

**SPECIAL
ISSUE**

In Memoriam Earl Cooley, 1911–2009

**THE NATIONAL SMOKEJUMPER
ASSOCIATION**

**QUARTERLY MAGAZINE
APRIL 2010**

SMOKEJUMPER

INSIDE: SPECIAL FEATURES INCLUDING ...

Stories about and photos of the pioneer smokejumpers

300 HONOR EARL COOLEY	3
FIRST FIRE JUMP	8
FIRE JUMP LEADERS	28
TOUCHING ALL BASES	38

CONTENTS

Message from the President.....2
 300 Out to Honor Earl Cooley.....3
 Early Smokejumper History.....6
 Description of the First Actual Fire Jump in the United States.....8
 Description of the Second Actual Fire Jump in the United States.....10
 Rufus Robinson—Pioneer Smokejumper.....11
 1939 Experimental Project: Pioneer Smokejumper—Francis Luffkin.....12
 Leap of Faith.....15
 Sounding Off from the Editor.....17
 An Interview with a Pioneer Smokejumper—Jim Alexander.....19
 Earl Cooley, the Hunter.....23
 The View from Outside the Fence.....26
Smokejumper Magazine Opinion Piece.....27
 Fire Jump Leaders.....28
 Odds and Ends.....29
 Newly Minted Smokejumpers Make First-Ever Rescue Jump After Civilian Crash.....31
 Death of Chet Derry.....32
 Off the List.....33
 Shane Ewing.....35
 Pioneer Smokejumper Glenn Harrison "Smitty" Smith 1914–1988.....35
 Touching All Bases.....38
 You Need to Add this Book to Your Collection.....43



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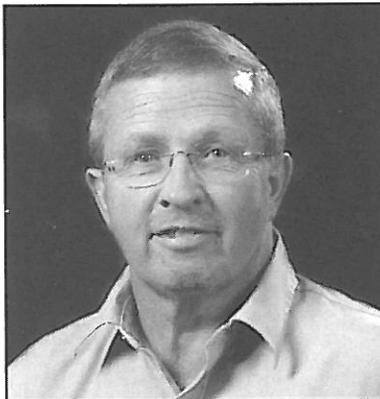
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Message from the President



by John Twiss
 (Redmond '67)
 PRESIDENT

HAVE YOU EVER WONDERED about the future of smokejumping? Part of the National Smokejumper Association's mission states that "we will advocate for the smokejumper program's evolution."

Is smokejumping valuable and needed today? Who decides how many smokejumpers are needed on an annual basis and what criteria are used? In which situation are smokejumpers most cost-effective? Who decides if and when a smokejumper gets called to a fire and what guidelines are used? How long will the smokejumper program last?

These are questions that the NSA board is discussing. Our goal is to be supportive of the current smokejumper programs, where appropriate, while under-

standing the agency's total fire-management program.

Through board members Jerry Williams (RAC-72) and Tom Boatner (FBX-80), we have learned that 98 percent of all fires are successfully suppressed during initial attack. We also learned that the 2 percent that escape initial attack – and often become megafires – result in 70 percent of the agency's annual fire-suppression costs of approximately \$1.5 billion.

We wonder: Can additional or different utilization of the smokejumper program help reduce that 2 percent?

With 105 million acres congressionally designated as wilderness and 60 million acres of Inventoried National Forest Roadless Areas, it appears that quick access to remote forest fires will be a future need. Add to that the fact that 140 million acres of National Forest lands are unhealthy – overgrown, diseased, bug-infested – and highly prone to large, hot fires, you have a need for highly-skilled wildfire fighters who understand prescribed-fire and large-fire behavior.

I think smokejumpers fit that need and more. What do you think? 🙏

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National Smokejumper Association Founder
**300 Come Out To Honor Pioneer of
 Smokejumping: Earl Cooley**

by Kim Briggeman – Missoulian staff writer

This article was published Nov. 17, 2009, in "The Missoulian," Missoula, Mont. Reprinted with permission.

Not everyone who paid final respects to Earl Cooley (MSO-40) on Monday knew the man. Some, if not most, came to the Sunset Memorial Funeral Home west of Missoula because of the legends and the legacy Cooley left behind when he

died Nov. 9 at age 98.

"I'm just a jumper," shrugged **Court Wallace** (GAC-04), who sat in a back wing at a memorial service that drew some 300 people.

Wallace and most other current smokejumpers know Cooley through the stories that have been passed down of his work in the early years of the Forest Service smokejumping era and his part in the first jump onto a wildfire in Idaho in 1940.

They had met the ailing Cooley only when he presented them their freshman class jump pins and certificates. Even as his health deteriorated, Cooley took pride in the task every summer up to and including the past one, said **Ed Ward** (MSO-80), superintendent of the Missoula smokejumper base.

Wallace had a ball cap on his lap that read "Nez Perce Forest," the forest where **Rufus Robinson** (MSO-40) of Kooskia, Idaho, and Cooley, who grew up in Corvallis, made their jump into history and lore 69 summers ago.

Though he now jumps out of Missoula, Wallace worked on the Nez Perce for several years, he said. In September 2005, he and some fellow jumpers took time out of a cabin protection project in the Selway-Bitterroot to hike some 15 miles to the Marten Creek site where Cooley and Robinson first jumped.

With the help of a GPS locator and a Forest Service map, they found it – and Wallace still shakes his head. Cooley always said it was remote. Wallace said it's still at least two miles from the nearest trail. "It's funny. We were hoping to find a big meadow," he said.

Instead they found a spot "way down in this gnarly canyon that's solid spruce," he said.

On that windy July day in 1940, first the strings of Cooley's chute tangled and then he landed in one of those spruces. He made it down safely to join Robinson in containing the blaze.

He made 16 more jumps that first summer and 48 in the next nine years. But that first was the closest call he ever had, Cooley said in a 2005 Public Broadcasting System interview played in the funeral home.

Other "chuters" found trouble sleeping, but never Cooley.

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Smokejumper base abbreviations:

Anchorage..... ANC	Grangeville GAC	MissoulaMSO
Boise.....NIFC	Idaho City IDC	Redding.....RDD
Cave Junction CJ	La Grande..... LGD	Redmond.....RAC
Fairbanks FBX	McCall.....MYC	West Yellowstone WYS
		Winthrop..... NCSB



Rufus Robinson, Frank Derry & Earl Cooley



Earl Cooley 1967

Pioneer Smokejumper Earl Cooley

Photo's Courtesy Earl Cooley Collection



Earl Cooley & Rufus Robinson 1970's



Earl Cooley 1940



Roy Mattson & Earl Cooley



Moose Creek Loft 1940

Layout Design: Johnny Kirkley (CJ-64)

“Oh yeah – hell, I enjoyed jumping,” he said in the interview, eliciting a chuckle from Monday’s mourners.

Cooley’s impact on smokejumping and firefighting was felt around the West – and honored around the nation. *The Wall Street Journal* and the *New York Times* were among the national publications that carried byline stories of his life and death in the past week.

“We make a lot out of his first jump, but he did a lot of other things for smokejumping,” pointed out **Jon McBride** (MSO-54) of Missoula, a retired jumper.

Cooley was at the forefront in the development of firefighting tools and technology. Among his contributions was testing and then improving the old Eagle parachute with which he made his first jumps, and which McBride said would “open with a bang and just about knock the wind out of you.”

From his home in Missoula, McBride coordinates the Art Jukkula Trails Maintenance Program – named after retired smokejumper **Art Jukkula** (MSO-56) – for the National Smokejumper Association, an organization Cooley founded.

Indeed, Cooley’s history is directly linked with that of smokejumping. He was the spotter in the airplane on jumping’s darkest day, at the Mann Gulch Fire north of Helena in 1949 that claimed 13 lives.

When he got too old to jump, he was a Forest Service district ranger on the Nez Perce and at Noxon. He returned to Missoula in 1958 and spent the last 13 years of his Forest Service career running the smokejumper base.

He and Irene, his wife of more than 70 years, raised five daughters who survive him along with their husbands, 12 grandchildren and 13 great-grandchildren.

Cooley’s remains were buried at the Corvallis Cemetery on Monday afternoon.

Back in Missoula, Cathy Scribner, a chaplain for Hospice of Missoula, eulogized Cooley and spoke of his wit, his courage and passion, his inner strength and his iron grip. She noted what she called his “heroic status among smokejumpers around the world.”

“He found his church in the mountains and the wild blue sky,” she said.

Court Wallace recalled another day, this one in 2004,



Spring training, 1941. Nine Mile Remount, Old CCC camp west of Missoula, Montana. Back row, left to right: Roy Abbott, George Honey, Jim Alexander. Front row: Francis Lufkin, Chet “Moose” Derry, Fred Braer, unidentified. (Courtesy Jim Alexander)

his first year as a smokejumper. His crew was en route to a fire above the Selway-Bitterroot when at one point over a nondescript stretch of rugged country, the spotter threw a streamer from the plane. It wasn't until later that Wallace understood why.

The date was July 12, the anniversary of that first jump, and the streamers commemorated the otherwise-unmarked site where Rufus Robinson and Earl Cooley

launched the smokejumping era.

"He's really the father of smokejumping, is how we look at it," said Ward. "He has been an inspiration to all of us, and we'll miss his laughter, and all the fun we've had with him.

"Our job now is just to continue on and work hard like Earl taught us to, and keep the tradition going for another 69 years." 🦉

Early Smokejumper History

by Earl Cooley (Missoula '40)

The following article was printed in the January 1997 issue of "The Static Line." It has been edited slightly for clarification purposes.

In the fall of 1939, a group of "barnstormers" was dropped into timbered areas on the Chelan National Forest – now named the Okanogan National Forest – near Winthrop, Wash., to determine the feasibility of dropping firefighters by parachute to combat forest fires.

This original crew of barnstormers included instructor **Frank Derry** (MSO-40), along with **Chet Derry** (MSO-40), **Virgil "Bus" Derry** (NCSB-40), **Glenn Smith** (NCSB-40), **Richard Tuttle** and **Allan Honey**. **Francis Lufkin** (NCSB-40), a Forest Service employee, made one jump during the last part of the experiment.

This experiment proved to be very successful, and it was decided that Region 1 and Region 6 would each have a small group of jumpers to continue the experiment in 1940.

Region 6 built its crew around a nucleus of the original barnstormers, with Lufkin and **George Honey** (NCSB-40) – Allan Honey's brother – being trained to jump out of Winthrop, Wash., along with Smith and Virgil Derry during the summer of 1940.

Tuttle and Allan Honey dropped out of the program in the fall of 1939, as they were not Forest Service employees.

Region 1 had sent **Rufus Robinson** (MSO-40) from the Nez Perce Forest over to take his training at Winthrop, and to be available to go to Moose Creek and start construction on a parachute loft. Rufus came back to Seeley Lake, northeast of Missoula – selected as the Region 1 training base for 1940 – and made one demonstration jump on the Seeley Lake Airport. He

then went on to Moose Creek to start work on the loft building.

Region 1 was to select one key fireguard from each of the seven forests. They included **Jim Waite** (MSO-40) from the Clearwater Forest, **Jim Alexander** (MSO-40) from the Old Cabinet Forest, **Bill Bolen** (MSO-40) from the Kootenai Forest, **Dick Lynch** (MSO-40) from the Flathead Forest, **Leonard Hamilton** from the Lolo Forest, and Earl Cooley from the Bitterroot Forest, in addition to Robinson.

"Region 6 built its crew around a nucleus of the original barnstormers"

Chet Derry was to be the parachute rigger for the Region 1 crew. Frank Derry was retained to serve both regions and was, like his brother Chet, already an accomplished parachutist. Frank had worked for the Eagle Parachute Company.

When we reported to Fort Missoula to take the regular ROTC cadet physical, Hamilton was diagnosed as having an enlarged heart and had to drop out.

Maj. William Lee Carey had been present at Seeley Lake to observe the training jumps and cargo drops. He would return to Fort Benning, Ga., and begin establishing the first U.S. Army parachute unit.

During the time at Seeley Lake, Bolen made three training jumps and decided to drop out for personal reasons. On his first jump, he freefell almost a third of the distance to the ground before he pulled his rip cord; this may have influenced his decision to drop out. He had also been dragged by his chute in a strong wind and suffered scratches and severe bruising.

Alexander had caught his arm in the load lines of his chute and got a bad sprain, so he missed several of his training jumps. Lynch had pulled his legs up on a strong-wind jump and landed on his tailbone, and also missed several jumps.

However, by July 10, 1940, we went to Moose Creek. Waite and I had 10 jumps each – the only two to have achieved this. Alexander and Lynch were to finish their training after we got to Moose Creek, whereas Chet Derry and Robinson had made all their training jumps.

They left six jumpers at Moose Creek Ranger Station for the summer. We were bunked in the ranger's dwelling since his family did not come in that season.

Merle Lundrigan (MSO-41) – not a jumper at that time – went in as squadleader for the summer. However, Merle made several training jumps in the spring of 1941, before he was called into military service.

George Case (MSO-44), the Moose Creek ranger, was selected as project leader. He had spent some time during training with the jumpers at Seely Lake to familiarize himself with the jumping process. 🦋



June 1940 first smokejumper training group at Seely Lake Ranger Station. Back L–R: Glenn Smith (rigger/jumper), Earl Cooley (jumper), Merle Lundrigan (project leader), Jim Alexander (jumper), Chet Derry (rigger/jumper). Front L–R: Rufus Robinson (jumper), Jim Waite (jumper), Frank Derry (project manager), George Case (district ranger), Dick Lynch (jumper), Bill Bolen (jumper). (Courtesy Jim Alexander)



July 12, 1940: Earl Cooley (left) and Rufus Robinson waiting for the plane at Moose Creek while Frank Derry checks their equipment. (Courtesy Earl Cooley collection)

Description of The First Actual Fire Jump in The United States

by Rufus Robinson (Missoula '40)

Reprinted from January 2004 "Smokejumper."

On July 12, at 2:00 p.m., Merle Lundrigan (MSO-41) asked me to go to a fire on the head of Martin Creek, Section 35, Township 31 North, Range 11 East. I started collecting my jumping suit, fire pack and equipment to take to the fire. Rest of the crew helped haul all equipment out to the airport.

Dick Johnson arrived from Missoula at 3:05 p.m.

with plane. One of the crew helped me dress and get into the harness of chute. At 3:21 p.m. we left the ground. Johnson headed the plane down river to gain elevation. Turned at Goat Mountain and headed back toward Bear Creek. Turned again and followed Ditch Creek, over top of Moose Ridge close to Wyles Peak lookout. Spotted fire on east slope of Martin Creek. Johnson circled fire at about 7,000 feet elevation. Fire looked to be about two and one-half acres in green timber fairly open. I asked Johnson to take plane up

higher to around 7,600 feet. He circled over fire once more and spotted alder patch of about two acres, above fire, to jump into. Dropped burlap test chute at 3:55 p.m. Chute drifted down into Martin Creek, north and east of the fire.

I bailed out at 3:57 p.m. Wind had changed between time of dropping burlap test chute and when I jumped. I caught a down draft and heavy ground wind, carrying me over alder patch half mile north. Landed in small green tree, 25 feet tall. My feet were about two feet above ground. Unhooked harness and set up radio. Talked to ship at 4:03 p.m. Lundrigan reported Earl Cooley had landed northwest of me in tree. Lundrigan agreed to hold up dropping of fire packs until I reached Cooley. I misunderstood location of Cooley, and after waiting 15 minutes Lundrigan dropped fire packs near Cooley.

We started on fire line at 4:45 p.m. Cooley started working around north side of fire, throwing dirt on hot spots and building some fire line. I took the south side, cooling down hot spots and building some fire line. Worked until 7:00 p.m. when I sent Cooley back to find the other fire pack. He met four-

man maintenance crew 300 yards from where his chute was hung up in the tree. They said they would be down to help us early next morning. Cooley did not find fire pack so came back to fire at 9:00 p.m. We worked on fire line until 10:00 p.m., ate lunch and watched rest of the night for snags falling across fire line. Had coffee at 3:30 a.m. Started building more fire line at 4:00 a.m. Fire controlled at 10:00 a.m. Four- man crew took over at 10.00 a.m. Had lunch at 12:30 p.m.

"I bailed out at 3:57 p.m."

Cooley and I started after chutes with one mule, at 2:30 p.m. Arrived back to fire at 6:30 p.m. We spent one hour looking for saw and climbers. Thought Lundrigan had dropped them although neither Cooley nor I saw them dropped. Maintenance crew found second fire pack on their way to fire.

Packer Howard Engle, Earl Cooley and I left for Moose Creek at 7:50 a.m. July 14. I arrived Moose Creek 3:10 p.m. Cooley and Engle stayed at Toney Point lookout over night. 📌



July 12, 1940: Rufus Robinson just before takeoff. (Courtesy Earl Cooley collection)

Description of The Second Actual Fire Jump In The United States

by Earl Cooley (Missoula '40)

Reprinted from January 2004 "Smokejumper."

On July 12 at 1:40 p.m., our project leader, **Merle Lundrigan** (MSO-41), was informed of a fire on the Nez Perce Forest on which two of us jumpers were requested. **Rufus Robinson** (MSO-40) and I were selected to go. The plane was ordered immediately after we received the fire call. While the plane was on its way from Missoula to Moose Creek Ranger Station, the group had collectively gathered all necessary equipment, including lunch from the cook house, fire packs, climbing spurs, saws, burlaps, suits, chutes, etc. We didn't put on our suits until the plane was on the field.

As soon as the ship arrived at the airport, each man took an assigned job. One put the aerial on the plane, one put on the steps, others helped Rufus and me into our suits, while others were loading the material into the plane.

We were soon ready to take off for the location of the fire. Pilot Dick Johnson, Merle Lundrigan, Rufus Robinson and I left the airport at 3:21 p.m. We went upriver to Ditch Creek, swung around south of Wiles Peak to the designated location of the fire, which was in the head of Martin Creek, Section 35, Township 31 North, Range 11 East, on the Nez Perce Forest.

Rufus knew the country so he chose to go out first; consequently, I was the second man out. Rufus threw the burlap out directly over a small elder patch about 300 yards from the fire on the uphill side. The burlap evidently hit two distinct currents of wind and was carried approximately one mile down the canyon from the spot. Dick circled the plane around the fire, and Rufus made the correction for the burlap and informed Dick as to where he wished to make the jump. I believe Rufus was about 2200 feet above the timber when he took off. He made an excellent takeoff from the ship, but ran into more drift than was expected and was carried beyond the spot a quarter mile or so. Rufus landed on the edge of a small clearing in a small tree.

As soon as I noticed Rufus standing on the ground by his chute, I decided to spot myself and bail out. At this point I should have thrown another burlap because I could not see exactly where Rufus was when

he took off. To the contrary, I only roughly guessed, allowing a little more for the drift. We hit two very bad air pockets before I was in position to jump, and I do not believe we were much over 1800 feet above the timber; nevertheless I was anxious to leave ship and get into action. At 4:01 p.m. I bailed out and jerked my rip cord when I was clear of the plane.

I didn't make such a good takeoff because I was beginning to turn over in the air when the chute opened. I think I received the hardest opening shock of any previous jump I had made. My risers were twisted above my head, and it seemed some time before they started to unwind; but eventually they did unwind and I located my position in reference to landing.

I had drifted west of the spot, but was evidently coming down in line north and south. A stiff ground current caught me about 500 or 600 feet above the timber. I knew it was impossible to hit the spot under these conditions, so I just turned my chute toward the fire and got well in my mind my directions and plans before I hit the timber. It seemed to me that I was traveling about 15 miles per hour when I went over the timber below me.

When I was about down, I could see that I was going to land in large timber by a small creek. I picked a large spruce tree about 120 feet high. The chute hung on the limbs about 10 feet from the top of the south-east side of the trees. I went through the branches on the side of the tree, breaking many of them. I noticed the chute on the side of the tree and didn't want to swing back because I thought there might be a possibility of the chute slipping off the limbs and going on down to the ground. So I grabbed the stub of a broken limb and climbed onto the trunk of the tree. I just climbed up the tree a few feet and unwrapped my risers from the harness.

Fortunately, the tree was easy to climb down, and I did not need my rope to descend to the ground where I took off my suit and set up my radio. Due to some unknown condition, I could not get a very good reception from the plane, but was able to contact Merle a time or two. Merle didn't get to tell me where he was going to drop our packs, but I kept watching every time the plane came within dropping distance from me. I caught a glimpse of the first fire pack through

the timber but only knew the direction and approximate distance to the fire pack. The second pack was released from the plane almost directly over my head and came in about 100 feet from me. I took the latter pack, filled my water bag and canteen, put the burlap with my suit and equipment, and started for the fire which was about a quarter or a half mile east of where I landed.

I was about 200 yards from the fire when I met Rufus. We took the one fire pack and went down to the fire. The fire was burning very slowly and only had

a few hot spots that could have been very dangerous. Rufus started around one side and I the other. We cooled down the hot spots and trenched where they were the worst. We found a lot of dead line that we passed up.

About 8:30 p.m. I decided to go back to my chute and look for the other fire pack. I was following the small creek back when I heard a horse bell. So obviously I went to see where they were. About 400 yards above my chute on the same creek, I found a camp with four men. After a short conversation with them

Rufus Robinson-Pioneer Smokejumper

by Chuck Sheley (Cave Junction '59)



Rufus Robinson 1940 (Courtesy Frank Derry Collection)

With the passing of Earl Cooley (MSO-40) news media have also been asking about **Rufus Robinson** (MSO-40). We did not even have a date of death in our NSA database. Thanks to research done by **Jim Allen** (NCSB-46), we have the correct date of May 3, 1987.

Rufus was the first of the 1940 Missoula crew to receive smokejumper training, going over to Winthrop to do so. He then returned to Montana to start construction of the parachute loft at Moose Creek.

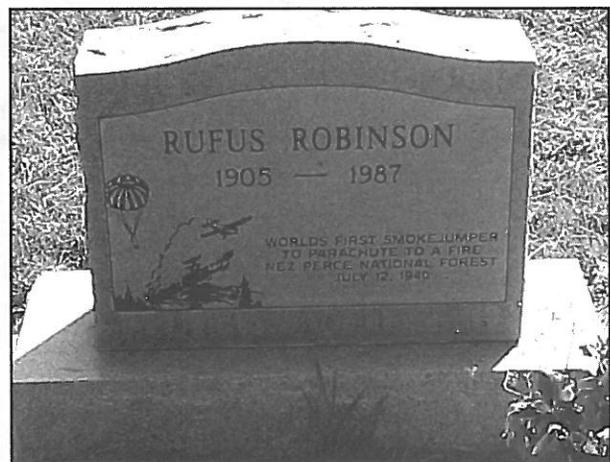
On July 10, 1940, Earl Cooley, **Jim Waite**, **Jim Alexander**, **Dick Lynch** and **Chet Derry** joined Robinson at Moose Creek. **Merle Lundrigan** (MSO-41), not a jumper at that time, was assigned as the squad-leader for the group.

On July 12, 1940, Rufus Robinson and Earl Cooley made the first fire jumps on a fire in the United States. A detailed description by Rufus is on page 8.

Rufus was born in 1905 at Wallowa, Oregon, and

the family moved to Turlock, California, in 1919.

Robinson only jumped the 1940 and '41 seasons before moving on to pursue work in the roofing business. He married in 1942 and lived in Santa Cruz, California, and Pasco, Washington. In 1958 he moved to Klamath Falls, Oregon, and in 1966 to Lenore, Idaho, where he worked as a roofer until he retired. He is buried in the Wallowa Cemetery.



they informed me that they would be down on the fire early in the morning. Rufus and I worked the hot spots that night and until 10:00 a.m. the next day when these men arrived. Rufus and I had practically trenched the whole fire, which was about three acres, scattered over about five acres of ground.

We ate a lunch that these men brought down to us and were ready to turn the fire over to them about 10:00 a.m.. I remained on the fire while Rufus went up and set out a manta and streamer to locate the position for the plane that had been ordered to drop supplies and pumps. The plane did not come when we expected it, so Rufus and I decided to retrieve our chutes from the trees, get them in camp and ready to pack the next morning.

“At 4:01 p.m. I bailed out and jerked my rip cord when I was clear of the plane.”

We took a mule and went after Rufus' chute first. We had to cut the tree down to get the chute because it was draped over the top of the tree. A small hole was torn in the apex of the chute. After returning to camp with Rufus' chute, we started to where my chute was hung in the trees. I followed, with the mule, the same trail back to the place where the maintenance crew was camped the night before. I knew exactly where the chute was from this point. I followed the small creek down to where I had blazed a couple of trees on the creek bank. The chute was only about

150 feet from this place.

The retrieving of the chute was apparently a big job since it was a good 85 or 90 feet up the tree to where the risers were attached. I took my 100-foot rope and climbed the tree. Rufus tied the Pulaski on the end of the rope. When I got up the tree to my chute, I pulled it up to me in this order. I tied one end to my risers and threw the other end down to Rufus. When Rufus got the rope he pulled on it and I chopped the limbs off in which my chute was tangled.

Rufus and I were both surprised at the ease with which we took the chute out of the tree. We spent a short time looking for the other tools which we were not sure had been dropped. I eventually came to the conclusion that the tools, which consisted of spurs and saw, had not been dropped. Due to the fact that the trail crew had found our other fire pack when they came down to the fire, we were relieved of our search for this pack.

We got back to camp with my chute about 6:30 or 7:00 p.m. By the time we ate supper, it was nearly dark and we retired for the night. I dressed in my jump suit and pulled a manta over me.

The next morning Rufus, the packer Howard Engle and I started out for Moose Creek. We went down Martin Creek and cut across country to Moose Ridge. Rufus took a different trail and went on into Moose Creek. Howard and I went to Tony Point that evening. The next afternoon I brought the chutes down with a mule and horse that had been brought up from the station. At 4:00 p.m. July 15, I arrived back at the Moose Creek ranger station. 🦋

1939 Experimental Project—Pioneer Smokejumper-Francis Lufkin

by Chuck Sheley (Cave Junction '59)

With the focus of this issue being on Earl Cooley (MSO-40) and the establishment of the smokejumper program in the U.S., it is appropriate to review our early history. Details sometimes vary according to the writer. I'm going directly to *The History of The North Cascades Smokejumper Base* by Bill Moody (NCSB-57) and emails with Steve Smith who was involved in detailed research when he produced the NSA video *Firefighters From the Sky*.

The experimental program ran from October-No-

vember 1939 on the Chelan N.F. (now the Okanogan N.F.). The Eagle Parachute Company from Lancaster, Pennsylvania, was contracted to provide experienced parachutists and basic equipment. Professional jumpers Frank Derry (MSO-40), Glenn Smith (NCSB-40), Chester Derry (MSO-40) and Virgil Derry (NCSB-40) plus two locals, Dick Turtle and Alan Honey, were the contract personnel.

The Forest Service assigned nine support personnel, including Francis Lufkin (NCSB-40), to the project.



Francis Lufkin 1939 Experimental Program (Courtesy Larry Lufkin)

After making “dummy drops” in various terrain types, 58 live jumps were made by eleven different jumpers. The first experimental jump into timber was done by Glenn Smith. There were no major injuries, and the program proved that firefighters could be parachuted into rugged mountainous terrain to fight forest fires. Walt Anderson, Fire Assistant Chelan N.F., has

been credited with naming the parachuting firefighters “Smokejumpers.”

As a result of the successful experimental program in 1939, two smokejumper programs were established in 1940. The five-man unit in R-6 at Winthrop consisted of Glenn Smith, Virgil Derry, Francis Lufkin, and rookie George Honey (not to be confused with Alan Honey

from the 1939 group). Dick Tuttle from the 1939 group was originally hired, but was seriously injured in a tree climbing accident before the program started.

The R-1 program consisted of Project Leader Merle Lundrigan, Frank and Chet Derry, and seven rookie jumpers selected from each of the region's national forests. Earl Cooley was the representative from the Bitterroot N.F.

On August 10, 1940, Francis Lufkin and Glenn Smith made the first fire jumps in R-6. George Honey and Virgil Derry jumped the second fire the next day.

Even though expansion of the program to ten jumpers was recommended at Winthrop for the 1941 season, the threat of war and lack of funding concentrated smokejumping to Region 1. Lufkin, Honey and Smith joined the R-1 jumpers at Nine Mile for that season. Only nine fires were jumped during the 1941 season. After training, Lufkin would return to R-6 and manage air cargo operations at the Twisp R.S.

By 1943 with WWII in full swing, there were only five experienced jumpers and only four candidates who could pass the physical exam. The introduction of the CPS-103 men (Conscientious Objectors) added 62 physically qualified personnel to the smokejumper program. The 1943 jumpers were stationed at Nine Mile

or assigned to the two newly established bases at Cave Junction, Oregon, and McCall, Idaho.

Francis Lufkin continued to manage the cargo operations and satellite smokejumper base at Winthrop through 1944. In 1945 Winthrop re-opened with a crew of 15 CPS-103 jumpers, and Lufkin became the Aerial Project Officer. He continued at that job until 1972 when he retired after 33 years as a smokejumper. During that time, he received a presidential citation from President Lyndon Johnson and a Department of Agriculture Secretary's Award, plus numerous citations from the USFS. His two sons **Ron** (CJ-60) and **Larry** (CJ-63) followed him into smokejumping.

Francis died February 12, 1998, in Bellingham, Washington, at age 83.

The Forest Service assigned nine support personnel, including Francis Lufkin (NCSB-40), to the project.

Frank Derry, born July 27, 1904 in California, died August 2, 1968 in Kalispell, Montana, five days after his



1939 Experimental Project Crew L-R: Walt Anderson, Richard Tuttle, Glenn Smith, Virgil Derry, Harold King, P.T. Harris, Francis Lufkin, David Godwin, Frank Derry. (NSA Files)



L-R: Frank Derry, Chet Derry, Harold King (pilot), Alan Honey. (NSA Files)

64th birthday. He was a resident of Bigfork. Frank is responsible for the development of the steerable parachute in 1942-43. The addition of "Derry slots" and guidelines allowed any standard flat parachute to be converted into one that fit the needs of a person parachuting into rugged terrain. Frank continued on with the smokejumper program until 1945.

Virgil W. "Bus" Derry, born November 7, 1908, died January 31, 1995, in Sun City, Arizona at age 85. He jumped at NCSB during the 1940 season. After leaving smokejumping he worked in logging, heavy construction and as a commercial fisherman in Texas.

Chet Derry made the first rescue jump when he

parachuted to a downed Johnson Flying Service Travelair on July 15, 1940, on the Nez Perce N.F. Pilot, Bob Maricich, was on a cargo drop when a wing clipped a tree. He was killed and cargo kicker, Del Claybaugh, was seriously injured.

Chet was killed April 20, 1947, in a mid-air collision while piloting a plane from Missoula to Hamilton, Montana. He jumped at Missoula in 1940 and '41.

Glenn Smith jumped at Missoula during the 1941 season, was gone 1942-43, and returned to jump 1944-49. He is listed as working at Missoula in 1950-51 but not recorded in any jump records. See more about Glenn in an additional article in this issue. 🦅

Leap of Faith

by Sherry Devlin

Reprinted from July 1990 "Missoulian" and January 2002 "Smokejumper."

The afternoon before Earl Cooley (MSO-40) made his first jump out of an airplane, he got his first

lesson in jumping out of an airplane. An instructor draped a silk chute from a ponderosa pine at the Seeley Lake ranger station and told Cooley and five other would-be jumpers to gather around. "This is the apex," the instructor said. "These are the risers. These are the

guide lines. Tomorrow we jump.”

“And tomorrow we jumped,” said Cooley. Ten jumps later, on July 12, 1940, Cooley made history as one of the first two smokejumpers to parachute to a wildfire. His jump will be remembered Thursday at a ceremony in Grangeville, Idaho, commemorating 50 years of smokejumping.

Now 78 and semi-retired, Cooley sifted through his memorabilia in an interview this week at his real estate office in Missoula. He has written a book, “Trimotor and Trail,” on his adventures as a pioneer smokejumper.

Fifteen years after retiring from the Forest Service, Cooley still lives and breathes parachuting and firefighting. He’s never without his smokejumper belt buckle and cap. Cooley said he “wasn’t thinking about history” in the spring of 1940 when he volunteered for the experimental smokejumper program. “I was thinking about doubling my salary. If I had known we were making history and would have to tell about it for 50 years, I might have thought twice.”

Cooley was working on a fire crew in the East Fork of the Bitterroot when he heard about the smokejumper program. He was weary of 20-mile hikes to backcountry fires. He knew jumpers had landed safely in “all kinds of green timber” in trials on the Okanogan National Forest in 1939. What he didn’t know until later was that regional forester Evan Kelley had argued against the parachute program as early as 1935, writing Forest Service brass in Washington, D.C. that “all parachute jumpers are more or less crazy, just a little bit unbalanced, otherwise they wouldn’t be engaged in such a hazardous undertaking.”

Cooley’s own foreman, **Merle Lundrigan** (MSO-41), later wrote that “it is not a good plan to tell a new jumper too much about the job of chute-jumping before he has made a few jumps.” “If he is too well-informed,” Lundrigan said, “it is inclined to unnerve him.” Nevertheless, Cooley and six other experienced firefighters were to try parachuting to fires during the 1940 fire season. Dry, hot weather and a record number of lightning strikes provided the targets. One of the seven didn’t pass the physical exam and another quit after three jumps.

A makeshift training camp was established at Seeley Lake. Recruits hung their parachutes from two tents and gathered at the airstrip to watch a pair of barnstormers demonstrate a jump. Then came the quick lesson on parachute mechanics. “I didn’t know enough to be scared,” Cooley said. “I had never been in an airplane before and never landed until I’d made five jumps.”

The night before the first jump, the crew drew straws to see who would be the first out of the plane. Cooley got the No. 5 straw. The jump spot was at Blanchard Flats, 20 miles from Seeley Lake. Sitting around the campfire

that night, the barnstormers started talking about jumpers who got hung up on the tail of the airplane or who were dragged across airports and a cargo dropper who had fallen out of a plane without a parachute.

Jump day dawned clear and warm, despite the recruits’ prayers for fog. Jump gear consisted of a leather football helmet, a baseball catcher’s mask, a back brace, ankle braces, logger boots and a heavy canvas suit with a high collar. “We were so bundled up we couldn’t move once we got on the ground,” Cooley said. “We landed so hard with those old Eagle parachutes. A doctor in town had told our instructor that the best way to land was stiff-legged, just the opposite of what we know is best.”

Cooley and company sat on boxes inside the airplane, eyeballed their own jump spot, then stood outside on the step, signaled the pilot to cut the engine, jumped and pulled their rip cords. “It didn’t seem natural to jump out into space,” Cooley said. “But the jumping never really bothered me.” He jumped 46 fires in 11 years as a smokejumper. “We would’ve jumped more if we had had more parachutes.”

Cooley and **Rufus Robinson** (MSO-40), squadleader for the smokejumper project, got the call for the first fire jump about noon on July 12. The fire was at Martin Creek, 50 air miles from Missoula. The first fire jump nearly cost Cooley his life. He bailed out of Johnson’s Travelair, pulled the ripcord and looked up to a “full streamer.” Cooley fell for 1000 feet while he tried to deploy the chute. He started to go for his reserve at 500 feet but his main opened at that time. Cooley hit a lodgepole pine and stopped, dangling over 100 feet off the ground. He climbed down the tree and hiked to the fire.

He later learned that project leader Lundrigan had caught his foot on a cargo rope and almost fell out of the plane. Lundrigan was so shaken that he never again worked cargo on a smokejumper mission. Cooley met up with a trail crew that told of a smokejumper free-falling to the ground. They had been dispatched to retrieve the body. “I’m your carcass,” Cooley said. “I made it.”

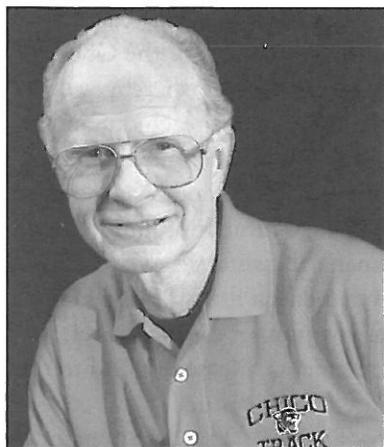
Cooley’s career as a smokejumper eventually included training paratroopers during WWII and conscientious objectors who worked as smokejumpers during the war. He was the spotter on the plane that dropped jumpers at the tragic Mann Gulch Fire in 1949. Twelve jumpers and a fireguard died in the fire.

Two of Cooley’s five daughters eventually married smokejumpers. He went on to another first, as one of the first firefighters to travel by helicopter to a fire.

“I never cared about stripes or promotions,” Cooley said. “I just loved the work. You know, in those early days, there was never anybody above you to tell you what to do because nobody up there knew what do do.” 🦋



Sounding Off from the Editor



by Chuck Sheley
(Cave Junction '59)
MANAGING EDITOR

THE OFFICE OF *Smokejumper* sits in a remodeled bedroom at my home in Chico, California. I usually get an article, cut words, close spacing and give it an initial edit. From there I walk to the dining room and hand it to my wife, K.G., who sits with a stack of dictionaries and style guides. In about ten minutes the document is returned to me marked with red lines, circles, notes and arrows. After those corrections/changes are made, back it goes to the dining room again and so on.

I've always wanted to get more involved in the NSA Trails Program, but found it almost impossible to leave Chico for any length of time and still get a magazine out on time. You would think that three months between issues is a long time but with the layout, printing and mailing processes, I'm still chasing down address changes from a prior issue when the layout for the next issue starts.

In steps an old friend, Ed

Booth (Associate). Ed is an ex-student of mine and comes from a newspaper background. He now takes a lot of the articles and edits and puts them into the proper format. This enabled my wife and me to drive over 8,000 miles and take part in four different projects last summer. Thanks, Ed.



Back in 2007, **Johnny Kirkley** (CJ-64) told me it would be a good idea to start doing a centerfold where we could group photos for our readers. He now has become the go-to person to handle the centerfold and get photos ready for the next issue. Johnny, as are most jumpers, is no-nonsense and gets to the bottom line quickly. I still remember the time in the barracks in Fairbanks, 1969, when Johnny (recently returned from Air America) was searching for the jumper who took a "cheap shot" at one of his engine crewmembers downtown the night before. It was made very clear that in the future, this would not happen again. You will see his great work on display again in this issue.

All this being said, I have the groundwork for three issues done and set in advance of the issue date in order to spread out the workload and meet deadlines.

The passing of **Earl Cooley** (MSO-40) November 9, 2009, changed the normal operating procedures. Earl's passing was covered nationally in magazines and newspapers. This issue had

to relate to Earl. Move everything from the original April issue forward and start from scratch. If this issue got to you anytime before the 2nd week in April, thanks to all of the above, many long days at the computer and **Larry Jackson**, who does the layout and printing.

I'm going to break down this issue as it is, in my opinion, special. When I went to the archives and started pulling everything written by or about Earl, I decided that the start and evolution of smokejumping was a team effort, of which Earl was an important part. However, when I looked in our obit section to get more information on **Rufus Robinson** (MSO-40), **Glenn Smith** (NCSB-40), **Frank Derry** (MSO-40), **Virgil Derry** (NCSB-40), and **Chet Derry** (MSO-40), there was very little information. Outside of **Francis Lufkin** (NCSB-40), who had a long career in smokejumping, there was not a lot known about the other "Pioneers." Thanks to work by **Jim Allen** (NCSB-46), **Roger Savage** (MSO-57), **Jack Demmons** (MSO-50), **Larry Longley** (NCSB-72), and **Ben Smith** (MSO-64), we now have additional information about the Pioneers.

This issue has more photos than any past issue. Many of them are historical. Most photos in the centerfold have never been printed before.

Several years ago a man who started in firefighting on one of my Type II Crews as a college student contacted me. He's now a Fire Captain in Yuba City, California. He asked if I had ever heard of Frank Derry? He related that he had come into contact with Frank Derry's granddaughter, Louise Zannotto. To shorten the story, I was able to get a disk of remarkable photos from the 1937-40 time period when the Derry brothers and Glenn Smith went from "barnstormers" to smokejumpers. See some of them in the centerfold.

Rufus Robinson was 35 years old when he started jumping in 1940, and he only jumped two seasons before moving on. Thanks to Jim Allen we now have a date of death and some knowledge as to what he did the rest of his life. There are also a couple of good pictures of "Rufe" in this issue. He looks like a pretty sturdy guy.

Out of the original four professional parachute jumpers, Glenn Smith stayed with smokejumping the longest. His two sons also became smokejumpers. His oldest son, Ben "Snuffy" Smith, did a great job in filling in the blanks in the article about his dad.

This being the issue on the U.S. Pioneers, it is appropriate that we moved part IV of "The Birth of Smokejumping," to the July issue. Translated by **Bruce Ford** (MSO-75) and **Tony Pastro** (FBX-77) from the 1949 notes of **Georgy Alexandrovich Makeev**, it wraps up the story of the man with the idea to parachute firefighters and he made it work against all odds to create the first smokejumper program in the world. Makeev had many factors going against

him. Besides his susceptibility to airsickness, age had to be a negative factor. I don't know his age, but he was a professional forester which took time for his education. He had ten years of fieldwork in forestry, and he said he was involved in the "imperial and civil wars." I don't know how many times he felt like giving up, but you can see that his determination resulted in a program that, at one time, had jumpers that numbered in the thousands. Look for the final part of the story of the creation of the world's first smokejumper program in the July issue.

Jim Budenholzer (MSO-73) did one of the best articles that we've printed in a past issue with his interview of Pioneer Smokejumper **Jim "Smokey" Alexander** (MSO-40). A revealing account from the mouth of a person who was with the first crew.

I want to thank Earl's oldest daughter, Sharron Cooley Hackman, and granddaughter, Amanda Ranstrom Adams, for gathering photos from the Cooley collection and getting them to me. In another of the "small world" situations, Sharron had lived in Chico for 20+ years and her kids had gone to school with our kids in elementary school.

While the beginning of smokejumping is the emphasis of this issue, there is an excellent article on the future of smokejumping. Retired Director of Fire & Aviation **Jerry Williams** (RAC-72) emphasizes a fresh vision for the continued success of the smokejumper program.

Mike McMillan (FBX-96) continues to put together one of the toughest to do, but most read columns in the magazine, with a great "Touching All Bases" piece in this issue. Mike contacts all the

bases and continually pushes to get this column together. What happened in smokejumping last season and what might this summer? Read "Touching All Bases" on page 38.

Jim Cherry (MSO-57) initiated the idea of the Good Samaritan Fund whereby we, as the NSA, could reach out and assist fellow smokejumpers in time of need. The Good Sam Fund has helped a number of jumpers with financial assistance. We recently sent a check for \$1000 to help a fellow jumper during his cancer treatments. Please respond to the insert in this issue.

The NSA Trail Maintenance/Restoration Program continues to grow in numbers and scope each year. **John McDaniel** (CJ-57) is laying the groundwork for a project in the Monongahela National Forest in West Virginia in 2011.

Jim Cherry has added another project in the Boundary Waters in Minnesota in May. The setting is at the Wilderness Canoe Base near the end of the Gunflint Trail. There will be cabins and a dining hall available. It is open to jumpers/NSA associates, spouses, children/grandchildren (min. age 16). The work will fit all ranges of physical conditioning and the opportunities for good old fellowship are the best ever. There are canoes and fishing available. If this doesn't get your attention, check out the "Off the List" for this issue. Now is the time to see old friends and make new ones.

You will have received the 2010 National Smokejumper Reunion information and registration by this time. We're set to go June 11-13 in Redding. Hope to see you there and on one of the Trail/Restoration projects. 📍

An Interview With A Pioneer Smokejumper-Jim Alexander

by James Budenholzer (Missoula '73)

Reprinted from January 2004 "Smokejumper."

A member of the first smokejumper force in 1940, Jim "Smokey" Alexander is a true pioneer. Alexander recently sat down with James Budenholzer (MSO-73) to share his recollections of that first season—and what it was like to make history.

"The way the smokejumpers were started was in the late 1930s. The Forest Service decided they needed another method of fighting fire so they didn't have [a] repeat of the horrible 1910 fires. I worked on the St. Regis district of the old Cabinet National Forest. I'd been up to see the 1910 fire. It was something to see—miles and miles of blackened snags.

"A man named David Godwin out of Washington, D.C. was the national forest-fire officer for the U.S. In the fall of 1939, there was an experimental jump group in Winthrop, WA, where they had a pioneer squad; trained people, riggers and parachutists, and they did experimental work and some jumps. They became our riggers at Seeley Lake [MT].

"To choose who would be the first smokejumpers for the first smokejumper fire season in 1940, Godwin had decided to choose ten men, one to represent each of the ten major forests. He wanted each man to have a minimum of five years experience fighting fires. I was working the old Cabinet National Forest and they asked for people who'd be interested. I volunteered. The supervisor chose me in the spring of '40 to represent the Cabinet National Forest. [This was] just after everyone came back from four to five days of rigorous training. The selected ones of us went out to Fort Missoula, which was still an active army post with the infantry stationed there. They had a hospital facility, and we had to take a medical exam. One guy named Hamilton didn't make it. He didn't pass the physical. The rest of us went up to Seeley Lake and put up a bunch of tents behind the ranger station.

"Godwin was there and several other people from Washington representing the Forest Service, and a whole bunch of Army guys and Air Force people, because they were thinking about starting what would become the Airborne 82nd and the 101st, and they took about 2,000 pictures of all our techniques and interviewed us all. They were going around the country looking for any

working parachute operation. Turned out ours was the only one. They were thinking about creating airborne divisions.

"The man I became acquainted with was Major William H. Lee. The next time I heard of him, he was a Major General and in charge of training the 82nd Airborne and the 101st. There is a big memorial to him down here in Fort Bragg at the 82nd headquarters. He wanted me and a buddy to come with him and join the Army. He offered me a 2nd lieutenant, but I didn't go.

The First Camp at Seely Lake

"We were at a place called Blanchard Flats, just north of Seeley Lake. This was about 35 miles northeast of Missoula. Each new jumper made six practice jumps: three jumps at Blanchard Flats and three jumps at the landing strip before any were made in timber. Instructions were given to the men on rolls, letdowns and other basics. We had two minor injuries during the training. One was a sprained ankle. The other was, we were pulling our own rip cords, and [one guy's] rip cord got caught in the shroud lines, and he pulled his shoulder pulling the rip cord. We jumped at 6,000 feet. [Another] guy didn't pull his rip cord until 2,000 feet, and Frank Derry sent the guy on his way. The guy didn't want to continue jumping anyway.

The First Fire Jump

"I didn't make the first fire jump; I made the second fire jump.

"I have a picture of Earl Cooley and Rufus ("Rufe") Robinson. My personal recollection is that there was a fire on Martin Creek, and they decided to make the first jump. They went 'eeny-meeny-mieny-mo' and then decided [on] Rufe and Earl—Rufe, a little because he was an older man, about 35, and Earl had to be about 23. I was 20."

"We were all looking up to Rufe as the more experienced. He was the guy that had a lot of experience fighting fires and kind of calmed us down. [He was] easy-going and completely unflappable. Earl was sort of



Jim Alexander making a jump from the Fairchild on Hughes Creek south of Missoula, Montana, 1940. (Courtesy J. Alexander)

a ‘yup-no’ man, didn’t have a lot to say. He was one of the nicest guys. These days, we talk every year. He says to me, ‘Smokey, about this annual subscription for the National Smokejumper Association magazine: Do ya think we’re gonna make it through another year?’ He stayed on with the Forest Service. On our practice jumps, Earl and I went together, and he almost always got sick when he made a jump. It was very hard. He was at the cookie bag all the time.

“When Rufe and Cooley got back, we were all elated they had made a safe landing. We figured the project was underway and that it was going to be a success, and there was going to be a good way to fight small fires. We wouldn’t be having to walk in a hundred men.

“Periodically, big shots would fly in from Missoula—like Major Evan Kelly. He was the regional forester. There were letters on file that he was *not* in favor of the smokejumper squads, and that it was a waste of ‘honest suppression money’ that could have been spent on

good men. We all knew that he was against us. He was overruled by Washington. David Godwin had overruled him. Godwin was the chief fire officer for the U.S. Forest Service, and he was with us at Blanchard Flats when we did our training jumps. From time to time, he’d show up. He had the entire U.S., but this was his baby. He wanted this thing to go.

“There was a lot of barracks gossip. As if we were under a microscope, the whole Forest Service was looking at this project, seeing where it was going to go. But we felt the Forest Service guys were with us. We all had experience with the pickup crews out of the bars. They weren’t worth anything. After a day, their feet hurt from walking in their shoes, and they wanted to get back to the bar and get a jug of wine.

“As untested smokejumpers, we were afraid that if they decided they were spending too much money, they’d cancel the whole project. So we worked as hard as we could to make sure it did work. We were planning for

1941. We were thinking there would be three squads, one at Moose Creek, one at Big Prairie and one at Nine Mile, which would be the main one, because there was a CC barrack there at Nine Mile, and the Forest Service had hundreds of mules there.

“We were very good friends, and everybody helped do everything. The first year, we didn’t have the static line; it was freefall. We felt that if a guy didn’t feel like jumping, [he] didn’t have to. The Forest Service never chastised them. It was their decision. When we got the static line, [however,] it was a horse of a different color; they had to jump.

“Frank Derry had been experimenting with the static line, so we decided to try and work that out for the 1941 group. We worked that out in 1940. So they were making pioneer static parachute packs on the feasibility of the static line at the loft in Moose Creek.

“In 1940, we were pulling our own rip cords. We stepped out on the step of the Travelair, and we’d go and count to five or 10 or whatever to clear the plane. Some guys would pull just when they were clear, and others would wait until they were at 1000 feet. Bill Bolen pulled his at 400 feet, and we were all on the ground watching him come. Frank Derry kept raising his leg and praying, “My God, my God.” We thought he was going into the ground. [Afterwards,] Frank told him he was through,



1940 First Static Line: Metal ripcord attached to line running to apex of parachute; rope static line attached to junction of ripcord/line to apex. (Frank Derry collection)

but Bill first said, ‘I don’t want to jump any more.’

“The rest of 1940, Frank Derry worked on this static line and the cover on the backpack. They made any number of different models using the sewing machines at Moose Creek, and Chet Derry made the first jump with a static line. It had never been done anywhere, as far as I know. It worked perfectly. [In] the winter of 1940, they went to California and perfected it. In 1941, we used it in the spring out at the old Nine Mile Remount west of Missoula during training.

“During a practice jump, a guy stepped out on the step, and before he jumped, he pulled a rip cord while still on the steps of the plane. Frank had to push the chute out the door, and it caught briefly on the tail of the plane. Luckily, the guy landed safely.

“At any rate, Earl Cooley and Rufe Robinson went on the first fire at Martin Creek. [They] dropped fire-packs on it. Dick Johnson was the pilot. They worked it all night and had it out before ten the next morning, [when] a four-man walk-in crew took over. The theory was, knock it in the head, control, and if you couldn’t control it, watch it until help came.

Second Jump

“I did the second fire jump along with Dick Lynch (MSO-40) from the Flathead Forest. That was on July 20, 1940. They decided to make an experiment. Two lookouts saw this lightning bolt go way down at the head of Moose Creek Range in Idaho, but they never saw any fire or smoke, but both had an azimuth reading.

“George Case was the District Ranger at Moose Creek. George Case had authority to dispatch jumpers from [the creek] to anywhere in the region. It was his responsibility. The crick drainage was huge drainage, and this strike was at the head of it. Even though they didn’t see any smoke or fire, they decided to jump in two jumpers.

He wanted each man to have a minimum of five years experience fighting fires.

“George Case ordered us in. Dick and I landed on a meadow about a half-mile from where the fire would be. Because it was a long, flat ridgeline, very open, we could see both lookouts through the trees, and with our compasses, we followed [the] azimuths until they met. Then we smelled smoke. It had just started out. We put it out.

“It was in the early afternoon, so we left all our gear up there piled up for packers to go in and pick it up. We took our jump jackets and Pulaskis and dropped



1940 training jump at Seely Lake Ranger Station (Courtesy Jim Alexander)

down seven or eight miles into Moose Creek Basin, which was 6000 feet down. We were told there would be food at the Forest Guard Station, but there wasn't, only a can of Sege Milk (condensed) and coffee. That's all the grub we had.

"We headed out at 4 a.m. when it was just getting light. We hiked along at a good clip of 3 or 4 miles an hour over very good trail, all downhill gentle grade, one of the main trails paralleling Moose Creek all the way. There were so many elk in that canyon we were slapping them on the butt to get them out of the way, literally thousands of elk. At noon we opened that can of milk: Dick had half, I had half. 40 miles later at about 10 or 11 p.m. we walked into the main Moose Creek Ranger Station. We were so tired we could hardly take our boots off. We were pretty sore from that long hike. It was a success, because with our compasses we were able to get to the fire. I never heard of them doing that again.

"Two days later at Moose Creek, we were building an irrigation ditch. Dick and I were sent to do the job with dynamite. Dick said he had plenty of experience. We dug the holes and buried the dynamite. He set the caps, and when we hit the plunger, it didn't go off. He

hit it a second time, and we had to then go in and dig out the dynamite. I was afraid we'd get our hands blown off. We dug it out okay.

The First Loft

"Frank Derry, his brother Chet, and Glenn Smith had set up a temporary loft, just a bunch of tables they had made. We decided to build a loft. The Forest Service flew in a cement mixer in a Ford Trimotor. We poured the base. The first loft wasn't even enclosed; it was all open. We couldn't extend the parachutes vertical; they had to be dried [horizontally]. We put on a roof made of cedar shakes made from trees we sawed down that served as [a] parachute loft for 1940-1941 at Moose [Creek], and I don't know what ever happened to that. It was very serviceable, over a hundred feet long. Frank Derry was the project manager. We had shelves to store the parachutes and a couple of heavy sewing machines to make repairs.

"In 1941, Dick Lynch went on to be the squad leader at [the] Big Prairie ranger station with about 15 men. I went there in 1941. It was a long flight from Missoula in a Ford Tri-Motor.

Early Days

“Let me go back further. I graduated from Great Falls High School in 1936, and I was active in the Boy Scouts and became an Eagle Scout. After a campout, we scouts came into Great Falls, and they were rounding crews to go to the Bear Paw Mountains, east of Havre, where there were two bad fires on the Indian reservation and the Forest Service lands. I volunteered to go up there. They sent us in an open truck, driving all night. We didn’t have any covering, just open air and sleeping bags.

“I was 18, one of the youngest guys. [We] rode all night, got there at breakfast. They were bringing down a guy on a horse, who was in the last stages of dying. He’d been burned, made quite an impression on me.

“We were there a couple of weeks, fighting that fire. Then we came back to Great Falls and fought another big fire that had started on Straight Crick, back up against the Rockies, where Charles Russell used to paint a lot of his paintings. We lost two guys on the Straight Crick Fire. Then we went back to Great Falls.

“We were fighting fires for 27 cents an hour. The grub was wonderful. We were growing up in the Depression. Those were hard times. So for us, the food was great. Some of us jumped the rails and rode boxcars to Missoula to keep on fighting fires. I signed up for more, and we went up to north of the Flathead where there was a huge fire of about 17,000 acres. I stayed there. I was almost

the last guy off. I was on the mop-up crew.

“I went back to Missoula, and we rode the boxcars to Spokane. We fought a bunch of fires there. Some of my buddies wanted to go north and fight fires near Seattle, but I went back to Missoula in a boxcar and fought a fire south of Missoula. By then, it was getting on to about September, getting pretty cold. When that fire ended, I went back to Great Falls.

“There was another call for a fire around Lewiston. By that time, I had enough experience; they made me a sector boss. I set up my first fire camp. It was really getting cold. And in the end, it snowed.

A Pretty Girl

“It is an interesting side story that in 1941, my wife, Dorothy, rode on the flights with Dick Johnson from Missoula to Big Prairie. Dorothy came from an old pioneer family in Montana. [Her people were] in the legislature and the senate and everything. On one flight, [Dick] had a cement mixer that broke loose in the plane, and because she was the only passenger, she had to secure it. He liked to take newspapers and have Dorothy throw them out to the lookouts. There were about 15 of them between Missoula and Big Prairie. Boy, were the lookouts happy to get those. They’d be waving! It was a pretty girl throwing out newspapers they enjoyed getting.” 🦋

Earl Cooley, The Hunter

by Ross Parry (Missoula '58)

Reprinted from October 2004 "Smokejumper."

In the early 1960's, Earl Cooley (MSO-40) and I were elk hunting in the O'Brien Creek drainage near Missoula. Our plan was to hunt in the same general direction, but not together, and eventually meet at the end of the road. We started off with me in the bottom "thick stuff," while Earl worked his way up toward the ridge top where the going was easier.

As I struggled through the "thick stuff," I heard a commotion off to my left. I raised my rifle and through the scope spotted a patch of hair about 20 yards away. I knew it was an elk and, since the hunt was either sex, I felt 99% sure it was safe to shoot. However, I was not certain of the body location of hair or if perhaps it was a deer? I figured if I took one step to my right, I could see more clearly. So I took that

one very slow, cautious step and crash, bang, the beast was gone.

I continued my struggle through the bottom, then up the ridge, down to another bottom and up another ridge to the end of the road; cursing myself for failing to shoot when I had the chance. I waited for Earl – and I waited – and I built a fire and I waited some more. The bull I had spooked had run up the ridge toward Earl and he shot it square between the eyes. It was a three or four-year old bull and, while I had been waiting, Earl had skinned and quartered it and had propped it up in the shade to allow the meat to cool properly.

I heard a story once that Earl shot an elk late in the afternoon and, rather than hastily cleaning and leaving, he had stayed out all night to make sure the meat was taken care of. I believe it.

Continued on page 26



Frank Derry Stunt Jump Team, Mines Field, Los Angeles 1937

Pioneers & Earlier Years 1937-40

Photo's Courtesy Frank Derry Collection



Frank Derry 1940



Steerable Eagle Parachute 1940



Frank Derry Jumpsuit Design 1939



Glenn Smith 1939



L-R: Rufus Robinson, Virgil "Buz" Derry & Richard Tuttle 1940



L-R: Richard Tuttle, Francis Lufkin & Glenn Smith 1940



Chet Derry 1937



*Frank Derry 1938
Packing Seat Pack*



Frank Derry 1939



George Honey 1939



Chet Derry & Frank Derry, Mines Field, Los Angeles 1938



*Evolving Jumpsuit & Parachute 1940
Layout Design by Johnny Kirkley (CJ-64)*