

Smithsonian Folklife Interview

Keith Wolferman
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Interviewer: Bob Beckley

[Tape begins with Keith Wolferman already speaking.]

Keith Wolferman (KW): That's my nickname. In case you want to know how I got that nickname, I used to play a lot of rugby for a team called the Maggots. They were giving me a hard time one time about why I was so stupid, and I told them it was because I got run over by a rubber-tired skidder in a logging accident, and they thought that was pretty funny 'cause this guy was giving me a hard time as a logger, so. And it just kind of stuck. They called me Skidder and then they just shortened it to Skid. So.

With that out of the way, I guess the best place to start would be how I became aware of smokejumping, and at what point I became kind of interested in it. I guess as a kid I was always interested in aviation. My dad spent a number of years in the U.S. Air Force, and we had traveled to Germany and Las Vegas, Nevada [a few words inaudible] and seen some air shows. I was always interested in the parachuting aspect of aviation as well.

Shortly after my dad got out of the Air Force and we came back to my parents' home, which was here in Missoula, Montana, and I just seem to remember always being acutely aware of the presence of the smokejumpers [in the] community. There was the base, which was just kind of this nebulous place out near by the airport, where every once in a while you could see some smokejumpers doing training jumps out by Blue Mountain just [above] the highway. Or you'd hear about a fire where they dropped [a couple] jumpers in. Friends that had uncles or fathers, close family friends that were smokejumpers were always... In any kind of a young boy's atmosphere growing up in Missoula, if a kid said, oh, my dad is a jumper, a smokejumper, it was always like, immediately that drew attention. Or his stature seemed to increase a little bit among your little gang of friends. And they always just seemed to be these larger than life characters that were living all these adventures and going to these exotic places and wild places. And it just always seemed like a really neat thing.

And then as I became more interested in the aspect of fire in the aviation world, I was offered, had the opportunity, was lucky enough to take a forestry program in high school—Missoula County High Schools had a forestry program in the junior and senior year—and I was fortunate enough to have a really, really cool teacher named Mister Harold [Knapp?]. And he knew a lot of people in fire and had an extensive background with the Forest Service, and he taught us a lot

about the basics of fire ecology, and things that are seeming fairly cutting-edge now always kind of came natural to him. So that kind of ignited a little bit of an interest there.

I always thought of the jumpers as being a bit larger than life earlier, but I guess it was more of a, just an unattainable thing. And so I never really thought I had a shot at making it in the smokejumper program, until I was involved in fire for quite a while. I fought fire locally on a ranger district. The first fires I went on were helitack fires where we flew in and spent the night, put out a small fire and hiked out the next day. And those were when I was on trail crew. So I spent some time on a trail crew, and the next year I went on what's called a BD crew, a brush disposal crew, which is basically a crew of people that go out with chain saws and take care of the messes that logging operations leave behind; kind of clean things up and put control lines around the logging units, then we go in and burn them; get rid of the logging slash. Then I did a couple years on a fire engine, on a local district here. It's what they call smoke chaser, where you can go in, helitack a fire with a helicopter, or possibly hike into it, or if you can get to it with, by road you drive a [word unclear] fire engine in there. And I had this bright idea that it might be easier to get a career-conditional appointment with the Forest Service and possibly get on a hot-shot crew, further my career a little more if I went into the military. So I did three years active duty in the army; a year-and-a-half of that was overseas in Germany, and really enjoyed that.

But after I got back I was looking to get my foot in the door and start with the Forest Service again, and I called the few contacts that I had on the Lolo National Forest, and I said I was interested in doing trails or district fire crew, or what's called a hot shot crew. Hot shot crews are highly organized, twenty person [hand?] crews that are a national resource and travel all over the country and hit the big fires. They see the action, the extreme fire behavior, the very different types of fuel types all over the country, and so it's a good way of getting experience to get into jumping.

I really enjoyed my hot shot time, and I worked pretty hard at kind of staying focused on it, because I realized once I made it to the hot shot crew, that's mainly the grounds where the jumpers recruit some of their quality people, and if I played my cards right I'd have a good shot of getting into smokejumpers. And the hot shots and the jumpers have a kind of real strong rivalry, but there's a pretty deep respect that runs both ways, especially the jumper organization for the hot shots, because it's a real tough, tough job that they have. And I took a lot of ribbing and kidding from the guys on the hot shot crew about the fact that, oh, he just wants to go and be a jumper. He's just using us as a stepping stone. But I think by being honest about that my hot shot team superintendents, Steve Karkanen and Margaret [Nurdy?] were aware of the fact that I wanted to go and become a smokejumper, and they worked pretty hard in making that a reality for me too.

So in 1990, after two years of shot crew, I was accepted into the smokejumper program as what was called an alternate. And that meant that if they chose to hire extra jumpers that season due to severe fire conditions, that they'd be able to pick me up. And they didn't that year, so I had to wait until '91. I trained in 1991, started out in a class of thirty people, and twenty-six graduated. We lost one guy the first day, On the PT test. [He just couldn't do the run.] Quit. And lost a couple more in rookie camp. And then one after we got back. They just chose to quit.

So after that rookie training at that time entailed seven to eight training jumps, and your first jump is what's known in the jumper world as "The Whole World is a Jump Spot", meaning you could do anything you wanted on that parachute and you would still make it into the jump spot. And then the jump spots get progressively smaller, with your last one being an intentional jump into a pretty continuous canopy of timber, about thirty to forty feet tall, with the idea that you'll hang up in the timber and do what's called a let-down, and take a bird's nest coil we call it, a three-quarter inch tubular flat nylon, and we take that out of a [word inaudible] pocket sewn into our jump suit and feed it through some rings in your jump suit and tie it onto your parachute riser, and then you [propel?] to the ground. We don't do that anymore because it's, there's a risk that someone could get hurt pretty badly if they broke out of a tree and fell to the ground, which is in fact kind of what happened to me on my timber jump as a rookie. They were yelling at us from the ground with a big bullhorn, and when you get in the door of the aircraft it's incredibly loud because of a slipscreen coming by off the wing and past the door. And then a spotter yells at you the commands, but the actual command to exit the aircraft is always a slap, 'cause that's a tactile signal and it can't be mistaken for a verbal signal. It's always in the aircraft. So the first thing you notice on the first jump as a rookie is how incredible, how incredibly quiet it gets all of a sudden. And you look up at your canopy and it is literally the most beautiful thing you've ever seen in your life. I was kind of flabbergasted that the whole system actually did work as well as it did. In the door on your first jump, you couldn't spit if somebody had a gun to your head. But it's not a bad scare, where you're totally freaked out and you just kind of slip into this panic mode. It's just more like, you're scared shitless but you know there's no backing out this time. And then your mind just clicks into all the training you've done in the last month as soon as you get that slap. And there's no question about it, your muscle memory takes over and physically you just blast out the door, and it's do your count, look up and check your canopy, it's open.

So on our timber jump we're waiting for the bullhorn to start talking to you, and it's a no-wind jump, beautiful spring morning, nice and cool in the Nine Mile Valley, west of Missoula here. And I'm coming down and I hear 'em say—and the spotter told me in the door of the aircraft, he said, the smoke's drifting uphill a little bit so make sure that you land below the fire a ways. So I got downslope of the fire and started working the turns and coming in with the parachute, and the guy's talking to me on the bullhorn, Walt Smith. And I hear him say, okay that's good, stay nice and tight. You want a tight body position going into the trees. And he said, now pull the breaks and slow your canopy down so that the canopy will cap the trees rather than kind of fly right through them. And I heard the branches start to break, and I stayed nice and tight, and I felt myself slow down, and the trees bowing, and then I heard a loud pop, and the top broke out of the tree that I was in, and I fell about twenty feet to the ground. Luckily I kept my feet together and stayed tight to do a good roll, but my knees flew up, I hit my reserve and the reserve jammed my helmet and I got a fat lip and that was about it. And my canopy proceeded to just kind of drape to the ground and went right into the signal fire they'd been using for the smoke indicator. So the trainers came over and grabbed it and wadded it up real quick to keep it from melting any more than it had. They thought that was pretty funny. But everybody was pretty freaked out, and I was actually really surprised at the amount of concern that they showed, because they wouldn't let me move, and they had a guy come over and check me out.... The most medically oriented person; we had a lot of EMTs and a real strong first-aid program but it, Bob Carlsons, it was, he said, you know, I'm a veterinarian. [Laughter] And so, I said, all right, we'll take that, you know. [Laughs] And he wanted to check out my neck and back and really make sure I didn't have any

spinal injuries. So he asked me if I was okay, he kept asking that, I said yeah, yeah, I'm fine. And I did, I felt fine. But the next day when I swung my legs around to get out of bed I could barely move because all my back muscles and stuff had been stretched really good. But I was okay. That was toward the end of rookie training anyway.

In 1995 they had a fire job over in Washington state where a couple people got hurt fairly severely, and they did somewhat of an investigation and tried to figure out what events led up to that and could it have been prevented. And they tended to feel it would be beneficial to the rookies to get more training jumps. So now they get fifteen training jumps before they're signed off on the smokejumper [word inaudible].

That's something that's always impressed me though. The minute you get your certificate and they pin those rookie wings on you, you're a rookie, you're kind of just a drone plebe that they run pretty hard and you're expected to hike down the hill to get a [keebee?] of water, which is like a five gallon box of water, weighs about fifty pounds. You're expected to clean the tower, check parachutes, pull weeds, whatever's needed around the place. And it's a real fun, fun year because you spend all your time learning so much. You're just a little sponge absorbing everything that goes on around you. I'd see guys downtown at the Missoula Club or the bar or something, that were former jumpers. I talked to a guy named Jeff Barnes one time, and he said, boy, your rookie year's a magical time. Don't get hung up in any of the political, backbiting, rumor mill bullshit that goes on, you know, at the base. Focus on your job, learn as much as you can, stay safe, and enjoy it, you know. I talked to some other older jumpers that are doctors or what not in town now. Anybody I could, just ask 'em, what do you think? How was your career? Tell me about your jumps. They said, keep a journal. Take lots of pictures. A lot of those guys say, when you're doing it you're just doing it, then you get busy. You don't even realize how fast it's going by and what kind of memories you're experiencing right now. So I tried to do that. I still do take quite a few pictures. I like, after every fire, to assemble the crew, whether it's helispot, or an old burned out tree, a snag, or something, and taking a picture of the guys you were with on that fire. And it's amazing how one simple picture will just bring back a flood of memories of all the experiences you've had, even if it's only a couple-day fire. That's really the catalyst for triggering it.

I think the other thing that's really super-strong in the jumper community is our oral history, because so much of our knowledge is passed on. On-the-job training and just talking to other jumpers at times when things are quiet and you kind of decompress. You learn so much. And it's amazing how you can talk to a guy that jumped maybe two years. Oh, I jumped from '54 to '56, or something. And he'll say, one time I was on this one fire and we had this situation and this tree was really hazardous and we couldn't get in there. And we cut it down with a two-man crosscut saw, and this is what we did. And you go, holy crap, that's such a simple way of doing things, and we don't do that nowadays or we hadn't thought about that. And you'll get on a fire a year later, a month later, and say, hey, I talked to this guy one time and he said we should try this. Or he didn't say we should try this, but he told me what they did and I think it'll work now. And we try that and it works, and it's amazing. Or the guys that get off the wrong fork of the trail and get lost.

So many of these things, the job technologically has advanced so much, with aircraft improvement and equipment improvement and lighter-weight materials. But the job's still the job. You've got an ungodly amount of gear to pack out if you ever have to haul that stuff out of the woods. And when you're young it's a hard job. And you keep hearing these older guys talk about how hard it is to stay in shape every year and come back and be ready for the PT test and to be fire-ready physically. And no matter how hard you train, you can be a physical specimen, it's still gonna kick your ass. But these younger, healthier guys, especially the real fitness-oriented ones, they tend to bounce back quicker and be ready to go for the next go-round.

But it's one of the few things I tell people that I've done in my life that was every bit as cool as I expected it to be. Because I've done a lot of things, you know. I was in the army reserves after I got out of active duty, and I went on a wartime deployment to Uzbekistan after Operation Enduring Freedom kicked off. Been to Egypt twice, Central America, all over Australia and New Zealand for a year hitchhiking, and seen a lot of really cool places and met some nice people, but you have this preconceived notion before you do something like that. And you think you know what it's going to be like, even though a little voice in the back of your head says, well, it'll probably be different. But you still have these hopes and dreams, want to see what it's all about. And smokejumping is one of the things that I've done in my life, that it wasn't exactly what I thought, some things were different, but it was, it so far exceeds any of your expectations. I don't know, I mean, I guess, you tend to forget the bad things; how really, truly miserable you are sometimes on fires. Otherwise if you remembered that to a 'T' you probably wouldn't do it any more. [Laughs] And you get back out there and say, Aw crap, here we are again. Look at this. What a mess. This fire's a piece of crap, you know. Oh geez. But it's just amazing how, when you get a little break, or you'll just be flying on a plane, and now as a spotter they really drum into you, look at who you've got on your load. See what the guys are looking like on your plane load when you're coming up on a fire. If it's a tough fire, or if it's kind of sketchy, safety-wise, how hard are these guys going to [run it]? Are they new guys or old guys? And so you kind of get in the habit of assessing the people that you have on your load and looking back among those faces. And I'm really surprised at how touched you are about how deeply you care for those people. And it's not that I don't have human emotions, but it's just a lot of times it just seems like for me it's really easy to be kind of a hard case and not this mushy kind of person. But you look at those people on that plane, and you care about them every bit as deeply as anybody you've ever known in your life. Family, friends, anybody. And it's this shared experience.

Bob Beckley (BB): Can you talk about what a spotter is? What a spotter does?

KW: A spotter would equate to a jump master in the military, but it goes a lot deeper than that. 'Cause on a military aircraft you've got people that have set jobs on the aircraft. The air crew, and then you have the jump master, which is assigned to the jumpers. Whereas in the smokejumper program we've worked really hard over the years to integrate the jumpers with the pilots as part of the air crew. And what you do is, when a fire call comes in, we get the maps and we get the resource order or jump request for jumpers that comes from the dispatch office, and we find out where we're going, and the top ten jumpers or twelve jumpers on the load, on the jump list. It's a rotating jump list; when you come in on a fire you go to the bottom, then you

rotate to the top, and they usually put a foreman and a squad leader on each load. And you'll go in there and operations will blow the siren; everybody comes into the ready room, suits up, puts on all their rough terrain protective jump suits, and underneath that jump suit you wear what's called a packout bag, which is a large, top-loader type backpack, frameless, and that's what you put all your jump gear in once you get on the ground.

So once everybody's suited up the spotter gives them their safety inspection, makes sure their equipment's put in correctly, and then loads them on the aircraft and then maintains control of the smokejumpers for the duration of the mission. And then also, once you're over the fire, he'll confer with the lead smokejumper on the load and ascertain what looks like to be the best jump spot, and then he'll drop wind drift indicators to determine what the winds are, and we jump from fifteen hundred feet with two-person sticks: two people, each orbit, go out of the aircraft. And if it's a really tight jump spot they may decide to single-stick it or drop one person at a time. They say you may only have the same wind conditions in mountainous terrain for up to twelve to fifteen minutes before conditions change, so things can change in the middle of a load, and it behooves us to get an idea of our release point and where we want to drop the jumpers, and give them the best chance of [going back with the winds we have and getting another jump spot]. And then the spotter will, once the jumper's on the ground, he communicates with them, and also notifies the local ranger district that's using the jumpers who the jumper in charge is and gives them a fire size-up and any other information that's pertinent information. Then they'll come in at about two hundred and fifty feet and drop cargo, which is what we call doorbundles. They're just fire packs with two and a half day's food and water, sleeping bag, hand tools, stuff like that. So the spotter will kick all the cargo, and then do the fifteen minute flight following check-ins, where we call, tell people on the way back to the base, and let them know what our location is, that operations are normal. And then afterwards we'll supervise re-loading the plane and do the paperwork, [master action] for the jump mission, and turn that in.

BB: How about injuries? Have there been injuries where you've had to evacuate smokejumpers, and where you've been a spotter and someone's been hurt? How do the jumpers handle a jumper's that's down?

KW: Most of the time it's assumed that jumping into rough terrain is where the injuries will occur. The one that really scares me is, when you're already on a fire and somebody gets hurt at night. Because then there's no way they can get [lifeline] to you, and you're there for the duration until they can get in and do a medevac.

I've been fortunate in that I've been an EMP since 1993, and I've mostly used my skills for small cuts and blisters and stuff like that. [Icing down] and sprained ankles and stuff like that. I've seen a broken back and helped evacuate a guy who did that. That was tough. It was a really super-steep, bear grass covered slope, and bear grass is a real tough, shiny, slick bunch grass that grows in the high, high elevations around here. And at any given time, with the six people carrying this guy in a litter that we had him in to get him up to a ridge top where a helicopter could pick him up, there was probably two or three people on the ground slipping and falling and we would try not to jostle him. So it was a bad deal.

They've done a couple of things where, if it's down in a hell hole and there's no way you're going to be able to get the guy out by hiking him out, they have a hoist-extraction-capable medium helicopter out of the air force bases at Fairchild and Spokane, Washington, and another one at Malmstrom Air Force Baser in Great Falls, Montana. And I believe the way that works is we call dispatch and dispatch calls Langley, Virginia, and it's the Air Rescue Squadron, you know, and Langley's their central headquarters, and it's the same ones that we launch if an aircraft goes down and an emergency locator transmitter beacon goes off. So that that's the way they receive their dispatching, and those guys come over and they have a guy operating a hoist, and he can go down, and they might be able to send the para-rescue guy down on the [winch]. And they'll check whether the patient's stable, how they're packaged, what they need to do to pick him up, and they'll put him in a litter and they'll hoist him back up in the aircraft and then take him to the nearest hospital. And that's happened a few times.

Like I stated earlier, we have real strong medical training program. We have a really tight relationship with the local hospitals. Doctor Warren [Guffet]'s been awesome as our medical control director for Saint Pat's hospital locally and the [lifeline] program. And what we do is, we open what's called the communications link; and it may be with the aircraft initially but then eventually we can go through the local dispatch on forest radio. And they call a 1-800 number we give them, and we tell them who we are, and we can be in New Mexico, or Arizona, or Oregon, or Idaho, it doesn't matter. And when you say, my name is Keith Wolferman, I'm a smokejumper in Missoula, Montana with the Forest Service. I'm an EMT, we have an injured smokejumper here, and boom. They know what's going on. I tell them the guy's age and, you know, the vitals, and we have the forms that we initiate when we assign people to specific duties. One guy'll say, okay—if we have enough jumpers—you, you and you, you're in charge of the fire. You, you and you, you go cut a helispot. You're in the scribe. You take down all the information. You're the, you know, EMT in charge, tending to the patient. And then the other guy can be like the rescue leader that coordinates everything.

We have equipment set up to where we can do winter rescue. We can do multiple victim plane crash responses. And there used t be a lot more of that that went on, and I think that that was a really valuable asset. Rescue of hunters. I know some McCall smokejumpers that jumped in on a guy that had been shot in the feet with a thirty-ought-six. That's a pretty gnarly injury. They treated him stabilized him. All of our EMTs, even though they're EMT basics, for years, since the days of the old glass IV bottles like on MASH, we've been doing IVs in the field. We have special protocols that allow us to initiate an IV and whatever we can do to stabilize the patient. So that's the first aid program in a nutshell, I guess.

BB: How about the camaraderie amongst jumpers? Can you talk a little bit about that?

KW: It's... You know, you'd like to believe that it's perfect. And in human nature I think that it is as close to perfect as you can get. But you can't get as eclectic a group as with smokejumpers and have everybody get along swimmingly. So we've got some super, hard-core, right-wing

Republican guys. We've got some real groove, hippy kind of people that have strong left-wing tendencies. And it makes for some real stimulating fireside conversations on a lot of these fires.

But like I said earlier in the tape, there's that bond that forms that is so strong, just because of the shared hardships and so-called "good deals", because... Our operations foreman gave a speech last year, and he was getting kind of upset with people coming in, and he said, it just seems like everyone's on this eternal quest for the best deal, and when you get on a fire that's a real sweet fire and everything seems to go well, and it's in a beautiful place, and you work hard and you catch the fire, but then there's some time for some relaxation, and that's called a really good deal. And the camaraderie that's there is pretty amazing. Because you go home and wives... I mean, smokejumper wives are incredible; my wife has supported me through some real tough stuff, family-wise, and they ask, friends will ask my wife, well isn't it hard having him gone like that? Or, isn't it hard worrying about him? Don't you know where he is? And she just said, nope. I know what kind of training he gets, and I know how those guys care for those guys out there, and they're going to do everything they can to make that job as safe as possible.

So I've got bonds to where I don't really realize it until the person decides to take another job and move on. Or go to school, finish up a master's degree, something like that. And there's just this void, and you're kind of bummed out. And I've talked to other friends of mine that I trained with in '91, that went and did mineral exploration in Kazakhstan and Central America, international business people. These are successful people that meet really interesting folks and travel around, and that's always the first thing that they talk about when you ask them how it's going. They say, oh, it's great, I really love what I'm doing. I'm making a scad of money, but God do I miss the people, the quality of the people that I've worked with on a day-to-day basis. It's just what makes the whole program what it is.

And you know, it's really frightening to think about the whims of bureaucracy and how, some day, somebody somewhere could just decide that smokejumping isn't really a viable option for manning fires anymore, and decide to pull the plug. There's those that have talked about that. In this day and age of helicopters and satellite phones, stuff like that, what do we need smokejumpers for? But I don't have a problem with that, because the bottom line is, even with the increased price of aircraft and fuel and the modern technology cost of equipment and training for us, we still have the capability, if needed, to load sixteen people, with food, water and tools for three days and get four hundred miles away, and have time and fuel on board to drop those jumpers and get into another town and land and take on fuel. And that's just amazing.

BB: Last night you said you flew some fires. Can you kind of run us through them, what that was like?

KW: Yeah. It seems that nowadays, in the effort to centralize I guess... It used to be the local ranger district could call and ask for a load of jumpers, see if some were available and we could launch immediately. And that was our bread and butter, was the rapid response of hitting fires on what's called initial attack, keeping them really small and distinguishing them before they became a problem. Because logistically, moving people around a mountainous terrain and

supporting them with food and water and communications, it gets to be a huge hassle once you get more than about ten or twenty folks out there. And we were on standby all day yesterday and nothing happened. But we knew lightning was occurring because we now have computers and lightning maps that show positive or negative strikes, and where exactly they occur, and we zoom in and out of these maps. And we knew that lightning was occurring. And then at eighteen hundred—six o'clock—when we usually get off work, they decided to put us on standby for an hour, and now a lot of these districts aren't sure whether they want to call jumpers or not. And they'll launch an aircraft, and a guy'll go up in a small, fixed-wing, and he'll look at it, and they'll make a plan and they'll decide, and then he'll call the ranger district and they'll call the dispatch center and the dispatch center will fax us something. So we're on our second hour of standby last night, and finally the fax came for dispatch. So we loaded up, we loaded ten jumpers on the PC-3, which is kind of what we call the queen of the fleet. It's a turbine engine converted DC-3 that towed gliders during D-Day. Built in the late '30s, early '40s. It's an incredible airplane. So we loaded up ten guys, take off, and fly up there directly to the fire, and it was burning about mid-slope, right off the Paradise cut-off road between Paradise and St. Regis, Montana. Anybody driving down the highway would have seen the plane circling 'round dropping jumpers. We dropped two guys just below the fire, put their cargo out, and then we started picking up some rain on the windshield, and there was a small isolated rain cell nearby, and they gave us a latitude and longitude location for another fire they wanted to check out.

And it's pretty interesting 'cause we were flying around, you see these fires popping up, and some are staffed with guys that hiked in or got there with their engine, and some aren't. And we have to sort of sort out where we are; and it's pretty easy in some respects, but in other respects you're flying a tight circle, you're looking at maps, and you try to figure out what town that is, and once you figure that out you figure out what drainage and stuff, looking at the maps and a lot of communications with the radio.

Well, we notified dispatch that we couldn't get to that second fire because the rain cell was hovering right around above it and it's pretty turbulent weather in mountainous terrain [a few words unclear], so we kind of circled around behind it, and about that time we got this incredibly horrible roaring static in our head sets on the radio, and I think due to lightning activity or something the radio system went down on the forest. And we'd been having some problem with the radios on the aircraft as well, so we were trying to sort all that out. And we had this circular rainbow—it wasn't really a normal rainbow because instead of being on the horizon, the ground, we're flying around and the sun was low in the sky in the west, and it looked... we're joking with the pilot, hey Joey, you got a rainbow following you, but it was just a circular aura, rainbow colors. And right on that ridgetop out of the corner of my eye I caught just a little orange winking, looked like a small campfire, about the size of a chair seat cushion. And I said, there it is. And so he rolled in to a fairly tight turn, and the guy in back, the spotter, started dropping streamers. And we had the two jumpers ready to go, and the local fire agency called us and said, well the dispatch center's radios are down, so we might just send you home. And we said, geez, we've got two jumpers in the door and the fire's right there. So I told them that we'd dropped streamers and identified a jump spot and were ready to stop this fire and we thought we could do it with the daylight we had left. So they said okay, go ahead and do that, and we kicked those two jumpers out. And it was a knife-edge ridge but it was maybe ten feet, twenty feet wide at the top, kind of flat like some logging activity had put a skid trail in or something up there. One side

was really rocky and densely timbered, and the other side was just a smooth slope with some large Ponderosa pine on it. And the guys went right in, had a nice ride. And the rookie landed right near the fire, and his chute just flopped right uphill, and looked like it smothered the fire. [Laughs] So everybody on board just started hooting and hollering and laughing their asses off at that one. That was great fun. So. Then we tried to radio them and let them know who the jumper in charge was, and that we had people on the ground, and get the heck out of there. And we started heading back to Missoula.

At first we thought—it's amazing how you think—well, we're fat, we've got over an hour of fuel left, and we're only fifteen, twenty minutes out of town flight time. We started heading back, and the weather just went [guttily] bags on us. These giant towering thunder cells; it was just pouring rain; it started to get dark pretty quick; and the pilot turned on a radar screen where he could see the weather—pretty good avionics in the PC-3 now, modern stuff—and he's not liking what he's seeing. He's seeing the real violent kind of thunderstorm activity ahead of us. And we could see the Interstate, and then there's a wall of grey, black clouds, lightning everywhere; a couple of big strikes right outside the aircraft like a flashbulb going off [claps hands] inside the plane. And we deviated a couple of times trying to get around those cells. Finally we just called Spokane and asked for an instrument landing approach, and they've got some electronic guidance systems and radar, that they talked us in on. But we couldn't get ahold of people with the radio, and it was a little bit tense for them, because here it is, ten o'clock at night in Missoula, there's lightning everywhere crashing and pretty poor weather, and they don't, you know; hadn't heard from us in a half hour, so they were pretty happy when they saw us taxi in last night. But all that for [two banners].

BB: We have about one minute of tape left. You have any final thoughts on being a jumper? What it means? What it takes? Anything you picked up from being a jumper that you'll carry with you forever?

KW: There's no way that you could tell everything you've picked up from being a jumper in one minute. But I do know it's a pretty amazing thing, because the more you give, the more you get. I know that sounds really trite and super cliché, but if you're aware of what you're experiencing and just go for it, there's just virtually no limit; there's not enough hours in the day to do all the things you have an opportunity to do here. Between, you know, medical, and parachute rigging, and training, and tree-climbing, and you name it. It's just incredible. And you just only hope that you physically can still give back what you need to give back to the program 'til the end. And I hope that, you know, twenty years from now I'd be sitting in the basement of this center looking back on a heck of a career. So.

BB: Good. Good way to end it. Thanks.

KW: Thank you.

[Camera and sound continue running as KW gets up from chair.]

KW: That's funny, 'cause I didn't... No jump stories. But, you know. It's what it is. For me, anyway.

END OF INTERVIEW