretty good money. My brother and I and a couple of other guys were up there surveying. We were still drawing jumper wage which was a good deal better than just a rod man on a surveying crew. And they were willing to keep us on, so we didn't go back fall quarter, we hadn't made that much money, [laughs] ever. So we just stayed on the survey crew until the snow got so deep we couldn't anymore which was about the first of November. Then we had to quit then and there wasn't anymore jobs so we had to terminate. That's about it as far as I can remember.

KT: What were some of the planes that you would jump from?

PD: At the time that I was jumping here, out of Missoula, they only used three different kinds of planes. They had the old Curtiss Travel Airs which were about a, I suppose a 1927 vintage. That was the littlest one and we took those if we just had a two-man fire. If we had anything bigger than that we used the old Ford Trimotors. That was what was used, I suppose more than anything, because that fit the size of jumper crews that were going out more than anything. And they were really good, they were awfully slow, it took an awful long time to get to a fire because their top speed was slower than most people driving their cars. [laughs] And then they had the old C-47s or DC-3s, I guess they called them. It was the army C-47, from WWII and they had a couple of those out there. I guess I never did jump out of one on a fire. I jumped out on one on training, but I was never on a fire where we used a C-47. They were okay, got there fast, and they used the C-47s a lot for moving guys around, like if you had a crew that was going from here to Grangeville or something to work on project, they'd usually just fly you over. They were a good transport plane.

KT: Did you have a favorite plane?

PD: Well, I suppose the old Trimotors were the best. They were slow and no wind blast when you jumped out of them, no wind blast when you jumped out of them, easy to get out of. They were okay, I don't think there was any great favoritism. The old Trimotors were antiques even then, so you had a big place in your heart, [laughs] for this old workhorse that was still out there pounding away. Yeah, even in 1948 Trimotors were old, old planes, so were the Travel Airs, for that matter. Down in New Mexico they used a little different planes, somewhat, they had a Canadian—what did they call that—a Noorduyn. They jumped out of that a lot. Which is a small plane, something like the Travel Air, maybe a little bigger than the Travel Air, but I never did jump out of it. I guess that's all we used, we didn't have anything other than those when I was there. They'd come to pick you up, occasionally in a different plane. If you walked out, say to Orofino or somewhere, they might pick you up with a different plane. But the planes that were geared up for jumping you could take the door off and have a place to hook your static line and so forth were those three.

[Break in audio]

PD: I do think it's kind of nice to have had the experience to know exactly how to go about fighting fire. Or at least a way to go about fighting fire.

KT: Has that been a help to you since you were a smokejumper?

PD: Oh sure, I have been on two or three places where somebody's campfires would start to run. Pitiful. [laughs] You'd think their common sense would tell them more of what to do, run around and stamp on them and things like that. [laughs] I think you don't realize how much you learn about fighting fire in the Forest Service. They just seem second nature now, but I guess you didn't really, or somebody didn't know. I'd grown up in the central part of the state out on a ranch and we'd always have prairie fires and stuff to fight so we pretty well knew how to go

about putting a fire out before I ever went to the jumpers. I'm sure some of these people came from the east and this really did require fire training.

KT: Can you describe a typical jump?

PD: A typical fire jump?

KT: Yeah.

PD: There isn't really too much to them [laughs] It's just a means of getting to the fire. We'd be, oh say, out here, if you were on standby out here at Hale Field, why very often the calls would come in during the night. Because most of the lightning storms come through late in the afternoon, they still do, it wasn't any different then. So the fires would flare up and get reported in the evening, or during the night when it was too late for anybody to jump that night. So a lot of times you'd get called out way early in the morning, it might be 3:00 in the morning. They'd want to start, get out, and get your gear together because there had been 15 fires called in during the night. So you'd want to get on them right at daylight if you possibly could. So I'd say that was a real common thing to get roused out during the night. And you'd get up and usually eat a big breakfast, roust the cook out, and eat a big breakfast and get on the plane just about daylight, maybe 4:00 in the morning or something like that, when it started to get daylight in the summer time.

You didn't have to worry too much about getting your gear on the plane, they usually had all that lined up anyway, that was on before you ever got there. But you always checked to make sure everything was there that you needed. And the overhead people were always worried about all the rations and the fire packs, so you didn't really have to worry about that. Other than you always did, you always checked to make sure there was stuff there. And a couple of times I remember, you were all ready to go and loaded up in the plane when it was still too dark to take off. We were flying out of Hale field down here and there were no runway lights or anything, it had to be daylight before they'd take off. I remember setting down here, oh I suppose the one runway, the end of it must have been about where the Mormon church is down here on Bancroft, down in here somewhere. And you'd taxi down there and wait until it got daylight enough to take off, which might be 15, 20, 30 minutes, just sitting there waiting, until the pilot thought it was okay to take off.

And then you'd fly, you usually knew just where you were going. Because you, before you ever left, you got a map with the location of the fire on it, you had to have that, so you knew where you were, and so you knew where you'd have to walk out to when you got done. So you knew where you were going and you'd fly where ever it was. Out of Missoula here, there wasn't hardly anywhere that was more than an hour or two away, that we jumped on around here. An hour or two, even in a Ford Trimotor was 150 miles, and we didn't go further than 150-mile radius. I guess there were a few. Most of the fires here in Region 1 were within 150 of Missoula, so you really weren't on the plane all that long.

And then you'd go out—I guess when you decided who was going to jump first was probably how you happened to set down in the plane, I don't know. [laughs] The guy closest to the door got up and hooked up when it came time, and the spotter, of course—they'd make a pass over the area and he'd locate a spot that he thought was a safe place to jump into. And he'd direct the pilot to fly over it and he'd throw out a little drift chute so he could measure how much wind drift there was. And then, usually on about the next pass over the fire, why then they'd compensate for the wind and by then, the first guy would be out on the step ready to go. Depended on, usually, if it was just a two-man fire, you just jumped one guy at a time. One guy would get out and jump, and then they'd make another circle, and the second guy would go. If it was out of the Trimotor or one of the C-47s you'd jump more than that, you'd jump two three guys at a time, two guys anyway out of the Trimotor. We'd jump, practice jumping, we'd jump five at a time, out of the C-47s. But the more people you'd have jump—

I'm getting away from your question. [laughs]

KT: That's okay.

PD: But the more people you'd have jump—at one pass, the more spread out you get and if you happen to be a little bit late coming out of the plane, happened to be the fifth guy, you might be a long ways from the fire because that plane is moving along pretty fast up there. And if you're up in pretty rugged country, why you might have a two hour walk from where you landed to get back to where you were jumping. So there's a definite advantage to just jumping one or two at a time, because they're coming right on the spot you want them.

Then, to get back to your question, of course when you get down you generally don't worry too much about your parachute since the fire is the main thing. You just leave it hanging up or whatever, if it's hanging up, if you happen to come in where there's enough timber to get snagged up in a tree. So you'd get your pack, if you could, your fire pack, so you had your tools and head off on the fire. If it was where somebody happened to be in charge of a fire, say eight people, so there was somebody who was directing operations, why he'd make up his mind what to do and tell you what to do. And we pretty much worked, well I won't say individually, you worked—depending on the situation where you were, maybe you'd all want to work on one line on one side of the fire, if that happened to be running that way. If it was not running much, you'd usually split up a couple would go on one side, a couple on another, wherever it looked like the dangerous spots where and worked together.

I would say there really wasn't much as far as having a big foreman who directed activities and that. Even though there was somebody in charge it was pretty much decided by the group. You know, "I think we ought to go over there and do this," and another would say, "Maybe so, but don't you think we should probably get somebody up there?" and finally we'd just agree about how to do and you'd go ahead and do it. But I'm sure this really wasn't the case on bigger fires, which I never really got on. I'm sure that when you get a 16- or 32-man fire you have to have a chain of command, somebody directing activity, but I really, in the jumpers never got on that

kind of fire, I did out of the jumpers but not while I was jumping.

KT: What was your most memorable jump?

PD: Well, I'd say the most—most memorable—I think just because so many strange things happened was one up in Glacier Park. It just wasn't like the usual jump—it was way high. Saint Nicholas is a real Matterhorn type peak down in the south end of Glacier Park, Mount Saint Nicholas. And I had looked at it all the summer I was working on the Flathead Forest. I had done a little mountain climbing and it interested me and I really wanted to try and climb St. Nicholas someday. And we happened to be on project that summer working on West Glacier and so when they got the fire call, to save time, they were getting a little short of jumpers here in Missoula. They just gathered up our gear and put in on the plane and flew the plane to Kalispell and we drove down to West Glacier from Kalispell.

So it saved us coming all the way to Missoula, getting on a plane and flying all the way to Glacier Park. They just came up and met us in Kalispell. So we went up, it was just a little two-man fire and it was way up on St. Nicholas, it was right in the very top of the timber on St. Nicholas. And I was pretty excited about that because I wanted to see St. Nicholas from the air. I wanted to, from right on top, [laughs] to see what it looked like, to see if it was possible for an amateur like me to climb it.

So when we got there, I really wasn't paying any attention to anything because I was trying to see St. Nicholas. And when we circled over the fire, we were probably 700, 800 feet above the fire. We had to jump awful low because the wind was blowing, we were at a really high altitude. So when we made our pass over the fire for our spotter to throw out his drift chute and so forth, we were right on the level with the top of St. Nicholas, we were right there. I could have thrown a rock out of the plane and made it land right on the top of St. Nicholas, the Matterhorn spire was just off the tip of the wing, boy that was exciting. [laughs] But anyway we went over, and I jumped first, and the fire was really small. And I jumped first and was really lucky, it was windy and hot and I came right on the edge of the fire. I hung up in a tree, but my feet were touching the ground. And I hung up in the tree right, in fact, I was so close to the edge of the fire, that if it had flared up it would have burned my parachute, I was that close to it. But the fire didn't amount to anything, it would have gone out if we hadn't ever had jumped.

The other fellow came around, and he jumped, same place I did, but he got caught in a cross draft. He went over and just before he hit, he went over a cliff which dropped off, he hadn't touched the ground yet, so the minute he went over the cliff he was, of course, 1,000 feet up in the air again out over the canyon. And he went on and disappeared from my view. But I knew he was okay, he was coming down all right. And he landed, he was probably—oh, I don't know—he must have been at least a mile from the fire and way, way below it down in this canyon under these towering cliffs. [laughs]

So I went ahead, to back up a minute, when I landed, one of the things that made it unique was

when I landed, I came down and I hung up in a tree and I bounced a little bit but my feet were touching the ground. I was kind of setting in my harness, and I had landed right in the middle of a whole bunch of little weasels, baby weasels. I don't know how many there were, they had absolutely no fear of me, they'd run right over my shoes, and you'd reach down and pick them up. They must have been at least half of a dozen of them, and that just, I couldn't believe it. It just didn't seem real to me, and this was, they just couldn't have ever seen a human before, it was halfway up Mt. St. Nicholas way up in Glacier Park. They had never seen a human before I know, but that was all kind of funny.

But anyway, I got out of my chute and went over to put the fire out, before the other fellow ever got there, I had the fire completely out. It wasn't big enough to jump on anyway it took about 30 minutes to put every spark out. So along in the evening he finally came walking in. [laughs] Anyway, at that time we decided to spend the night, it was getting dark by then. We were testing out some sleeping bags that they were trying out in the jumpers and they were made out of brown paper. Just like a great big paper bag that was laminated, several layers of paper laminated together with tar, and the things were really pretty good. The idea was that they were disposable, you didn't bother to carry them out, they'd burn or anything. You'd use them one time and you'd throw them away. But they had a problem in that they were really slick, if there was any slope to the mountain at all, they'd go just like toboggan. Where there was bare grass you'd go to bed and if you turned over in the night, [laughs] you'd find yourself bombing down the mountainside. [laughs]

So that was all we had for sleeping bags and we walked up the hill a little ways and found a game trail that was all dug out in the hillside. And we figured we could make our paper sleeping bags lay in that game trail so we got in and went to bed. That danged trail must have been the trail to water for whatever was up there, I don't know, big animals, anyway. I imagine elk. maybe sheep or goats, deer, whatever. But that have must have been the thoroughfare for the animals, that game trail where we had our beds. Because all night long you'd hear footsteps, they'd plunk, plunk, plunk and they'd just get so close they had to be—gonna step right on you. Then they'd smell you or something and there'd be a big snort and some crashing and then you'd think, I'm gonna go to sleep. And just about the time you'd start getting to sleep, you'd hear this thud, thud, thud and another one would come and it went on the entire night. I don't ever think we ever really went to sleep. There were animals crashing through the brush all night. [laughs] And then the next day we walked out.

And that was the day before the Mann Gulch fire. When we got out they told us all these guys had been killed over there. Nobody knew who and we were all pretty worried. I had a brother jumping and I didn't know where he was. I didn't know if he was in Mann Gulch or wherever. We didn't know clear until the next day when I got back to Missoula, who was actually was involved in it. I'd say that was my most memorable fire just because so many things happened.

KT: Okay, I was going to ask you about the Mann Gulch Fire. Did that seem to effect the attitudes of the jumpers?



PD: I don't think so, it came pretty close to the end of the season, and really there weren't all that many more fire jumps after the Mann Gulch fire. So I wasn't around a lot longer, a few weeks. But it seemed to me that the people were more inflamed or worked up about the Mann Gulch fire from outside the jumper project than from within it. It seemed like everybody in there knew that fighting fire was pretty dangerous, and we had some bad luck, and it was pretty bad luck. But I don't think anybody had any particularly bad feelings about it. Of course, everybody lost a bunch of pretty good friends, but that was no different than war times. Most of us had just gotten out of the service, so I think that maybe had a little effect too among the jumpers. I'd say practically everybody in the jumpers was a veteran, and you'd been through the same thing just a couple of years before and it wasn't like it would be now if the same thing happened.

KT: That's pretty interesting. Do you have any other stories that you can remember?

PD: Lots of stories but most of them aren't true. [laughs] They were probably true the first time they were told. [laughs] After the story gets around awhile, it doesn't resemble the original incident too much. There are lots of good stories about what happened jumping but none ever happened to me. My life in the jumpers was pretty common. I didn't have any of those hair-raising [laughs] experiences that some of them did.

KT: How did being a smokejumper affect your career choices later?

PD: As directly affecting it, nothing. You learned a lot of things from the jumpers. When I graduated from college I went off as an electrical engineer. And there was never really anything directly that a person did in the jumpers that affected what one did with your life. But indirectly I'm sure it did. You learned to deal with situations without having to go to—so somebody to ask them what to do. Because you'd gotten in the habit of being self-sufficient in the jumpers and I think probably things like that affected you. And just the fact that it was always an interesting conversation piece. Anybody that had been in the jumpers—people always wanted to talk about it. It was nice to have been a jumper. But it wasn't the sort of thing one would want to make a career out of. But it was really fun to have been a jumper. But I don't think it really made very much difference in a person's choice of a career.

KT: Is there anything else you can think of you might want to share with us?

PD: I don't know, I guess not. I suspect that the attitude of the jumpers now, the few that I've known in recent years is quite a bit different than it was then. But then the jumpers are quite a different organization than it was then. It's gotten to be a time where it isn't just a bunch of college kids. More people that do that for a living now. At the time I was jumping we still—we still called it the jumper project, it was still an experimental thing. It had never been accepted as a sure thing at the time we were there. So it was still a, you felt you were working on a kind of experimental project to see if it would work. But that isn't the case now, it's been in

existence so long, it's just another job in the Forest Service. It's just a job to be done and that's bound to affect the attitude of the jumpers.

I don't really know anybody out there now, I've known people through the years. So I can't really compare and say you are a lot different than you were then. But I expect due to the change of the makeup of the people, of the crews that they probably have quite a different attitude. I'm sure just by reading these things in the paper about all the—comments in the paper about them trying to move jumpers out to locations scattered throughout the state, instead of keeping the main headquarters here. And there is a lot of disagreement with that idea by the people that are jumping just from the letters to the editor in the Missoulian. That would never have entered anybody's mind at the time I was jumping, we wouldn't care where you'd jump. I can't imagine anybody caring if they jumped out of Missoula or Seeley Lake or where, that wasn't even a consideration.

KT: I'd sure like to thank you for this interview.

PD: You're welcome.

[End of Interview]