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The Glory Days
by Carroll Gambrell

Part I

The Glory 'Chute or How I Spent My Summer Vacation

Wind whipping around my helmet;
Heart beating like a pump,
"These folks must be crazy
If they think I'm going to jump."
-- First-time jumper

Dedication:
To all the guys who did it anyway,
And
To Earl, who showed the way,
And
To Fred, who showed us how.

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PREFACE

I want to make one thing perfectly clear. I was scared the first jump, the last jump and all the jumps in between. I make no pretense of bravery. I merely wanted to impress a girl. There is something highly unnatural about leaving a perfectly good airplane in mid-flight and, frankly, I don't think if I had made a thousand jumps it would have made any difference. I would never get used to it.

True, it beats walking miles to a fire, but I don't ever remember getting that scared when somebody told me I would need to walk somewhere. Anyway, the Forest Service pays people more for getting to a fire by parachute. They say every man has his price, and I guess mine was \$1.52 an hour straight time. That's what the Forest Service paid in those days, plus all the C-rations we could eat, while we were on a fire. This was also when every moldy-ass Civil Service clerk in Washington, D.C., was getting two dollars an hour plus time and a half for overtime, double time for holidays - and they didn't have to eat C-rations at all, let alone jump out of that old Tri-Motor.

We didn't think it was very fair, but if we were looking for fair we should have gone to Washington. Secretaries who couldn't even type were getting paid more than we were. Come to think of it, they got paid a whole lot more.

Every smokejumper tale I ever read was epic in concept, heroic in deed and tragic in consequences. Maybe this tale is just a little epic and a little tragic, but the only heroism I find is a bunch of guys who stepped out and turned left, no matter how scared they were.

This is a work of fiction, so certain events that actually happened will turn out the way they should have, instead of the way they did. Some names were changed in order to protect the guilty. Otherwise, this story is pretty much the way it was, or at least the way I would liked to remember it.

Enjoy,

Carroll Gambrell

INTRODUCTION

I never thought of pulling my reserve. I was so tangled up in shroud lines and risers I couldn't have pulled it, anyway. Although I couldn't look up to see, because of the mess of lines behind my head, I knew I had some kind of a canopy. There had been a kind of funny noise followed by a half-hearted opening shock. The only direction I could look was down.

I didn't seem to be falling any faster than usual, but those goat rocks below kept getting closer and closer while, the meadow I was supposed to land in got farther and farther away. I felt drawn toward the goat rocks as if by a magnet. Whether I liked it or not, that was going to be my landing spot.

I said a short prayer and braced for the impact.

I think I might have cried a little, too.

Chapter 1 - They Can Teach a Monkey to Jump

Old Leroy and I were good friends. I couldn't really blame him if Miss Howland was impressed by the fact that he had spent his summer smokejumping. I was sort of impressed, myself. I mean, there weren't too many among us at that time who had spent their summer vacations jumping out of airplanes onto fires.

It wasn't that I was exactly jealous of Leroy, because he became a kind of hero, but it sure was inconvenient.

It probably wouldn't be fair to say that I'd just met Miss Howland. She had caught all eyes when she twaddled into our speech class and, although she wasn't stepping out of a clamshell, she appeared to my eyes as Venus in the famous Botticelli painting.

I was smitten immediately. We were seated alphabetically. She sat right in front of me. Leroy sat just behind me. She had the most beautiful brown eyes I had ever seen and, although she didn't even know I existed, I was in love. I didn't know her first name, but I could learn that after we were married and had some kids, for all I cared.

First speech we made was to introduce ourselves and tell about our summer vacations. Well, I ask you, what kind of tale do you think would impress a girl the most? The one about jumping out of airplanes in Montana, like Leroy, or one about pruning pine trees in Arizona, which is what I did? Not that pruning pine trees in Arizona wasn't a Big Adventure to me, but tales of sawing limbs off a pine tree wouldn't exactly inspire a coed to gasp and ask what happened next.

I don't think she was even listening to my introductory speech, which was a harrowing account of the day the crew averaged sixty trees per man, a record for the Sitgreaves National Forest. In fact, I don't think anybody was listening.

On the other hand, even Professor Dickey hung on the edge of his seat whenever Leroy made a speech. I didn't have a dog's chance. Miss Howland would turn around in her seat and look right past me to watch Leroy make a point. I felt invisible and, to Miss Howland, I was. She never took the slightest notice of me, while in my mind I groveled at her feet, a miserable wretch.

It was scant comfort to me that Leroy, while he basked in the sunshine of her admiration, merely accepted it as his due, and manifested no romantic inclinations whatsoever. Instead, he held her in an easy friendship, spurning that for which I would have given my soul.

Of course, I didn't let anyone see how miserable I was, but, sensitive as Miss Howland must be, surely she must be aware of my deepest feelings. I was wrong. Not only did she give no sign of knowing, she didn't give any sign of caring, which only added to my misery. Tender feelings, if she had any, were reserved for Leroy.

There was only one thing left to do. Drastic though it was I began to think seriously of becoming a smokejumper myself. I had been on a couple of fires, but I wasn't going to compare my experience with Leroy's. Miss Howland would just laugh, if she did anything. The fires were just small two or three-man deals, and weren't anything to write home about. The only thing dangerous that happened was when we were in a Jeep racing across a high-grass meadow with our eyes on a big Ponderosa snag at the edge of the meadow, burning from a lightning hit just about an hour before.

John D., our straw boss, was driving and old John D., with his eye on the fire, failed to see the irrigation ditch that lay directly in our path. It was hidden from our view by the high grass. Actually, none of us saw it until we were in mid-air over it. It's good we were going as fast as we were, else we never would have made the other side.

The landing was pretty rough, but, considering the glide angle of a Jeep is about the same as that of a brick, I guess we were pretty fortunate not to end up in a crumpled heap. Teeth got rattled and noses bumped, but no one got badly hurt. Bill Autry, riding in the rear, put a Stetson-shaped lump in the aluminum roof, and the front wheels were a tad wobbly, but we went on and put the fire out. Nothing heroic; we just wanted to get back to the ranger station in time for supper.

And then, of course, there was the time a bunch of us borrowed old Roy's car while he was away from camp. We wanted to go into Heber for the weekly square dance and we did plan to fill up his tank - or at least add about a dollar's worth. We knew old Roy wouldn't mind. Besides, he shouldn't have left the keys right there in plain sight under his mattress.

I don't think that episode qualified as an adventure, anyway. I was driving as we topped a hill and rounded a curve, the headlights suddenly fell upon a mama skunk and five little stinkers that just seemed to pop up out of nowhere. No chance of stopping on that gravel road. I did the best I could to miss them, but I'm afraid we wiped out the whole family, whose last act on earth was to stink us up pretty bad.

We couldn't really blame the folks at the dance hall for not letting us in. We didn't exactly reek of Old Spice, but it hurt our feelings when we got back to the ranger station and Ranger Moody made us park the car in an open field about a quarter of a mile downwind from the station.

When Roy got back and we tried to explain to him what happened, he was a bit peeved, too. In fact, you might say he was outraged. At first he just stood there and kind of choked and gurgled, sort of like Old Faithful just before it cuts loose. Old Faithful quits pretty soon. but Roy's eruption went on for a pretty good while

After he got over that spell he just sulled up and pouted up for a couple of weeks. Every once in a while he would direct a spate of abusive language at us. The good news was he didn't commit any of the bodily harm and mayhem he promised, but I continued to sleep with a big stick by my bunk just in case.

At the end of the summer the car still smelled pretty musty when it heated up, but we were used to it by then. I don't think Roy ever did quite get reconciled to it, though. The car stayed parked out in that field the rest of the summer. Ranger Moody was sort of hard to get reconciled to it, too.

Well, that was not the kind of stuff that would put stars in the eyes of any girl I knew, whereas the very mention of fire and jumping out of airplanes got their undivided attention. That was real adventure and whoever did it must be brave. Girls are attracted to brave men.

All my pine tree-pruning adventures went for naught. You didn't need to be brave to prune a tree. There was another thing, too. Old Leroy seemed to have enough ready cash to go over to the College Inn for a hamburger and a shake whenever he wanted. None of us had that kind of money. I was forced to wear the

same pair of socks for a week, then turn them inside out and wear them another week, because I didn't have a quarter to spare for the Wash-o-Mat, let alone a hamburger. I'll have to hand it to old Leroy though - sometimes he shared the French fries.

It was during one of these little chit-chats that I discovered I might be eligible to become a smokejumper. Someone asked Leroy if you didn't need to have been a paratrooper or something before you could be a smokejumper.

"Naw," Leroy replied, with a sort of dashing modesty. "The Smokejumpers taught the Army to jump way back in 1940. They can teach a monkey to jump. It's firefighting experience they're looking for."

The conversation droned on between Leroy and my two roommates until they finished the French fries and Leroy left. I didn't enter the conversation except to grab a French fry whenever I could. I kept thinking about being able to teach apes to jump. I hadn't heard of an ape jumping, but, if they could teach an ape to jump, I could sure learn. And the main thing was I had fire-fighting experience. I mean, like I said, the fires weren't big ones, as fires go, but a fire is a fire.

I sent in my application the next day and prayed they wouldn't ask for details.

Chapter 2 - A fire is a fire is a fire

Volunteering for hazardous duty is a thing most often done before one has time to reflect upon it. If one has a chance to have those second thoughts, one might well choose another course. At the very least, one is apt to have mixed feelings, sort of like watching your mother-in-law drive over a cliff in your new Jaguar.

I guess that's kind of what happened to me. Let me explain.

When I filled out the application, I might have glorified my fire experience just a little. Get right down to it; I guess you might say I glorified it a lot. I got to thinking that I might have overdone it a tad. Actually, if I didn't just outright lie, I could have, what you might say, pushed the envelope of truth to its utmost extremes.

That might be one reason to have second thoughts. I had clearly overdone it. What if they believed it? What if they thought I was such a whiz bang that they sent me out to fight a real fire all by myself? What if I had to prove it? What if ... Well, I didn't really want to think about it. They would check with Ranger Moody down in Arizona and he would tell them I had only been on three small fires and that's as far as it would go.

I would need to think of some other way to gain Miss Howland's favor. Maybe I could write poems or something. Women always like poets, the more tragic the better. And right then I sure felt desperate if not tragic. There wasn't much difference in my mind.

But, getting back to those fires I was on in Arizona, just for the record, I'll explain how it really was, which will explain why I was having second thoughts about the smokejumpers maybe getting a false impression about my

experience.

The first fire I've already told about. To cope with the second one, they sent me and a pair of cousins who showed up fresh off the streets of New York City. They hadn't ever seen a patch of woods larger than Central Park. This fire also involved just one lone lightning-struck tree. We liked not to have found it, as it wasn't burning too well. Since we did find it, there was nothing to do but fell the tree and put a line around it. We needed to hurry before the fire went out by itself. I suggested that Don, the younger of the cousins, be cutting the line, while Bud, the other cousin, and I felled the tree into the line that Don was chopping.

Being of a most affable temper, they agreed that it appeared to be a sound plan, so we fell to. I plumbed the tree with an axe to determine where it would fall. Don had a good part of the line chopped by the time Bud and I finished the undercut that would guide the tree to the exact spot we wanted it to fall.

After that, we started the main cut that would topple the smoldering giant and lay it exactly within the pre-dug fire line that our cohort was digging. That was the plan, but I had reckoned without allowing for Bud's superior strength. You see, he was a muscle builder and strong as an ox. He pulled his end of the saw with much more force than I could muster. The result was our main cut was not square with the undercut, meaning Bud's side reached the undercut while I still had several inches of wood holding on. With our main cut catty-whompus to the undercut, instead of breaking off evenly along the undercut, it started twisting as it fell. This was no real disaster - yet. It just meant we didn't know which direction the darn thing was going to fall. The disaster wouldn't come unless it fell on somebody.

It hopped off the stump and danced around it a time or two as we abandoned saw, hammer, wedges, fire rakes and axes and ran for our lives. It finally crashed to the ground at about a 90-degree angle to, and completely outside, the line Don had labored on so fiercely while Bud and I sawed. There was nothing to do but chop a new line and go on back to the ranger station. The fire must have gone out during the night because we never heard anymore from it.

The third fire was a small brush fire I went on with Laurel Bigler, a local ranch owner who occasionally worked for the Forest Service. A few shovels full of sand took care of that one. No ditches to jump or trees to fell on this one.

But there was one small complication. It seems Laurel was suffering from a slightly broken leg from a bet. You don't usually break your leg on a bet but this wager was that Laurel couldn't rope an elk and ride him. Laurel won the bet but broke his leg while trying to turn the critter loose. At the time of the fire, which was a day or two after the elk roping, he hadn't yet seen a doctor. He did plan to take care of that when he went to Holbrook on Saturday, for in the meantime his leg was bothering him some. That's why he asked me to go with him. I'm not sure what my function was, but Laurel did most of the firefighting while using a shovel as a crutch.

I figured a fire record like that had to be embellished some to even make it believable. I guess I did overdo it a little, but I didn't hear back from the smokejumpers for a long time. I had about reconciled myself to the fact that they had checked with Ranger Moody and he had told them the truth, which was that I had practically no fire experience.

At least I had tried and, to get right down to it, I wasn't too crazy about the idea of jumping out of an airplane even for Miss Howland. But unrequited love will drive the smitten youth to thinking about all sorts of desperate measures, and I was certainly smitten. I thought about joining the Merchant Marine and going off to sea and having adventures fighting pirates in the South China Sea, but I gave up that idea when I considered I was more likely to end up on a banana boat fighting mosquitoes in Guatemala.

I guess there is no more pathetic creature in the world than a love-struck youth in the pink of health, with hormones dancing and all the juices of life flowing within him, trying to reconcile the instincts and urging of his primordial ancestors with the romance of a Renaissance lover. It's rendered even more pathetic when the object of his misbegotten ardor refuses to even acknowledge his very existence, and he's balked by his own shyness from making an approach.

To discuss the situation with my best friend and roommate, Joe, was unthinkable as that would open opportunities for the ridicule that would surely follow confession. I knew my old buddy, with whom I had grown up like a brother, would not pass up the chance to get in a few digs at my expense. He never had.

It was highly important to keep up normal appearances, giving no hint of my inner turmoil. That was no easy task, but I managed to pull it off by staying in the library and dealing with my frustrations by reading poetry. It didn't help my grades any but I sure learned a lot of poetry, which could come in handy if my moment ever came. But she continued to pretty well ignore me and we had still never spoken; yet, my devotion remained unflagging.

Dreams of winning my way into her heart by becoming a smokejumper were fading every day the long-sought letter from them failed to arrive. In my dreams a letter would arrive saying they were going to build their fire season around me, exclusively. But that letter never arrived and I grew more despondent day by day.

I began to consider becoming a monk. Outside of the fact that I was neither Catholic nor Buddhist, becoming a monk was beginning to have more and more appeal. But dreams die hard and, until the smokejumpers turned me down flat, the flame of hope still flickered. As to my having sort of exaggerated my firefighting experience, maybe to the smokejumpers a fire is a fire, and the size doesn't matter. I hoped that was it.

Chapter 3 - A light at the end of the tunnel

There is nothing like the sting of Cupid's arrow and a rival to arouse the competitive spirit in a young man of ardent disposition. Problem was nobody, especially the object of my affection, knew how ardent I was. But, in my mind, I was nothing if not ardent.

Sadly enough, if things continued in the same pattern, I would never get the opportunity to demonstrate the depth of my feelings. Leroy continued to hold her undivided attention. There was no indication from her that she even knew I existed. It was a dark and lonely time for me. Laughter became forced, and my moods were bottomless and murky.

Then one day an event occurred which, to me, had infinite possibilities.

When Professor Dickey assigned us the problem of making a speech with the use of visual aids, I seized upon it as a godsend. It was an opportunity to get one up on Leroy and a chance to really score. I looked upon it as my light at the end of the tunnel.

What I planned to do was to make my speech on the tools of a forester's trade. To do so, I would need a tree - and who better to be my tree than Miss Howland, star of the Interpretive Dance Class? She could hardly refuse in front of the whole class. It would be my hour to shine. She would need to at least acknowledge my existence and, once the ice was broken, who knew what would happen? The more I thought about it, the more excited I became. What could go wrong? How could it fail?

I set about executing my plan immediately. There was some concern about its being sneaky, underhanded and low-down - a trick no self-respecting guy would stoop to - but desperate times call for desperate measures. And I was certainly desperate. Besides, this was the best chance I had.

We had a week to prepare. I rehearsed, prepared, re-wrote and polished that little talk for the entire week. Lincoln didn't spend nearly as much time on the Gettysburg Address as I did on this speech, but then he didn't have nearly as much riding on the outcome.

I tried to work in some way to be able to convey my true feelings. Maybe I could become a tree-hugger and sweep her off her feet and carry her off to my dream cottage in the woods, where we would spin out our hours together communing with nature and raising children. Ah, foolish dreams!

That would be digressing, and Prof Dickey took a dim view of digressions. Besides, not knowing her first name would be a drag. All I had ever heard her called was, "Miss Howland." I couldn't go around calling her "Miss Howland" all the time, especially if I was trying to declare my undying love. People would think I was crazy baring my soul to a girl whose first name I didn't even know.

Anyway, the nearest I dared come to doing that in this speech would be to express my deepest feelings for trees, considering she was going to be a tree for a few minutes. I doubted very much Miss Howland would get the message, but it was the best I could do.

The Big Day finally arrived and Prof Dickey called the class to order. I arranged my instruments on a table behind the podium. My heart was in my throat and I was sure the first three rows must have heard it pounding. But if the class had caught my excitement, there was no indication of it. I was not exactly known as the Daniel Webster of the sophomore speech class and nobody was expecting much. Several people were yawning and a couple of guys in the back row were already prepared to catch an afternoon snooze. Little did they know what a surprise was in store. For that matter, I was a tad in the dark, too.

But I had my speech down pat. I had rehearsed it aloud in front of Joe so often, he could have given it. In fact, he had threatened to move down the hall until I had delivered it. But Joe didn't understand how important this was to me and there way no way I could tell him without risking the ridicule I knew would follow.

After a few introductory remarks, during which time my tongue went dry, a strange lump developed in my throat, my voice cracked and became exceedingly husky, came the Big Moment. I didn't ask for volunteers, as that would be too

risky. I couldn't dare take the chance that Miss Howland might not have been one of them.

In a voice that sounded a bit croaky, I asked Miss Howland if she would come forward to assist me. Prof Dickey smiled. He liked to get a lot of people involved in a project and it was a good way to get the audience's attention. I knew I was making points with Prof Dickey, whether I was making any with Miss Howland or not. So, if worst came to worse, it wouldn't be a total loss. In the meantime, I had done it! I had actually addressed the Girl of my Dreams!

If I had expected her to eagerly spring forward, I was disappointed. She gave a start and didn't spring forward at all, but instead sat there demurely shaking her head, blond curls bouncing and reflecting light in the most glorious manner. In a word, she would have nothing to do with it. All my scheming and preparation would have turned to dust had not Prof Dickey come to my aid by insisting that she cooperate. She came forward with what I thought was a smile until she got nearer and I could see that she was just clinching her teeth.

This thing was not exactly getting off to the most promising start, but she had at least noticed me. That was progress of a sort. To put her at ease, I began by showing her how to use the compass. This went off very smoothly except that she reacted at first as if she expected a scorpion to jump out and bite her. To further gain her confidence, I next demonstrated the use of the range finder. To me, business was picking up - I was forced to touch her while showing her how to put the instrument up to her eyes and adjust it to determine the distance. The warmth of her presence and the heady breath of her perfume were almost too much for me. I rocked back on my heels a time or two, and I don't think I was breathing at all. If I was, it was in short gasps.

I must admit it was kind of a downer when she trained the instrument on Leroy and squealed with delight at being able to determine the distance to where he sat. Which was not nearly far enough away to suit me. She then pointed it at Prof Dickey and they had a laugh.

She was beginning to relax some, and I noticed she was not above flirting a bit, if she thought it would improve her grade. It gave me a morsel of confidence to furnish her a cause for a moment of gaiety. At this high moment, I thought it would be well to proceed to what I hoped would be my ace in the hole.

Assuming the nonchalant devil-may-care attitude that seemed to work so well for Leroy, I asked for the range finder, which she reluctantly surrendered. She was having fun with it and didn't really want to give it up. It had made her the center of attention and she liked that. But we needed to move on.

This was the moment I asked her to pose as a tree, while I explained the purpose of the next exhibit. She threw me a look of askance, as if she wasn't too sure what I was up to. But then she assumed the mannerisms of a virgin pine - limbs spread, face uplifted, a faraway, dreamy look in eyes cast toward the Heavens.

It was a vision even more than I expected and I stood frozen to the spot. For a long, awkward moment I forgot my speech. I even forgot where I was. When some idiot twittered I was brought back to earth. Dull, senseless, unfeeling clod! Here was a sight for the gods and some cretin saw fit to laugh. Sacrilege! The world was heartless.

Holding my debonair attitude, I continued, while Miss Howland stood frozen

in her pose. The twitter died when, I am happy to say, most of the class declined to join in. One of the sleepers in the back row stirred, rubbed his eyes, and stared at Miss Howland. From the confused expression on his face, I believe he thought he had fallen asleep in the wrong class.

While Miss Howland continued to bask in the warmth of the imaginary spotlight, as it were, I picked up the Biltmore Stick, which resembled nothing more than a common yardstick, and began to expound upon its many uses and mysteries. For instance, you may use it to determine the number of board feet in a log, or in a standing tree. It may be used to determine the height of a tree. It serves as an ordinary yardstick, if one is needed, but it's probably used most often to determine the Diameter Breast High, or d.b.h. in forester jargon, of a standing tree. In order to get a valid reading, one must reach out and, at arm's length, hold the stick tangentially against the tree at breast height.

I was about to demonstrate, when I became aware of two things: 1) the two rather large rounded "knots" on my tree were located exactly at breast high; and 2) a piercing look from a pair of rather sharp, brown eyes peering at me from my "tree" were daring me to take that measurement.

I froze in mid-measure.

"You do, and I'll fall on you like a ton of bricks," she hissed.

Most of the class heard her. It was beginning to sound like a hyena convention in the sophomore speech class. I'm afraid even Prof Dickey had abandoned me to my fate. This was a sledgehammer blow to both ardor and ego, but I had no choice but to continue and try to recoup my rapidly fading fortunes.

Without slacking up in the least on my debonair manner, I placed the offending Biltmore Stick on the table and, with the greatest aplomb, picked up the pair of tree calipers.

"These may be used to measure butt swell," I announced blandly.

With a shriek, my tree dodged behind a desk and I perceived I had guessed wrong again. As for the class, they were whistling, shouting and stomping on the floor. Prof Dickey seemed to be gagging on something. For my part, I wished them all dead, but I seemed to be the one who was dying. But I needed to continue. Perhaps some miracle would save me. Shaken to my very foundations, air of nonchalance slipping badly, I replaced the calipers on the table. I'm sure Doctor Freud would have had a field day with my next move, for out of several instruments remaining, I picked up the increment borer.

"We use this instrument to bore into the tree," I announced in what I hoped were even tones.

Miss Howland gave another shriek and I thought she was going to faint dead away. Prof Dickey fell out of his chair, pandemonium broke loose and class was over for the day.

Sick at heart and ready to give up the ghost, I managed to drag myself back over to the dorm. Joe was already in the room, classes over for the day. With my world in a shambles, having just crashed down around my head, I was sure Joe was bound to comment. But if he noticed anything amiss, he gave no sign.

"Letter for you," Joe announced, hardly looking up from his studies. He

handed me a brown envelope over his shoulder. It had Forest Service logo, and was probably the long-expected rejection from the smokejumpers. Everything else had gone wrong that day - why not that?

Slowly, heart heavy with the dread of expecting the worst, I opened the envelope and read the contents. My heart gave a leap. I was mistaken. They wanted me to come to work! I read the letter over again in case I had read it wrong the first time. There was no mistake... unless the Forest Service had made it.

I had known all along that it was a long shot, but in my mind acceptance by the smokejumpers was the last hope I could ever have of impressing Miss Howland, if even that would work. After what had happened in Prof Dickey's class today, I wasn't at all sure. But I clung to a desperate hope that this was the answer to my most fervent prayers.

Joining the French Foreign Legion had been an option, but a little too far out, even for me. Smokejumping seemed to be the most viable route, and Miss Howland had already been impressed by it. Besides, it would be only for three or four months. The Foreign Legion wanted you to stay longer than that, and they shot deserters.

I rushed to tell Leroy my good news. I must say that, if he shared my joy, he was careful to hide it. My enthusiasm might have waned a bit when he reminded me that parachutes didn't work every time. They had been known to malfunction at the most crucial times, like three seconds after you went out the door.

I tried not to think about that too much and slept that night with the letter under my pillow. If there was a light at the end of my tunnel, I just hoped it wasn't another train. I had already been run over once that day.

CHAPTER 4 - Training

I don't know if it's significant or not, but we were the thirteenth and last smokejumper class to train at the old Nine Mile Camp. It was formerly a CCC Camp left over from the 1930s, about twenty-six miles north of Missoula. The next class moved into a new modern facility at the Missoula County Airport and never knew the joys of isolation, living with fifty roommates in an old bunkhouse, lighting fires in a potbelly stove on frosty mornings, or manufacturing one's own entertainment without the assistance of movie houses, fancy clubs or women. I want to tell you, that kind of living will clear your lungs, strengthen your body, test your will, mold esprit de corps, and drive you absolutely berserk, if you aren't careful.

I never did know what Nine Mile was nine miles from, but I guess it didn't matter. Downtown Nine Mile was out on the highway, about two miles down a gravel road from camp, and consisted of a tavern by the same name, which also sold gasoline, groceries, liquor, wine, beer, firearms, ammunition, hamburgers and hardware. It was the only commercial building in town, the rest being devoted to the residential section, which consisted of a trailer, where the folks lived who owned the tavern.

All of us made the two-mile trek from camp to the tavern at one time or another. It was an easy walk downhill all the way. Walking back was a different story. Not only was it uphill, but not all the boys were able to navigate too

well after a visit to the tavern, especially in the dark. We never lost anyone, but some of the guys were known to have spent most of the night in the woods from time to time.

Nine Mile Tavern was the only waterhole for miles around - and they made pretty good hamburgers, too. You could also get a better-than-fair T-bone there, if you could afford it. But the only people we knew who could afford that kind of eating were some of the guys from more affluent homes back east. The rest of us ate hamburgers, for which the owner of the tavern generously put on the cuff until payday. Other than weekends, we didn't get down to the tavern much. We were usually too worn out from the training routine to make the trek.

But the first of June, a hundred and fifty or so guys had showed up out at Nine Mile, and, without a whole lot of fooling around, training began. Mr. F. O. "Good Deal" Brauer, the project chief (we learned later where the "Good Deal" bit came from when he assigned us to brush-piling projects, which he made sound like it was as good as a vacation in Acapulco).

Mr. Brauer would become known and beloved by all of us as our fearless leader; he started the ball rolling by telling the assembled rookies that figures showed that two out of three of us would be injured to some extent before the season was over. Of course, that just made everyone feel sorry for the guy on either side of him.

But when he told us that half of us would not even finish training, I knew that didn't include me. I didn't even think about quitting. I hadn't come two thousand miles to fail. I could do that at home. No sir, not me. Quitting wasn't a thing I even thought about. I couldn't quit, I didn't have enough money to get home. I had to stay until payday, and that was six weeks off. By then, training would be over, and the fire season would have begun. No matter how brave I thought I appeared, my Red Badge of Courage had a tinge of yellow, but, like it or not, I was locked in, and might just as well make the best of it.

Don't get me wrong. I don't mean to say that we stayed in a cold sweat all the time, but there was always the underlying question of whether or not, when the moment came, we were going to step out that door. They were a great bunch of guys and a lot, if not most of them, shared the same mixed feelings - although we seldom, if ever, talked about it.

If the training was tough, the trainers were even tougher.. Our trainers were definitely dedicated to working our buns off. They remembered the tragic Mann Gulch fire only a couple of years earlier, in which thirteen jumpers had perished, and they didn't want a repeat of that tragedy. That was fine with us. We didn't want a repeat either - but we knew it could always happen.

Old Jim Lowe and I quickly discovered that one fire the smokejumpers didn't know how to fight was the fire of a bee sting. That's where Jim and I made our only contribution to the accumulated mass of smokejumper lore, and I don't think they ever grabbed hold of it.

Jim was from Tennessee and the only other boy there from the South besides me. Although we didn't know each other until we got to Montana, we had hiked the same Smoky Mountains trails and, for all I know, been stung by the same bees.

Being the only Southerners in camp, we took a lot of ribbing from the other guys until one day MacDonald, an Indian boy from up around Kalispell said, "Hang in there, guys. Us Indians have a score to settle with these Yankees, too.

We'll help you out."

Anyway, Jim and I made our contribution one day in First Aid class. As I remember it, Len Kraut was teaching it. He was one of our leaders, but he sure didn't know what to do for a bee sting in the field. He told us to rub mud on it and stuff like that, but he never said anything about plastering it with chewing tobacco. That sort of amazed Jim and me. We thought everyone knew that a good quid of soggy chewing tobacco applied to the sting would take the fire right out of it. Furthermore, there was always chewing tobacco available, but there might not be any mud on top of a mountain.

Would you believe those silly Yankees nearly laughed us out of the room? We decided that if a bee stung their britches off while they were looking for mud or tea leaves or whatever they thought would work, it would serve them right and we wouldn't care. We didn't make any more suggestions after that, either.

There was the time we were having a class on safety, which included "avoiding mid-air parachute collisions." See, we were supposed to have these parachutes that we could steer by pulling on guidelines, sort of like plow lines, except yelling "Gee!" or "Haw!" wouldn't do any good. We needed to reef down on those plow lines and pray it worked. It usually did.

Anyway, Fred set up a hypothetical situation where the wind was blowing me straight toward Tom Givens, and directed his question at me..

"What do you do?"

I studied about it for a few seconds before I answered. It could have been a trick question, for all I knew, and I wanted to get it right.

"I don't do anything," I said.

"What! You are about to collide and you don't do anything!! What are you thinking?"

"Well, I figure the same wind that's blowing me is blowing him."

I thought it was a pretty good answer, but it apparently wasn't the one Brauer was looking for. Givens owed to make sure he didn't make any jumps with me..

We climbed ropes, jumped off platforms, did flips onto trampolines, chopped fire line and learned to climb down from trees we never climbed up One of the most important things we learned was how to make a landing, where we would crumple our knees right quick, then roll on down the side of our body and end up with an over-the-shoulder somersault. It's called an Allen roll, and it's how smokejumpers are supposed to land.

Paratroopers are taught to do it a little differently They call it a PLF, or parachute landing fall. I was in the paratroopers later. Like I said, I'm awfully mercenary and that extra \$37.50 a month came in handy. Anyway, the smokejumpers taught me to do an Allen Roll so well I never did learn to do a good PLF.

I guess the Big Test, short of going out of a plane, was jumping out of the eighteen-foot shock tower. It's like a big gallows and we sort of felt like we were the main attraction at a hanging, except the rope was hooked to our

parachute harnesses, which took the shock instead of our necks.

There's a net down below, but we didn't ever get that far. The rope jerked us up just short of the net. It's a little higher than a second-story window. Not really high enough to kill, but a lot higher than we'd want to jump. Heck, even hooked up to a harness, it's a little scary the first few times. They told us if we went out of the tower, we wouldn't have any trouble going out of a plane. I didn't believe them, but it turned out to be true.

The toughest part for me was getting suited up inside one of those mock-ups of the Ford Tri-Motor. That's one of the planes we used. The idea was to get used to suiting up en route to a fire, in case we were in a hurry, and smokejumpers are always in a hurry. The Tri-Motor carries eight men, plus the spotter, who tells you when to jump, and I had a hard time trying to suit up with seven other men. It seemed like the whole darn cabin was full of flying elbows, knees and feet. I'm glad I never did need to suit up in the air on an actual fire call. I would have gotten into all kinds of tangles and it really wouldn't have been safe. Two men in the same 'chute just wouldn't have worked out at all. They liked for each man to have his own.

One of the biggest days during training was the practice fire, and I guess ours was not much different from most of the previous ones. Well, maybe a little different. We must have already dug three hundred miles of line through the woods just learning how to do it. We used what they called the "bump method," where we spread out about a dozen feet apart along where we wanted the fire line to be dug, and everybody started digging line by scratching up the ground right down to mineral soil, in a path about three feet wide. The fire is not supposed to be able to cross that line.

At least that's the idea. Sometimes the fire does cross the line anyway. But the bump method meant what I did was. When I reached the spot where the man ahead of me had dug, I said "bump", and everybody ahead of me moved up to where the men ahead of them had dug, and started digging more line until all the segments were connected. It was up to the guy in the lead, usually the foreman, to determine where the line should go. We could chop a lot of fire line in a hurry that way, and we got pretty good at it.

The place they chose was way up on the side of Edith Peak, where the timber had been cut and the laps and brush piled. The idea was to chop a line all the way around it, then touch her off and let us see how the fire just sort of burned itself out, once all the fuel was consumed inside our line. Then we would go in and burying all the places that were still smoking. That's called "mopping up".

"A fire isn't out until twenty-four hours after the last smoke is spotted," is the rule Fred Brauer drummed it into our heads.

After all was ready, we stood about eight feet apart in our already dug fireline while they touched her off. It was exciting. A fire will always start the adrenaline pumping. Ours really got to pumping when, just about the time the fire got going good, a completely unscheduled wind came up, and we had to run for cover; but right off the bat, we recovered, got organized, and started digging more line - this time for real.

We were able to keep it from spreading sideways, but there wasn't much we could do to keep it from shooting right up the side of Edith Peak. Fortunately, the breeze subsided late in the afternoon and we were able to get a line all the

way around it again, but not before the fire had eliminated all the brush on the side of Edith Peak in a swath the size of several football fields.

Come to think about it, we learned some very valuable lessons about fire that day. First of all, fire and weather were both extremely unpredictable. Neither always follows the rules. Secondly, trained firefighters standing eight feet apart in an already-pre-dug line weren't proof against a fire getting out. And third, there was nothing glamorous about fighting fire, unless hard, dirty, stinking work could be considered glamorous.

It was worth every bit of \$1.52 an hour. A fire didn't punch a clock or take lunch breaks, and it didn't go out at quitting time. When we finally hit our bunks about 10 o'clock that night, we were tired, hungry, sweaty, grimy, and worn out. We already felt like veterans, and we hadn't even made our first jump.

But we were about to remedy that shortcoming.

Chapter 5 - The monkey jumps

My hands gripped both sides of the door of the Tri-Motor in what must have been the mother of all death grips. The whites of my knuckles were shining clean through my leather gloves. One foot was jammed onto the outside step, and the other crouched under me. The wind that whistled through my face mask bore the sickening-sweet smell of aviation-gas fumes from the starboard engine.

If this wasn't living on the edge, it was certainly as near the edge as I ever wanted to get. It might have helped some if I had ever flown before, but I hadn't. This was my maiden flight ever. I felt a little like the Captain of the Titanic, except I wasn't going to get to come down with the airplane.

I could see a circle of people gathered around what must have been a red "X" in the green meadow they said was our target. Wally Dobbins, our spotter, was trying to point it out to me. I couldn't see the "X" because I'm red-green color blind, but I knew about where it had to be, and I told him I could see it. That seemed to satisfy him. He left me with my thoughts and turned his attention to spotting.

The meadow was coming up fast. I concentrated on the exit I was planning not to make. My heart beat in time with the engines. Thoughts raced through my head.

"These people are crazy if they think I'm going to jump. I'm not going to jump. Only an idiot would jump out of a perfectly good airplane. I'm not jumping."

I wasn't moving out of the door, either, and that was probably my first mistake. No, it wasn't my first mistake. My first mistake was getting in the door in the first place. No, that wasn't my first mistake. It was ... heck, who was counting. I had made a lot of mistakes and together they had put me where I was.

I didn't want to think about it, but, for sure, I was not going to jump.

Wally dropped his hand - the signal for the pilot to cut the engines - and then he tapped me sharply on the heel and yelled, "Go!"

Maybe I'd better go back and explain a few things I might have forgotten to tell you before. I don't want to make any excuses or blame anyone for the uproar the speech with Miss Howland caused. The other reasons I was trying to become a smokejumper, I have already listed.

In the short time that remained of the semester, Miss Howland managed to avoid me as if I was a viper of some sort. Old Leroy continued to wow them with speeches about the history of forest fires, and about how old Earl Cooley had made the first smokejump back in '39, and all that.

I noticed that he usually managed to modestly weave in a few personal experiences, too. There was no doubt about it, he was a spellbinder, and there was nobody's spell he binded any tighter than Miss Howland's. I will say that in spite of it all, I had to admire the boy. He never let rivalry for Miss Howland's attentions interfere with our relationship. Actually, the reason it probably didn't bother Leroy is that he wasn't even aware I was a rival. That kind of hurt.

But Miss Howland couldn't pretend she was no longer unaware of my existence. She was well aware of it. The fact that she knew I was there and continued to ignore me was even worse than when she actually didn't know I existed. But it was obvious she was always well aware of Leroy's existence. His smooth manners, his dashing ways, his suave, easy, don't-give-fat-rat's-rumble-seat charm absolutely captivated her. Yes, the love light shone in the eyes of my beloved, but not for me.

To compete with Leroy's silk stories, I countered with speeches on "How we jumped an irrigation ditch in a Jeep", and "How to avoid sawdust injury while pruning ponderosa pine in the Great American Southwest." To be completely honest, they didn't do the trick a-tall.

Even Prof Dickey showed signs of drifting off. It didn't help even when he told me that my visual aids speech was one of the funniest speeches he had ever heard. It was the only time in the whole year I made an A in his class. I'm not sure he was ever convinced that I hadn't planned the whole thing to be funny.

I left well enough alone because I needed a decent grade in his course to offset the miserable scores I was making in Organic Chemistry. That subject didn't make sense to me then and hasn't since. I truly believe they asked the same questions on every final, but changed the answers.

In spite of the fiasco and despite the odds against my ever redeeming myself in her eyes, my love for her never wavered, and Miss Howland continued to be my ideal of feminine pulchritude. And, speaking of pulchritude, she had plenty of it. She had a very pretty way of wrinkling up her nose whenever Leroy said something clever, and it seemed as if he was always saying something clever. Whenever he did, a pang of pure unadulterated jealousy would sweep over me, and I would sink even further into my shell.

The last social function before finals, was the Junior-Senior Prom. I ventured to it with Maggie, an old friend I had grown up with. Our families were old friends, and I want to say now that there was nothing at all between Maggie and me, except long friendship. Not that I was ashamed of Maggie. There just was no romantic spark. Neither of us had any designs whatsoever on the other. She was a girl friend, she was a friend who was a girl, who was easy to be around and comfortable to be with.

Leroy, of course, took Miss Howland.

Miss Howland was a vision of loveliness in a white, strapless dress. It was difficult to say if she had almost squeezed into it, or was about to come out of it. Either way, she was attracting plenty of attention. Leroy was his usual cool, jaunty self, in a white dinner jacket that perfectly complemented Miss Howland's outfit, golden hair and radiant glow. Her laughter was a perfect symphony of tinkling bells, though the bells began to become more and more out of tune with every stop she made at the champagne table.

She didn't seem to have any trouble filling her dance card, but she was very selective about it, filling it mostly with the names of her various professors who seemed very anxious to dance with her. I couldn't blame them. After all, she was not only tall, willowy and extremely buxom, she was the star of her dancing class. Light on her feet would hardly describe her. She floated.

Maggie and I watched her float by one time with a rather short, baldheaded, horn-rimmed partner, obviously a professor. His red nose rested comfortably in the recess of her cleavage, a dreamy expression on his face.

"Good dancer," Maggie observed, dryly.

"Yes, and would you believe she has an impeccable GPA to go with it?" I asked.

"Yeah, I'd believe it," Maggie commented, again very dryly.

I wondered why there was so much irony in Maggie's voice, but she was always quick with the pithy remark. Because she had a way of seeing to the heart of a matter, I thought I'd better change the subject before Maggie discovered I was dying inside.

We passed the evening, dancing a few dances, eating those little bitty sandwiches they always serve at functions of that sort. There didn't seem to be much of anything available to drink other than champagne and punch. I didn't drink very much, because I'm not very much of a drinker. Maggie stayed sober as an owl.

Old Leroy wasn't drinking much either, but he wasn't doing much to stop Miss Howland. I think she drank my share of the champagne and his, too. As the evening wore on, she became more and more...well... relaxed.

I was alone a good part of the evening while Maggie danced with my roommate and frat brothers. I didn't mind. I spent most of the time at a dark table watching the dancers - especially Miss Howland. She passed by once doing a hot cha-cha-cha number with Prof Dickey. He could cut a right mean rug for an old geezer. She danced three more times with the short, bald prof, who couldn't seem to extract his nose from her bosom. But the climax of the evening came when she was dancing with the Dean.

The Dean was a tall, graying, distinguished, usually reserved fellow, who always made me think of a penguin. Some folks regarded him as a cold turkey, but, under Miss Howland's spell - or it might have been under the influence of about a quart of champagne - he really began to thaw. It was during a pause in the Samba in the Continental style that she decided to eat his boutonniere, while he made a futile attempt to drink champagne from her slipper. I don't

think he needed any more champagne, but it was a small slipper full of holes that let most of it leak out; so I don't think it added enough to hurt.

The couple drew quite a crowd, including Mrs. Dean, who took a very dim view of the whole proceeding, and tried to shuffle her husband out of the place. He didn't much want to go, and she ended up pushing him into the fountain pool and dumping the punch bowl over an innocent Miss Howland.

After that, the party kind of lost its edge and we headed home.

I'll admit, Miss Howland's behavior at the party didn't exactly enhance my idea of her as my ideal of womanhood, but one so deeply enamored as I readily forgives. But she didn't seek my forgiveness and continued to ignore me. Leroy, on the other hand, seemed less forgiving of her momentary lapse, as I characterized it. He was a little more direct.

"That's the squirreliest broad I ever met," was his succinct appraisal.

I could see that he might have a point there, but Leroy could not possibly see what I saw. That took the faith of a martyr, the heart of a lover and the soul of a poet. After the fiasco of the speech, I sure felt like a martyr and there was no doubt in my mind that I had the heart of a lover. I wasn't so sure about the soul of a poet, but that was probably there, too. I had been thinking a lot of dreamy thoughts since Miss Howland came into my life.

The most significant thing to me about the whole episode was that Leroy announced he didn't want anything more to do with Miss Howland. A decided coolness developed between them, Miss Howland declaring that Leroy acted like an old fuddy-duddy when she was just having fun, and Leroy saying she had embarrassed him.

A decided rift had occurred. Perhaps I could fill the vacuum, if I could just go out and have some adventures. That's what seemed to attract Miss Howland in the first place. She liked brave people and I needed to show her I was as brave as the next one.

I was discovering, however, that it was a heap easier to be brave when you weren't hanging out the door of an old Tri-Motor - and as far as adventures were concerned, I was about to have one.

The engines cut, Dobbins hit me on the heel and I shot out the door as if I was spring loaded. Like Pavlov's dog, it was a learned reflex, conditioned by hours of training. I didn't have a darn thing to do with it; but the reflexes, after I shot out the door were all my own. Gone were the thoughts of Miss Howland. I was concentrating on other things right then.

"Get back in that airplane, you fool. You can't fly!" was my first thought, but it was too late. You can't unring a bell. The next thing I remember was watching the tail go by, then a sort of eerie silence before the "whoop!" of opening shock made me squinch my eyes shut. When I opened them, I was swinging in the harness beneath a beautiful, fully blossomed, red-and-white-striped canopy. Safe! Surprise, surprise!

I blinked a time or two and looked around. It was like having the best seat in the house at the World Series. One of the first things I noticed was the silence and how soft that grassy meadow looked. But it didn't really seem to be getting any closer, and I still couldn't make out the "X."

It didn't matter. I would be happy just to hit the meadow. But I seemed to be suspended there in mid-air. What if I didn't come down? Who cared. Right then, I would have been perfectly content to hang there forever. I think "euphoria" is the word for how I felt. But it began to fade as the ground got closer. I needed to think about landing.

I have no idea what my altitude was when it became plain that the sightseeing was about to end and the serious business of making a safe landing took over. At any rate, for the last few seconds I pretty well focused on the problem at hand.

Veterans might be able to judge the moment of impact but first-timers can't. I tried to remember all the things they taught us - keep your eyes on the horizon, don't look down, keep your legs slightly bent and, for God's sake, don't lock your knees.

Before there was time to get all those things firmly fixed in my mind, the ground came up. Whop! My legs crumpled into an Allen Roll and I was sitting up in two-foot-tall pasture grass, at least a football field away from the big, red "X." But, I at least hit the meadow. That was more than some of the guys could say.

Close enough! It was over. Much to my surprise and infinite relief, it hadn't ended like the maiden voyage of Titanic.

The monkey had jumped.

Chapter 6 - Meet Miss West

The combination of adrenaline high and relief we all felt after the first jump was short-lived. We did it all over again the next day and the day after that and the day after that, and so on, until after awhile it began to feel like a bad habit one enjoys. Although it took only seven jumps to qualify, it didn't take near that many before a somewhat different feeling began to creep in. Doing it every day like that, we began to feel like it was going to go on for the rest of our lives.

And the jumps were getting progressively tougher. No more soft flat meadows. The jump spots kept getting smaller and the ground rougher. The idea being we would finally get used to it - and maybe some of them did, but I didn't. It was much like the first jump, except I thought I knew what to expect, but that didn't necessarily guarantee what would happen. It must have been on about the fourth or fifth jump I learned that what was supposed to happen didn't always happen.

I had been assigned to the Travelaire used for two man fires, Al Cramer spotting. Al had been around several fire seasons and pretty well knew what he was doing. He was reputed to be able to put you out on the jump spot, even if your parachute didn't open. That might have been true, but somehow I drew little comfort from the thought.

The T-aire was the smallest plane that Johnson Flying Service used to deliver jumpers. Johnson Flying Service was the company the Forest Service contracted to fly the smokejumpers to fires. Their pilots were absolutely the

best in the business. Johnson wouldn't even consider a pilot's application unless he had logged at least a thousand hours of bush flying. Many of the pilots had logged their hours in the Canadian or Alaskan bush. All were veterans. Before the season was over, those pilots had earned our undying respect and probably deserved more.

The three principal aircraft used were: the T-aire for small two- and three-man fires; the Ford Tri-Motor for up to eight men; and the CD-2, or "Doug" for up to sixteen men. We got a taste of each of them before we were fully qualified. Of the three, the Doug, built in 1935, was the only "modern" airplane in Johnson's fleet. The Tri-Motor, built in the middle 1920s, looked like a corrugated chicken coop, except not so streamlined. It took off, flew, stalled and landed all at roughly the same speed ... slow. It could use very short fields, was tough as pig iron, very reliable and ideal for mountain flying. It was also the type of plane that suffered the crash that killed the famous coach, Knute Rockne. That noted event was tough to erase from one's mind, but essentially, the plane was noted for its ruggedness.

The Travelaire bore a marked resemblance to Lindbergh's Spirit of St. Louis, except you could see out. They were built about the same time. It was a four- or five-place fabric-covered monoplane, with a huge radial engine. On boarding, I noticed a metal plaque by the door bearing the inscription, "Built by The Ryan Aereoplane Company," the same company that manufactured the famous Spirit. That could account for the resemblance. It wasn't exactly modern in appearance, and the archaic spelling of "Aereoplane" was a certain tip off as to the age, but the company had gotten Lindbergh to Paris. The plane should be able to get us to a fire.

This jump was the one where we were to suit up and 'chute up in the plane. I have no idea why I was assigned to the T-aire for this exercise, unless someone just enjoyed torturing me. You see, I wasn't what you might call the most petite rookie in the program. With my gangly six-foot, four-inch frame and size thirteen slippers, I wasn't exactly built for getting dressed in phone booths. I never could imagine how Superman managed it. I guess his feet weren't as big as mine.

Anyway, the T-aire had even less room than the Tri-Motor, and as I had come all around kicking that Tri-Motor mockup apart, I thought there was a very good chance of my dismantling the T-aire mid-flight. But I managed to get everything more or less in place without doing that.

In case anyone is wondering, I don't really blame what happened next on any kind of faulty procedure, or anything to do with suiting up in the plane. It just happened, that's all, and if it's all right, I will just leave it there.

We were jumping into a rocky little side-hill meadow a few miles south of Missoula, and I guess everything was going according to plan, which was to land in that little meadow without breaking a leg. At least no one had broken one so far. All the overhead personnel who weren't acting as spotters were on the ground critiquing jumpers. Al Hammond was on the ground with a bullhorn, directing jumpers to the spot, in case they couldn't see it.

We came mushing along over the jump spot. Cramer signaled the pilot to chop the engine and clapped me on the shoulder almost simultaneously. Again, I sprang out the door as part of that dang conditioned-reflex thing, and watched the tail go by, waiting for the opening shock...waiting...waiting...waiting...but it never came. Instead, there were

some funny noises behind me as if someone was tearing sheets.

Suddenly it was as if a large hand grabbed me by the nape of the neck and dropped me into a gunnysack. That wasn't supposed to happen, but it was all the opening shock I felt this time. I can't say as I was entirely happy with the feel of it, but it was better than none at all.

What the heck was going on? If that sort of thing had been covered in the training program, I sure missed it, and I thought I had paid pretty close attention. I tried to look up and find out what was going on, but couldn't because of the tangle of lines behind my head. I felt about halfway hog-tied. I could barely hook my fingers around the guidelines by which the 'chute was steered, but, when I pulled the right one, the 'chute turned left and vice-versa. Furthermore, I was speeding backward! Everything was reversed.

Sooner or later I'm sure I could have figured out the right combination for steering the darn thing, but right then I wasn't having much luck. I had no idea where I was headed, other than I knew I wasn't going to hit the jump spot. I watched it melt away like a popsicle in the sun, as that whacko parachute drifted away from it. It was the most frustrating feeling, but there wasn't a doggoned thing I could do about it.

"You have a Mae West! You have a Mae West!" Hammond yelled over the rapidly fading bullhorn.

I assumed he was speaking to me, as no one else with a Mae West was in the air at that time. Knowing what the problem was brought little comfort. There wasn't a darn thing I could do about it, and Hammond couldn't get up there to help me. They had talked about "Mae Wests" during training, but I knew it was never going to happen to me. They were supposed to be "rare".. When one or more shrouds get looped over the top of the canopy, it makes it resemble a well-filled Bikini bra. I can assure you, there is nothing sexy looking about it when viewed from directly below.

That is, if you could view it, which I couldn't, because of the tangle of lines behind my head. The thing is, although I didn't know it then, I not only had a Mae West, but the darn thing had turned wrong side out, too! I had an inverted Mae West, and I know that event wasn't covered in training, because it wasn't supposed to happen!.

That accounted for the reversal of control and backward drift. Although it was a thing that rarely occurred, it was truly difficult for me to appreciate the uniqueness of the situation right then. I was doing my best to avoid getting killed in the process of becoming a sort of celebrity. I was drifting toward some very jagged goat rocks that were drawing me toward them as surely as if they were a magnet and I was a refrigerator.

It was not a comfortable feeling. If I thought it was hard to be brave when I was hanging out the door, it was nothing compared to watching a pile of goat rocks rushing up at me. Right then I was in agony, but that had no effect on the inevitable.

When I crashed into those rocks, it sounded as if someone had thrown a brick through a plate-glass window. No Allen Roll on those sharp rocks. I hit running headfirst down the steep slope, and with arms flailing and head lowered, charged full tilt into an old growth Ponderosa pine at the foot of the slope.

The tree remained immobile, but I bounced back and sat down. I was on the ground and, I think, unharmed, except I was blind! I couldn't see a darned thing, except a little bit of daylight below my right eye - and that revealed a small patch of ground that kept spinning around and around.

I could hear the far-away voice of Al on the bullhorn, telling me to whistle if I was all right. I tried to pucker and blow, but what came out was more of a Bronx cheer than a whistle. I had lost my pucker, and was blind as a bat to boot; so I just sat there and tried to shake the cobwebs out of my head.

Over on the jump spot, Hammond was still trying to get me to whistle at him, not knowing at the time that I couldn't even have whistled at Marilyn Monroe. Evidently, not being able to elicit the desired whistle from me, they became concerned and sent out a search party.

The searchers found me about the time I discovered that banging headlong into that tree had jammed my head so far up in my helmet, I couldn't see. Removing the helmet brought about a great improvement, but it was a while before my pucker returned.

We never did find out why and how that 'chute got so tangled. Fred did tell me not to worry about it, because it probably wouldn't happen again in a million jumps. I took him at his word. I didn't plan to make that many jumps, anyway. Besides, the Forest Service gave me a brand-new parachute.

There was one thing I flat made up my mind to, however, and that was, if that was the kind of stuff I needed to go through in order to attract the Miss Howland's of the world, forget it!

Chapter 7 - "X" marks the spot

There was an element around the parachute loft, which included most of us, who would bet on anything, a roll of the dice, the turn of a card, or which flower a bee was going to sniff next. Come payday, they sat down to a poker game that lasted until all the money was in one corner, then borrow hamburger and beer money from the winner until next payday, and start the process all over again.

Betting on their skill and luck as a jumper was a natural. It wasn't very hard to simply get up a spot pot and whoever got closest to the X won the kitty. A hundred and fifty or so guys all kicking in a couple of bucks apiece made it a pretty fat cat..

Gambling does not run in my family's blood. It has been often discouraged since my Great-uncle Henry, of whom the family seldom speaks, and whom I never met, won a raffle while he was over in England. The winnings consisted of a first class ticket on the maiden voyage of Titanic. That might have been one reason I never met him.

But because I was in training to become a smokejumper, I thought it would be a good idea to act like one, so I put my two bucks in the first spot pot, and landed a country mile from the target. The next jump I was a little closer, but not nearly close enough. This went on for quite a while. I kept coming closer, but no cigar.

After making several contributions to other guy's beer money, it began to dawn on me, gambling could get to be expensive. Here it was I had upwards of ten dollars invested in that darn spot pot and nothing to show for my investment but

bruises and contusions. I was becoming downright discouraged.

Lloyd Brown was one of our most accurate spotters, even more accurate than Cramer, and he was scheduled to spot me on the next day's jump. In addition to taking great pride in his work, Lloyd was a sympathetic sort of person. I approached him after supper the evening after the goat rocks episode, and, as expected, he lent an attentive ear to my sad story.

"What's it worth if I put you square down on that spot?" he asked.

That was what I was hoping he would ask. It showed he was getting into the spirit of the occasion. He had his own pride and reputation, too.

"Half," I said. "Split down the middle."

"Okay, get ready," He had a sort of a wry smile and a certain gleam in his eye that gamblers have when they are betting on a sure thing. That should have tipped me off that he had something up his sleeve. It didn't. I just figured he knew what he was doing, and would take a few extra pains doing it. I crawled into the sack that night feeling I had a good chance of winning that pot tomorrow, if Lloyd lived up to his reputation. I might even have a chance of paying off my hamburger bill and getting something besides cuts and bruises from landing on goat rocks. Speaking of which, they were beginning to ache something fierce.

We suited up early the next morning for a jump into a small clearing just over the mountain from Missoula. I was in the Tri-Motor and they were letting the guys out one pass at a time. I was the last to go, and in seven previous passes, I got a good look at the tiny little clearing we were supposed to hit. It was a tight squeeze to even hit the clearing, let alone the jump spot. From the air, it didn't appear big enough to park a pickup. There were parachutes draped all around the clearing, and it didn't appear anyone had even come close to the spot.

The seventh man jumped and Lloyd signaled me to take my place in the door. I won't say I wasn't sweating - that would be a flat-out lie - but this time I felt I might have something to look forward to besides a sprained ankle.

The big Ford circled wide and came in slowly for the final pass. Lloyd was directing the pilot with hand signals, while I was steeling myself for the final spring. My heart was beating eight to the bar and I was breathing like a one-lung Marathon runner as we munched into the final pass. I won't say I was eager to go, but at least this time I was more willing. Finally Lloyd gave the signal to cut the engines and gave me a clap on the shoulder.

"Go!"

I went.

Ploof! Came the opening shock, and I checked the canopy above me blossom beautifully. After checking the canopy, I grabbed the guidelines and prepared to steer for the spot. I never got the chance.

Wham! The ground came up and smacked me before I expected it. Man!! That was the quickest parachute ride I ever had.

Guys were coming up and slapping me on the back and congratulating me. I

was sort of addled and wondered what it was all about. We had all made jumps before and nobody had ever made that big of a deal about getting down safely - not even when I had hit the goat rocks. I was in the clearing, and that was more than most of them could say, but I still couldn't see that X anywhere, because I was sitting squarely in the middle of it!

It couldn't have been surveyed any closer. Lloyd had hit the target as near the bulls-eye as you could get. He told me later we had come in at about six hundred feet. No wonder I had hit the ground so soon! The 'chute barely had time to open!

It would have been a perfect day except for one little hitch. I had been so excited about my prospects for winning the pot that I had neglected to ante up! No cigar this time.

To Lloyd's credit, I will say he took the whole thing like gentleman. If he was the least bit perturbed, he never said so, but I never came close to winning a spot pot again. I guess it's just as well. If I had won, the gambling bug might have bitten me and I might have won a vacation in Mogadishu, Baghdad, or Chicago.

Chapter 8 - Tourists

It was the 4th of July weekend, and we had a few days off before our final qualifying jump. That was fine with me. I was afraid my goose pimples were going to become permanent fixtures, and I needed a day or two of rest to let them settle down. With a long holiday weekend off, Jim Lowe, Bill Gumby, three or four of the other guys, and I decided to take a trip to Glacier Park, since we had never been. However, we had no way to travel, except by thumb.

In order to improve our chances, we split up into pairs so a dozen people wouldn't be trying to pile into one car. For that reason, it ended up me and Jim traveling together. The idea was for everybody to meet up in the park, once we got there.

Folks back east might not realize that out in the Big Sky Country things are on a much grander scale, and Glacier Park is about the size of a small state. Ironed out flat, it would be bigger than Texas. It's laid out with the long way running north and south, and there's an adjoining park over in Canada about the same size or bigger. The two of them together cover a right smart of a territory.

There's a highway along the southern boundary of Glacier Park called the Summit Highway, and one across the middle called the Going to the Sun Highway. It's the road someone must have had in mind when he drew those Roadrunner cartoons. The route is spectacular, as far as scenery is concerned, but it is definitely not for the faint-hearted. It runs right along the face of a sheer cliff all the way up to Logan Pass. Even mountain goats and bald eagles avoid it whenever possible.

There's one thing about hitchhiking in Montana. You don't ever get short rides. Anybody who's traveling is bound to be going a long way for the simple reason that everything is a long ways apart. There are no two places you would want to get to that are close together. Having plenty of elbow room, folks tend to be particularly obliging. Jim and I didn't need to wait long for our first

ride. A pickup truck with three guys in the back pulled over and the driver motioned us into the back.

With that kind of luck we would be in Glacier in no time. They seemed to be a jolly crew, so we didn't waste any time climbing aboard. We probably shouldn't have been quite so willing to place our fate in the hands of these birds. They were a bunch of off-the-wall-weirdoes. I wasn't sure Jim had noticed at first, but the driver had a downright cavalier attitude with regard to the center line of the highway. He didn't pay much attention to it at all. But I don't think Jim had time to notice that little lapse, as he was too busy putting out the fire in his pants caused by a firecracker one of the Good Time Boys casually dropped into his pants cuff.

The guy hadn't done it on purpose. It was just that his buddy, equally oiled, had nudged his elbow just as he was about to toss it at a roadside chicken stand, and made him drop it accidentally. Not to make a pun, but they seemed to get a right big bang out of it, and decided to do a repeat performance on me. I hope you will understand I didn't want to be a killjoy, but I didn't mean to allow that, either. They still thought it was good sport to try to drop a firecracker into my pants, while I danced around in the back of a pickup truck that was weaving all over the road.

When they paused to watch a rodeo at Ravali, Jim and I took advantage of the moment to bail out and leave that amateur bomb squad now getting their kicks out of throwing firecrackers at the bull riders. Those boys were thinking big. In the meantime, we disappeared into the crowd and made it out to the highway.

We were fortunate the first car that came along stopped. We were a little slower about accepting a ride this time. I mean, we weren't expecting Wally and the Duke of Windsor to drive up, but we made sure it wasn't cowboys with firecrackers.

Without a doubt, this car had seen better days. It is highly questionable if it had ever seen the inside of a car wash or a body shop. They appeared to be a family with two little boys in the back seat, and what could be safer? The oldest may have been ten years old; the youngest about eight. Mama was a tad on the frowzy side and Pop whose name, we were informed, was Bill, resembled a mud wrestler who had just lost a tag match.

They were obviously not on the way home from the Queen's Ball. They had been cherry picking, they told us, as we crowded into the back seat with the boys, who, by the looks of things, had been eating the cherries out of a big grocery bag.

"Have some cherries. We got a-plenty," Bill said, in a tone of voice that indicated he might regard it as a personal slight, if we didn't partake. About that time the oldest boy spit his cherry pit back into the grocery sack.

Jim sort of gagged, and I wasn't too thrilled with the prospect, either, but neither of us could think of a reason to decline the generous offer that would satisfy this insistent red-faced hulk. At that point, I'm not sure we wouldn't have preferred the company of the bomb squad again.

Bill shook the bag at us, and we gingerly reached in, searching for a relatively unexplored spot. There wasn't one, but we each took a cherry from as deep into the bag as we could reach..

Bill seemed to regard this meager effort as an affront to his generosity, and made it plain that he would regard it as a personal favor if we could see fit to overcome our shyness and accept a man-sized handful of his somewhat polluted bounty. He underscored this point by rattling the bag at us again - upon which, the younger boy added another cherry pit to mingle with the already ample portion in the sack.

Although we weren't going very fast, it was much too fast to jump for it. Nothing to do but reach in, hope to find a virgin area, of which there weren't any, and try to make a small handful look like a big handful. It was thus we proceeded toward Polson at 35 mph, which seemed to be the vehicle's top speed.

The smallest boy, who was looking over his daddy's shoulder, had his face stuffed full of cherries. He resembled a red-lipped ground squirrel. He suddenly burped a soggy mass of half-chewed cherries all over a hapless Jim and the back of Bill's neck..

"Kenny! What the hell are you doing?!" Bill yelled, while Jim sought to rid himself of this sudden unwanted and unexpected burden..

"Mind your manners!" Mama scolded, wiping cherries off the back of Bill's red neck and Jim's front. "What are these people going to think? What do you have to say for yourself?"

Kenny sulked up. "I wisht I'd just a-farted, instead" .

"I wisht you hadda, too, you little bastard," said Bill, wiping cherries off his neck.

That delighted his brother, who giggled, which was answered immediately by a punch from the embarrassed Kenny. A scuffle ensued, with Jim and me in the middle of it. The little one pinched the big one, who let out a yelp and aimed a swat with a toy steam shovel at his little brother, who ducked to the floor, laughing. He missed his brother, but caught Jim squarely on the knee.

In the meantime, Mama kept flailing away with a belt, trying to quell the uprising, Her purpose was good, but her aim was bad. In fact, it was deplorable. Not a blow landed on the boys, but she beat the heck out of me and poor Jim.

"Now you boys quit that," she whined in a voice that didn't carry much authority, all the time flailing away. Whap! Whap! Whap!

"Ooohhh!!" Jim yelled. "I surrender!" I ducked and caught one on the back.

The boys jumped, ducked and dodged amid screams and squeals of delight that sounded like six cats in a garbage can.

Whap! Whap! Whap! I thought she would never stop flailing that stupid belt. If she ever hit one of the boys, I never knew it, and the boys didn't, either. They thought it was great fun, and apparently Bill did, too.

"Hoooweee! Man! Look at them little critters go!"

Their daddy might have gotten a big kick out of it, but that didn't help Mama a dab, and it sure didn't help me and Jim, who bore the brunt of Mama's efforts.

The boys finally calmed down with only minor skirmishes from time to time calling for the belt, and we eventually rumbled into Polson. Sick, sore and somewhat swollen, we declined the invitation to spend the night and get a fresh start in the morning.

As the car pulled away, a well-aimed cherry pit struck Jim on the neck just behind the left ear and stuck. We turned just in time to see two grimy-faced deadpan little boys staring at us out of the car window. The older one gave a weak wave of the hand; the little one stuck out his tongue, and they were gone.

We stood out there for quite awhile before our next ride came along. A big black car passed us doing about eighty, but slowed to a stop way down the road. We didn't even know he was stopping for us, until he blew the horn and motioned for us to come on. We started running that way, because he seemed to be in a hurry. We must have run a good half mile before we could jump in.

We were greeted by a neatly dressed Indian in a wide-brimmed black Stetson, who proved to be one of his tribe's elders on the way to a meeting of his tribal council over in Browning, east of Glacier Park. Hot dog! We had a ride all the way to our destination. That was the good news. The bad news was, the tribe was celebrating Custer's Last Stand, and he had started early. Worse than that, he was taking a short cut across the Going to the Sun Highway.

I don't know if you have ever had the thrill of traversing that route with an inebriated aborigine, who was celebrating the victory of ancestors who outrode, outshot, and outfought, the flower of American cavalry. Such a journey is not recommended for the faint of heart. It isn't even recommended for the stout of heart, and it surely isn't a trip you want to take with an Indian in the middle of celebrating Custer's Last Stand.

To sum it up, the trip was a tad more than mildly hairy, but we did get to East Glacier in gig time. The sun was still fairly high when we more or less poured ourselves onto the pavement at East Glacier, grateful to be alive.

We had a little bit of trouble getting Jim out of the car. I thought his leg was probably stiff from that whack on the knee with the steam shovel, but it turned out he had a death grip on the dashboard and just couldn't let go. His eyes were sort of glassy, too. We finally pried him off and were able to bid a fond farewell to the chief, who left for his meeting in a cloud of dust.

Jim and I, on rubber legs, moseyed about, looking for any of our buddies, who might have showed up. I didn't figure there was much chance of finding them in that crowd. The place was crawling with tourists, and the guys could be anywhere. We hadn't gone far when someone called my name from the direction of the Visitor Center. It was our buddy, Lucky Dave Lodzinski, who was still in camp when Jim and I left.

Seems that Lucky Dave had caught a ride out of Missoula with a bunch of girls who worked in the park, and, get right down to it, had a much more pleasant trip than me and Jim. On top of that, the girls had introduced him to the Park Superintendent, who had invited him to stay in VIP suite over at Park Headquarters!

It seemed that the park rangers had a very soft spot for smokejumpers, who fought their fires and not as often brought out the remains of hikers who had

had the ill luck to run into one of the park's grizzly bears. I think Gunby was on one of those missions.

While Gunby and Lucky Dave, and the other guys partied with the girls, Jim and I conked out in the VIP suite and slept like babies. We were just too pooped to party.

Chapter 9 - Somebody up there likes us

I didn't relate the trip back to camp in the last chapter because there was too much to tell in one sitting. Besides, just thinking about that first part wore me out. But I will say, if getting there is half the fun, getting back must be the other half. Still, there should be something in between.

Jim and I had missed out on the partying, but we didn't care too much. That good night's sleep helped a whole bunch. That night, the third of July, had come a big snowstorm up on the Continental Divide. We didn't know anything about it until one of the rangers mentioned it the next day, which was the Fourth.

The storm had laid about six inches of fresh snow up at Logan's Pass, a place of incredible beauty right in the middle of the park. We had passed over it with the Chief the day before, but at ninety miles an hour, neither Jim nor I either one had our eyes open for beauty or otherwise. We decided to go back and see it at a little slower pace this time.

Besides being unbelievably scenic, surrounded by high, craggy snow-capped peaks, long Alpine meadow vistas, and glacial tarns, it's where all the tourists stop to stretch and pee. Well, being tourists who needed to pee, we thanked our ride, two nice ladies who taught school somewhere in the Midwest, and evidently needed to pee, too, but school teachers don't talk about that. However, I noticed they headed for the comfort station in a pretty big hurry. High altitude does that for you.

It wasn't too long before the whole gang started arriving two at a time, as we were still traveling in pairs. Their arrival timing wasn't set up, it just happened that way, and it didn't take long for us to get together. We were all just sort of milling around, taking in the sights, and I can't say who fired the first shot, so to speak. I guess it was just inevitable that, with all that fresh snow, somebody would hit somebody with a snowball, and pretty quickly it snowballed into snowballs flying everywhere.

Having grown up in Florida, I never had even seen snow until I got to Montana. Some of us hadn't ever been hit with a snowball anytime, and for sure, none of us, even the Yankee boys, had ever been hit with a snowball on the Fourth of July.

It was a unique situation, but, with so much snow to make snowballs, it might have gotten out of hand. In fact, it did get out of hand when some of the other tourists were hit and they started throwing snowballs. I bet there were a hundred people up there yelling and laughing and carrying one. There was so much snow flying, it looked like someone had run over a chicken house with a semi.

Well, there wasn't any way that something like that could be going on without attracting the attention of the authorities. And when authorities get their attention attracted, they seem to think they've got to do something. I

don't know who called them, but I think it was a little old lady in a flowered dress that got in the way of a real hummer.

Anyway, the authorities came rolling up directly in four or five big, green Ford automobiles with lights a-flashing and aerials going whomp, whomp, whomp. It took a while to restore order, but, when they started mingling with the crowd, they finally settled things down. One of them, apparently a "town-tamer", red-faced, barrel-chested and about an axe handle-broad across the shoulders, said, "All right, who started it?"

We hung our heads and nobody said a word. After a moment of silence, something like observing a moment of silence at a solemn occasion, somebody giggled.

"It was him, your honor," said the lady in the flowery dress, indicating our nameless giggler.

We turned and stared in the direction she was pointing - at one of our brethren, stretched out in the snow, looking at the sky, trying unsuccessfully to stifle another giggle I won't say who it was because, even now, it might land him in trouble. I remember thinking those giggles sounded as if they might have been left over from the party. Anyway, the big, red-faced ranger walked over to him and nudged him with his foot.

That brought another giggle, but he cut it short when he saw who had nudged him, and the sight seemed to sober him up a bit - though he did seem to have a little trouble focusing..

To the everlasting credit of that big ranger, I say that he was not entirely unsympathetic. Stern, but not without a certain amount of empathy he delivered a most eloquent soliloquy on the purposes of the park and the responsibilities of the folks who used it; the effect of which was to bring us to the verge of tears.

After sternly admonishing us not to let it happen again, he turned to leave, offering his broad back as a target too tempting to pass up. He had not taken a half-dozen steps before he was plastered right between the shoulder blades with a real blockbuster. Our drunken buddy had great aim, but extremely questionable judgment.

Whirling in his tracks, face even redder, the big ranger rumbled toward our hapless compadre much like a Sherman tank advancing on a squirrel. In a moment of inspiration, which more than likely prevented a grizzly-mauling, our soused companion reached into the snowbank and came forth with a life-saving bottle of Jack Daniels Old No. 7, which he held out as one would hold out a cross to protect one from a vampire..

Dracula's grimace melted into a grin, which eased tensions considerably. The collective sigh of relief might have fanned a good sized forest fire, and visions of at least half of this year's Smokejumper Class getting thrown in the pokey dissipated. With a wave of the hand in mock disgust, he dismissed the whole crew.

The upshot of the whole thing was the rangers loaded us up and gave us a free ride out of the park. Actually, what they did was escort us out the West Gate and tell us not to come back, unless there was a fire. Although the base was still a long way off, we were a heap nearer than if they had taken us out

the East Gate.

A lot of cars rushed by while we were trying to get to Kalispell, but tourists don't stop for hitchhikers much, and it was getting pretty late in the afternoon when Jim and I disembarked at a hamburger joint in downtown Kalispell. We spent nearly the last of our money on chili dogs and Cokes, then started walking backwards out of town with our thumbs out.

What few tourists who were still on the road weren't stopping and the natives weren't picking up strangers. The night was becoming pretty chilly, and we sure weren't looking forward to spending the night in the woods.

We were contemplating going back and asking to spend the night in jail, but, because we had come so close to having done just that earlier in the day, we thought we had better not tempt fate. While we were pondering our options, which seemed to be severely limited, a car slowed to a stop.

I know it probably sounds as though I'm making this up, but I swear this is exactly the way it happened. I wouldn't lie. I wanted to say that because Jim and I couldn't believe it ourselves. We didn't know who was in that car, and, thinking about recent history, we didn't want any more cherry spitters, pyromaniacs or Indian chiefs in a hurry. Couldn't really blame us if we wanted to check things out. But, the face that appeared didn't raise any suspicions whatsoever. He had a bald head, a small beard, wire-rimmed glasses, and spoke with a gentle voice. Here comes the part that's hard to believe. Truth to be told, we were even a tad skeptical ourselves.

"I'm going to Missoula, boys," he said. "Will that be far enough?"

He might have been Attila the Hun, for all we knew, but we piled in anyway. Turned out he taught at the university and needed company to keep him awake until he reached home. We kept him awake for four miles before we conked out completely and slept all the way to Missoula. He let us into an empty dorm where we spent the rest of the night. Our luck had changed. Somebody up there liked us, after all. At least, we thought He did.

Early the next morning found us on the road to Nine Mile with our thumbs hung out. There wasn't much traffic, but eventually a long, yellow convertible pulled up with a young man driving, and a good-looking blonde in the seat beside him. This must have been a young couple on vacation, out early in the morning in a beautiful car, enjoying the scenery and the early summer air. What could be better! What could be safer? We didn't hesitate to crawl in. Man! We were going to arrive in style.

Remember what I said about appearances being deceiving? Well we were deceived again. What we discovered even as the guy shifted into second gear, was that they weren't enjoying the air. They didn't give a hoot for the scenery. In fact, they didn't even know where they were or where they were going. They had been partying all over the Northwest since their wedding sometime the week before, and were hoping we might direct them to the nearest tavern!

Thinking more quickly than I had ever known him to think, Jim said, "I know just the place, but it's a little hard to get to. If you'll let me drive, I can get you there in two shakes." And that's how we finally arrived back in Nine Mile. We left the happy couple blissfully asleep, parked in front of Nine Mile Tavern, and walked the last two miles into camp.

Somebody up there does like us. He just didn't want us to relax.

Chapter 10 - Hanging around

Of all the days we looked forward to, the next was the one I mostly wanted to be able to look back at. It was our seventh, and last, qualifying jump, known as the "Timber Jump." It would not be made into a meadow or any kind of clearing, mainly because there would be no meadow or any kind of a clearing anywhere near it. There would be nothing but timber to land in. We had been assured of that by no less than our fearless leader, Mr. F.O "Good Deal" Brauer, himself..

Rumor was that, if we didn't hang up, they would take us back and make us jump until we did hang up on something, preferably a tree. I'm not sure they would have done that, but that was the word.

We were going to be forced to climb down a tree we had never climbed up. That was the whole idea. I will say they fixed it so we wouldn't have any big trees to land in. They're the dangerous ones because, if the parachute didn't hang up, a limb was liable to spill all the air, and the jumper would fall to the ground. That had happened before, causing grievous injury to the jumper.

Thoughts like that can keep you awake sometimes.

On the other hand they gave us a long rope to help us climb down out of those trees, and our jump suits were made of a heavy canvas to keep limbs from poking through. Little things like that brought a lot of comfort, but they were poor protection in case of a long fall.

As further protection against limbs, the collars on those jump suits came way up around our ears like funnels. At certain times, that could become a problem, too, as when people got airsick, as some of the guys inevitably did. At least the poor souls might need a shower, but they wouldn't need barf bags, they were wearing one. That collar would funnel everything right down inside their suits and not get any on the floor at all. That didn't help the guy it happened to very much, but the rest of us appreciated it.

Another thing about the outfit was that, if it felt like it fit properly, that meant it was much too big. What I mean by that is, by the time I put on the suit, harness, parachute and all, I couldn't straighten up, and walking very far was a chore. Of course, when I hit the ground, we immediately shed the jump gear, and fought the fire unimpeded.

Probably the most important piece of jump gear was our boots. You would think regular Corcoran Paratrooper Boots would be just the thing, but that is not true. They didn't supply enough ankle and arch support, and are totally unacceptable. The only boots that the Forest Service approved for smokejumpers were Chippewa Lace-to-toes and White Loggers. The White Loggers, made by the White Boot Co. of Spokane, are the homeliest boot imaginable, but are the boot your feet love.

Loading onto the Doug, suited up and wearing all that gear would be near 'bout impossible, if there wasn't a stout person nearby to help. After suiting up and 'chuting up, we couldn't walk upright, so they boosted us aboard like sacks of sugar beets. We crawled over to bucket seats to think things over until

the plane took off.

Then there's the ride to the jump spot, where there might be some more waiting. They only let out three guys at a pass and they might need to make several passes before it's our turn. By then, we'd be in a pretty good sweat.

This flight was a little different from the others. For one thing, it was our last qualifying jump. After that, we would be real smokejumpers. For another, it was the first time we didn't have a clearing to land in, or any hope for one. That, in itself, was a problem, as if we didn't already have enough to worry about.

To top it all off, there was this little guy running up and down the aisle, hanging out the door taking pictures, and asking all kinds of dumb questions. He was a freelancer from one of those adventure magazines like Argosy or Saga, or maybe the National Geographic. Somewhere along the way someone noticed he didn't have on a parachute. I think the spotter caught it, when he noticed him hanging out the door trying to set up some kind of wacky angle to get shots of jumpers leaving the plane. Anyway, they got him a 'chute and let him hang out the door. After a while, someone asked him if he knew how the 'chute worked.

He said, "Yeah, all you do is turn this thing and mash it."

We liked to have fainted. He was mashing the quick-release mechanism for the harness! I think they sent him up front to take pictures of the pilot after that. I didn't see him hanging out the door any more.

I didn't feel much like praying, and, as often happened, my thoughts turned to Miss Howland. I wondered when I was going to have some adventures to impress her with. So far, I didn't have anything much to talk about.

We came over the jump spot and the first three guys moved into position. I watched as they went out, then I got ready. I was in the middle of the second stick between Denny Miller and Odie Powell. We looked like a six legged centipede, when we lined up to go.

These were a couple of guys I could really count on. I still wasn't going to knock anybody over for the opportunity to go out the door first, but, if I needed to jump anywhere with anyone, I'd just as soon it be with those two guys. They could be relied upon to help me out the door, in case my feet stayed glued to the floor. The only thing that bothered me was that Odie had a bad habit of landing on people's 'chutes that were just below him. He would walk across the top of their canopies, up to his knees in nylon, then hop off into the wild blue yonder when he reached the edge.

Odie and I were good friends, so it wasn't anything personal that I just didn't think it was a good idea at a thousand feet to be walking around on other people's parachutes. On the other hand, Odie didn't set out to do it, either - it just seemed to work out that way. Old Odie was just naturally a sociable type, and he like to be around other people. However, mid-air is not my idea of a place to be socializing.

The big Doug circled, and we could smell the wood smoke from the small fire that had been lighted to mark the target area. Red Xs wouldn't have been visible. We just needed to aim for the smoke.

Actually, we didn't really need the smoke anymore. There were parachutes draped all around on trees where the first jumpers had already hung up, but the smoke added a touch of realism, if we needed any. I personally didn't care - all I wanted was to get this jump behind me.

It seemed like forever that we stood lined up in the door while the old Doug mushed along, coming over the jump spot. Al Hammond, the spotter, held his hand up as a signal to get ready and he held it, and held it, and held it ... then, down it came - and whump, whump, whump we were out the door.

After what seemed like an hour and a half came the opening shock, and I could see Denny below me. But I never did see Odie. A shadow passing overhead told me he was nearby, though, but he was far enough away that I didn't need to worry about him walking around on my parachute.

Looking around, I could see and smell the smoke from the target fire, and see red-and-white-striped parachutes draped in the trees like some kind of decorations. Some had jumpers still hanging in them. Other than the fact that there wasn't anyplace to land, except in those trees, it was a right pretty sight. Trouble was, pretty soon now we were going to be part of those decorations, and there didn't seem to be one spot softer than another.

I tried holding off as long as I could, but it didn't do much good. The next thing I knew, I was crashing down through the tops of a stand of pole-sized lodgepole pines that covered the whole mountainside. Limbs broke off and branches whipped by my face, but nothing poked through and the heavy mesh of the face mask protected my face. Then I seemed to slow to a stop and just hung there, suspended about eight feet off the ground.

I'll be darned! That was the easiest landing I had made yet. I didn't even need to use my let-down rope. It was no trick to just slip out of the harness and drop to the ground. That just goes to show that the things you dread most don't necessarily ever come about.

Smokejumper numbers show that far more people are hurt landing than jumping out of the plane. I guess that makes sense because, if the 'chute didn't open, I wouldn't get hurt until I hit the ground. Still, it was getting out of the plane that worried me a lot more than landing. Truth was my troubles didn't really start until after I was out of the plane.

At any rate, I felt as if my troubles were over. and I just hung there awhile, catching my breath While I was hanging there, Brooklyn's finest, old Fred Eichenburger from Fresh Pond Road, came crashing through the trees. He kept slipping and sliding and bouncing off limbs until he finally came to rest less than a foot from the ground. He just released his harness and stepped out - his landing was even easier than mine.

That freelancer could have saved himself some trouble. Saga magazine evidently didn't think too much of his jump stories. But they did like a story he did about a homemade bucking barrel that some of the guys set up so they could practice bull riding for the Labor Day rodeo in Missoula

We didn't have any kind of formal graduation ceremony or anything like that, but we were "fire ready". The only recognition was getting our names added to a ready list. We were more interested in finding out where we were going on project.

The gang was about to be split up for a while, but we knew the next jump would be for real.

Training was over.

Chapter 11 - Meadow Creek

I hadn't mentioned the following before, because I didn't want it to sound like I was looking for an excuse for being a bit apprehensive, some may call it chicken, but, until the day of that first jump, I had never been up in an airplane in my life. I had never even been inside an airplane, not even on the ground. I had been up in an airplane seven times; now I was really looking forward to coming down in one.

I know that sounds odd in this day and age, but it's not that I'm so backward or inexperienced. It's just that I had neither the opportunity or occasion to fly or be around airplanes, other than the models we made. Only the leisure class and people who thought they were in a hurry flew in the 1930s. We surely weren't rich, and Pop was never in that big a hurry to get us anywhere.

I hope you will understand why I may seem a tad more than a little bit edgy about this jumping business. I don't think you need an excuse for getting an extra thrill for stepping out into a couple thousand feet of thin air, no matter who you are. I don't think I was any different from any of the other guys. If they weren't scared, why were they doing it? To get a thrill, they'd need to be scared, and if they weren't getting a thrill out of it, there are lots of easier ways to make \$1.53/hr..

In my case, simply getting a thrill was way down on my priority list. I was trying to impress the girl of my dreams, and I needed to make enough money to stay in school. I guess I might have been trying to prove something, too, but at the time I would have been hard put to tell what it was.

Anyhow, the first seven times I ever flew in a plane, I jumped out of it.. I'm not saying that's any kind of a record, but I do think it is a tad unusual for folks to jump out of an airplane the first seven times they ever go up. That's why I don't think I deserve much blame for wanting to experience landing in an airplane, for a change.

Now, finally, I was going to have that opportunity, when they took us out on project. But, first, let me explain "project".

One bunch of guys were permanent party in Missoula, and didn't do anything but rig parachutes. That is all they did, and it goes without saying, it is essential that it be done right. Almost right won't do. There must have been around two dozen riggers, and they had plenty to do, and were also on the fire list.

The jump list was a rotating list with everybody's name on it. as your name came up, you jumped a fire, and when you came off a fire your name went to the bottom. That is how they kept up with who had jumped when and what fire. Also, they always kept at least another dozen or so men in Missoula on reserve fire call besides the riggers. Those men did make-work details until their names came up, and out they went. The rest of us were farmed out to ranger districts all over Region One. We worked at those districts, doing all sorts of odd jobs,

until our names came up on the fire list; and they'd come and get us one way or another.

That way we learned how to do everything from piling brush to maintaining phone lines. I'm here to note that piling brush was probably the worst job there was - and the jobs they had the most of. The best jobs were the ones back in the remote districts in the wilderness areas. They didn't cut any timber back there, so there was no brush to pile. There were no roads, either, so most of the jobs were trail and phone-line maintenance and stuff like that. A lot of extracurricular fishing got done on those projects..

Now I didn't know any of this at the time, so I can't be accused of doing any politicking to get the job I got. I wasn't much of a politicker anyway. All I can say is that maybe Fred liked me. On the other hand, maybe he wanted to put me out of sight and the most primitive place he could find was the place he chose.

But, I really think it had more to do with my name being in the right place on the roster when he was assigning projects. Whatever it was, that time at Meadow Creek might not have been much for gathering glory of the sort that would impress Miss Howland, but it was some of the best fishing I ever had.

There was plenty of time to come up with stuff to impress Miss Howland.

The Ford Tri-Motor lumbered down the runway with eight of us aboard, not counting the pilot and Al Cramer, who was to see us squared away at our projects. Pointing the nose toward the northeast, the plane slowly gained altitude to clear the mountains. The old Tri-Motor was never in a hurry to do anything.

It was the first opportunity we had to do any sightseeing at all from the air. When we were making a jump, most of us were too busy to enjoy the scenery, and when we did look out, it was to either locate the jump spot or gurg up out the door so it wouldn't get any inside. We weren't jumping this time and we took full advantage of seeing the sights.

There were a lot of sights to see. Snow capped Lolo Peak, guardian of the Missoula Valley and Queen of the Bitterroots the Chamber of Commerce called it, receded behind us. Clark Fork snaked its way northwestward through the valley below, headed for its confluence with the Columbia river, and finally the Pacific Ocean.

Sometime later, the beautiful rugged, snow-laden Swan Range and Mission Valley appeared on the left. This was country as God made it. Any vague thought of despoiling it in any manner seemed a sacrilege.

By the time we winged over the Bob Marshall Wilderness Area, the escarpment that gave its name to the famous Chinese Wall country was visible far to the east, and down below we could trace the silken thread of the South Fork of the Flathead, some of the world's best trout water.

The pilot throttled back to lose altitude, and we began our descent into Big Prairie. My initial airplane landing was imminent, and, while it might have been a conditioned reflex, I could feel my stomach tightening. We circled once and were given a good look at the long, low log buildings that were the Big Prairie Ranger Station. Then the pilot lined us up with the grassy strip and we banked in on final approach..

It wasn't too bad until I started seeing trees whip by the window that were much higher than we were. Tree tops below didn't look ten feet away. I figured I needed to trust the pilot at a time like that, but I still wasn't putting my full weight down. Get right down to it, in its way, it was hairier than landing in a parachute.

I thought we would never be able to look down and see that grass strip - and whatever was below us was coming up fast. Then the trees stopped and the runway began and the old Ford settled in on the grass. When it rolled to a stop, I discovered I wasn't breathing, but I started again before anyone noticed.

After letting four guys out and some mail and supplies, we took off again. It wasn't nearly as bad as the landing. Meadow Creek was twenty miles or so down river from Big Prairie, and we flew straight down the river canyon. Way off to the west we had a good view of Big Salmon Lake. Boy, I would have given my eyeteeth to have dropped a hook in that water. I never had the opportunity.

Below, we had a good look at the river, and that country looked awfully rugged. It was awfully pretty, too, but I didn't see how anyone could fish in that canyon. The walls rose almost vertically, and the water shot through like a millrace. About halfway between Big Prairie and Meadow Creek was a pretty-fair-sized waterfall.

But a few miles farther on the canyon walls disappeared and the stream widened considerably. It didn't look like too much trouble to fish that section. I got a chance to try it later on, but that's another story.

A few minutes later we buzzed the Meadow Creek landing strip to chase a herd of elk out of the way, and I was about to experience my second landing in an airplane. I was beginning to like it, and this time I remembered to breathe.

The four of us hopped out and surveyed our project. Our job was to repair a corral fence to hold the ranger's horse when the ranger spent the night at the Meadow Creek cabin. Meadow Creek was not a manned station, but the cabin was nice. They only used it when they needed to, and it was to be our temporary home..

Fixing that fence wasn't any chore at all. All we needed to do was cut a post and a couple of poles to replace a rail that had rotted. We had it done in a couple of hours and, because no one said anything about our having any other chores, we didn't look for any. We had nothing to do but fish the South Fork River, until we got a fire call, and that might not come for weeks. It was some kind of rough duty, all right, but somebody had to do it.

Anyway, after we repaired the corral fence, we fished and fished. I truly never saw anything quite like it. We were probably forty or fifty miles from any sort of road. There was a little airstrip next to the cabin, but it was closed to civil aviation. If someone had a notion to get back in there where we were, they'd need to become a smokejumper, rent a mule, or walk.

Mules were scarce, and not too many people cared to walk that far. We were casting flies in almost-un-fished waters - not very many, if any, of those fish had ever seen a hook. It didn't take any time for us to catch enough for supper and then some.

But we couldn't have grits. I don't think there was a single grit in the

whole state of Montana, because they don't eat grits up there. I think they run all their corn through hogs and eat pork chops. Anyway, they don't have grits, but they did have a little corn meal and some onions, so I made hushpuppies.

Of course Jim Lowe, being from Tennessee, had eaten his share of hushpuppies, but Andy and Skip thought a hushpuppy was a kind of shoe. All in all, I guess we were about even, because Jim and I hadn't eaten trout like that before, either. Folks, we didn't have any Old Milwaukee, but I'm here to say, it doesn't get any better than that.

That's the way it went for the better part of ten days - sleep, eat and fish. Hard to imagine, but easy to get accustomed to. A lot of times, especially after a big meal, we would just sleep and maybe write a few letters. I started one to Miss Howland, but, since I didn't know her first name or address, I only got as far as, "Dear Miss Howland". I guess it didn't matter. I didn't have much to write about that would interest her, anyway. I wondered how Leroy managed to have so many adventures that did?

One morning the Tri-Motor settled onto the long, grassy strip, and our idyllic sojourn at Meadow Creek came to a screeching halt without producing a single adventure worth Miss Howland's notice..

Chapter 12 - Fire on the East Spread

In the Northwest it's not always true that where there's a thunderstorm there's going to be rain. That part of the country is bad about spawning big, dark clouds that roll over the mountains throwing lightning everywhere, but nary a drop of rain. "Dry lightning," they call it.

A lot of those lightning hits are hot, and if conditions are right, as is often the case, they cause fires. It makes sense to control these fires while they can still be handled by a few guys, instead of waiting until they have spread to several thousand acres, which they can do in a hurry. Then, it takes an army to put them out. That's why they have the smokejumpers, who can get to remote fires early.

I had occasion to observe a lightning hit close up one time. For my part, I would have been just as satisfied had it not been quite so close. We were working in the middle of thousands of acres of ponderosa pine forest that grows along the Mogollon Rim country in central Arizona. We were doing what the Forest Service referred to as "Timber Stand Improvement," which is just another name for pruning trees, so they won't produce knots when made into lumber.

Since we were in the middle of the largest ponderosa pine forest in the world, there wasn't any such thing as not standing under a tree when a storm came up. If you stood anywhere, it would have to be under a tree. Up on Mogollon Rim a storm came up at noon nearly every day. We could almost set our watches by it. The storm wouldn't last long, and in that dry heat and low humidity we dried off almost immediately..

Charlie Frost and I were usually way out in front of the pruning crew, hanging tags on trees, the color of which indicated how high to prune. I don't know what our titles were, but that was our job. We always met about noon and ate our lunches together. The storm would come up as usual and shower us a little. It wasn't exactly a dry storm, but we would be bone dry five minutes

later in that arid mountain air.

One day we met as usual and sat under a big ponderosa to eat our lunches. I say "as usual" because we always met, and there weren't any other kind of trees to sit under. They were all big ponderosas, and there was no place else to sit that wasn't under a tree.

We got soaked as usual. The storm was just dying out as we finished our lunch and we were moving off in opposite directions to go back to work. Neither of us had walked more than a few paces before a bolt of lightning split the tree we had been sitting under! There was no thunder, just a ZZZZZT! and a deafening explosion that knocked us a-winding. I guess we were pretty lucky the cook hadn't put extra bananas in our lunches, because we would have still been under that tree eating bananas when that bolt hit. Nothing could have survived that strike.

As it was, we were stunned and practically knocked out of our socks, but neither of us was hurt. It did take our pants a little longer to dry than usual. That was as close as I ever wanted to be to a bolt of lightning, and I sure won't forget that one.

That particular lightning strike didn't start a fire. Some of them don't; some of them do. It all depends upon a fickle nature and a very wide variety of conditions. The fact is that enough of them do start fires to keep the smokejumpers (not to make a bad pun) hopping through the whole hot fire season.

Although we didn't see or hear it, one of those hot bolts of lightning brought our Meadow Creek sojourn to a close. It banged down over on East Spread Mountain, several miles north of Missoula and started a fire that wasn't detected until a tower operator smelled smoke. It was burning at a spot not too far down the mountain from his tower, but he had the shade drawn on that side to keep the sun out and failed to see the smoke until the fire had a pretty good start. A lady in a tower many miles away was actually the first one to spot the smoke. She called it in about the time the closer tower operator smelled it.

I think the call came in to the smokejumper base about quitting time on Friday afternoon. In a few minutes, we were suited up and I was among sixteen guys boarding the Doug for my first fire jump.

Some of the older guys were slapping each other on the back and whooping it up. I didn't know why, until somebody pointed out we would be on overtime until Monday morning. Actually, it wasn't overtime like time and a half - it was just straight time, but it counted. I whooped it up with the rest of the guys. It seemed like the thing to do at the time.

The celebration lasted until one of the guys got airsick and threw up before he could take off his helmet. That face mask made a pretty good strainer and the high collar just funneled everything right down his shirt. That had a pretty rampant domino effect, and in rapid succession, several of the other guys went down, too.

Feeling kind of queasy myself, I moved over near the door and sat down where the air was more breathable, and where I could do a little thinking.. It was my first fire jump, and I hadn't thought a lick about that overtime, but it did occur to me that there wasn't a single smokejumper who wasn't already some kind of veteran when he made his first fire jump. That was a comforting thought in a way.

I mean, just look at it - all of us had some fire experience, or they wouldn't have taken us in the first place. Then we had that big practice fire that got a little bigger than we wanted, and all of us had at least seven jumps before we jumped our first fire. There wasn't a raw rookie among us. We were all a bunch of veterans, some more scarred than others, and some scarred and sick. At least I wasn't sick...yet.

I was just beginning to turn my thoughts to Miss Howland when the first three guys were told to stand in the door and I had to give up my spot. Miss Howland would have to wait while I took care of some important business.

The plane was just mushing along, coming in over the jump spot. Seemed like it mushed forever, with the guys standing there like cocked pistols. Finally, Al brought his hand down and they shot out the door as if spring-loaded. I was first man in the next stick, and I stood in the door just like we'd been trained.

I couldn't see anything but woods, rocks, and mountains below, but suddenly I could see the fire and smell the smoke. The air smelled better standing in the door with the wind whipping by than it did inside the airplane, where all those guys got sick.

Al, the spotter, talked to the pilot over an intercom; told him when to chop the engines to keep the prop wash from blowing us away, then signaled me to go. That is the way it went on the practice jumps, and exactly what happened on that jump.

I sprang out the door before I had time to think about it. Everything was quiet, then the opening shock nearly jerked my eyeballs out. Some folks talk about how much they dread that opening shock, but I always dreaded not getting it.

Since the first men were already on the ground, I just steered for their parachutes, and landed nearby in a thicket of low brush. Bob Winchester and Paul Dennison were the fire bosses, and they had already scouted the fire and were getting things organized, while the other guys were coming in.

As soon as everybody was safely on the ground, the old Doug came in low and Al started kicking cargo 'chutes out the door. We gathered up fire packs, containing our essentials: a lady shovel, a Pulaski, a pack of C-rations, a paper sleeping bag - all wrapped in a little four-foot square piece of canvas. He also dropped a two-man chain saw and some water in five-gallon cans, because there sure wasn't any water on top of that mountain.

The lady shovel and Pulaski were the most important pieces of equipment right then. They were our fire tools. Everybody knows what a shovel is, but a lot of people look askance when I mention "Pulaski." They think I'm saying that they shoved a Pole out the door. That isn't true at all.

A Pulaski is a tool with an axe on one side of the bit and a hoe-dag on the other, and is one of the handiest tools ever invented, whether for chopping kindling or fighting fire. It was named after a man named Pulaski, who saved a bunch of people caught up in the Great Idaho Fire, by herding them all into a cave and keeping them there until the fire blew over. The Great Idaho Fire of 1910 was the biggest forest fire in American history, and must have been a real scorcher, because it burned more than a million and a half acres and didn't go

out until it finally snowed that fall.

Anyway, we grabbed our fire tools and headed for the fire, which was only about a quarter of a mile down the ridge from where we landed. Bob spread us out and we started chopping fire line. It was surprising how much fireline and how quickly sixteen trained men can chop fire line when they really get after it. We had that fire caged on three sides in no time, but we just couldn't head it off. It was burning through that brush pretty fast.. About all we could do was keep it aimed toward the ridge and hope it would burn itself out.

It didn't.

What we did was, Bob had us move well ahead of the fire in the direction it was burning and dig a good, wide fire line. Bob stood there with his drip torch burning until the smoke from it started drifting toward the main fire. Then he started a backfire all the way along the inside of the line we had just dug.

The two fires started burning toward each other. When they met, it was sort of like a big crash. Then they became one fire and burned until all the fuel was gone. It sounds simple, and it is, if it works. If it didn't, we'd end up with two fires and more trouble than a red-headed woman and a pint of liquor. But, Bob knew just what he was doing. By waiting until the smoke from his torch drifted toward the main fire, he knew the big fire would draw the little fire to it.

Now I wouldn't want to give the idea that just because we had a line around the fire, and just because it wasn't spreading any more the job was over. That was only one phase. It was still roaring from all the fuel inside the line. Before we could get a bite to eat and some rest, Bob needed to detail some men to patrol the line and make sure the fire didn't jump the line, as fires are apt to do.

Somewhere along the way I had been called on to hold one end of that two-man chain saw while Dennison held the other, and I was plumb wore out. That darn saw must have weighed a ton. Bob appreciated that and I was in the guys picked to leave the line.

Even C-rations looked pretty good that night, but there was one item in C-rations I couldn't understand. I could usually figure out what I was eating even without reading the label, but I never have discovered what that one item was. It was a bar of soap that looked like candy, or a candy bar that tasted like soap.

That night, it didn't matter. I ate it.

Chapter 13 - Under control

Paper sleeping bags are all right. I mean, I stayed warm enough, but it made an awful racket when I turned over, and I could feel every little rock and twig, if I didn't pad it with something. The best thing was to put a parachute down on a bed of fir boughs as a sort of pad, then put the sleeping bag in the middle of the 'chute and fold the parachute over. Made a right snug little boar's nest, and, with the 'chute folded over it, the bag didn't make nearly as much racket.

I barely had strength enough to get that chore done, and I didn't rattle much of anything that night, or what was left of it.

We were up before dawn and back out there chopping more line, relieving the guys who had stayed with it all night. The fire had jumped the line several times in spite of their best efforts. I was happy to note that on one occasion it had crept out and burned that hokey chainsaw. The saw was nothing but a pile of twisted metal and a little pile of white powder where the magnesium alloy of the casing had burned.

As the sun climbed higher, the temperature rose and the wind picked up. We had more spot fires to handle where the main fire scattered sparks and there was a real danger that the main fire might take off again. Water bombing from the air hadn't been perfected in those days; we didn't have anything to fight the fire with but dirt. There was no water on top of that mountain and sometimes, where the ground was rocky and hard, even dirt was hard come by.

Late in the afternoon the wind began to die down a little and we took a short lunch break. Say whatever about C-rations, it sure didn't take very much of them to satisfy. Whoever invented them must have figured out a way to get the whole darn garden, including the barnyard, into one can. I think they did it by removing the taste.

It didn't matter if you had potatoes, lima beans, sausage, hash, baked beans or spinach, nothing had much taste. Fruit cocktail was the best thing in there, and the stuff labeled "bacon and eggs" was pretty good. It didn't look like much but it was surprisingly good. But those things were gone pretty quickly, and I was left with the rest of it, which I put off eating as long as I could.

I have never known anyone to eat the crackers, no matter how hungry they were. Raccoons might eat them, if they soaked them in water long enough. Jaybirds turned them down cold. Bears might eat them, but bears eat anything. I saved mine in case I thought of something to use them for. I couldn't imagine what.

That fire kept us busy for the next two days and nights. It was a constant round of dig line and lose it, fall back and dig another one. That fire kept spreading and spreading. We always managed to check it, but whenever we thought we had it corked, it would break out again. The trouble was the wind wouldn't die down and there was just so much fuel in that dry brush. We got precious little sleep, and we were running out of food.

We usually got food drops after three days, but all the planes were busy dropping men on other fires. Things were beginning to get a little edgy, as far as food was concerned. No, that's wrong. Things were getting bad edgy. We were hungry, and there was nothing to eat except an occasional berry. We couldn't fight fires very long on a diet of nothing but berries.

That's where my crackers came in handy. I crushed one of them up to use for bait, and laid out a trail for a grouse I'd seen hanging around camp. Sure enough, it came pecking along the trail of crumbs and I knocked it down with another cracker. Those crackers made good throwers. They always sailed true. Maybe that is what they were for.

I had the bird picked almost before it quit flopping. Gary Dunford and I

roasted it that night and divided it for supper. It was kind of rare in spots, but it was a heap better than the C-rations we had run out of. By then, we had been fighting that fire twenty-four hours without much to eat. We would probably have eaten that grouse raw, if we had to.. I don't guess we were on the verge of starvation, by any means, but fighting fire took a lot of energy and we were beginning to discover what real hunger looked like. It was ugly.

By the morning of the fifth day, the fire had cooled enough to start mopping up, and Bob had radioed an SOS to Missoula for food. Lloyd Brown was on his way in the T-T-air with a food drop, and none too soon, as far as we were concerned. We were getting in a bad way.

A couple of guys were detailed to patrol the fire line, while the rest of us stood warming around the campfire. A couple of us were detailed to retrieve the food drop that was coming. While we were waiting, Gary Dunford found another use for those paper sleeping bags. I thought it was right clever, but it nearly turned into a disaster.

He turned the bag bottom-side-up, tore a neck hole out of the middle of the end and two arm holes out of the side and made himself a poncho. It might not have set the fashion at a style show, but it was a pretty good way to stay warm away from the fire.

The problem was, he shouldn't have gotten so close to the fire, because the bag caught on fire. The insulated paper burned slowly and nobody noticed it until it crept right up Gary's back and started burning his shirt. It doesn't take long to get out of a paper sleeping bag, but, for people who keep records of such things, Gary probably set a record. A little more and he would have been a smoked jumper.

The drone of the T-aire sounded far in the distance. Sound carried well in the crisp, morning mountain air, and we were able to pick it up while it was still miles away. It seemed as if that grocery plane would never arrive. When it did, it circled a time or two to get the lay of the land, then came in at almost treetop level and Lloyd started pushing its life saving cargo out the door. Pass after pass, it rained groceries.

The first few 'chutes got caught in the breeze that had never entirely left us; we ended up chasing them quite a ways down the ridge. The next couple of passes were lower and Lloyd, began to find the range. He was putting those cargo 'chutes down pretty close to the fire.

On the last run, he radioed Winchester that the next one would land on the campfire. If he was joking, we surely couldn't tell it. He didn't miss that fire far enough to measure. The Travelaire had made a turn and came roaring back in. I swear he was below the tree tops. The crate popped out and hit the ground next to the fire before the 'chute had time to blossom. It was a perfect shot - no complaining about that.

It was twenty-four dozen fresh jumbo eggs for breakfast, and he pre-scrambled every durn one of them for us. A little to the right and he could have fried them, too.

Mop up of the fire begin right after we had what must have been one of the biggest omelets on earth. We weren't exactly dining at the Ritz, but we got full for the first time in days..

Chapter 14 - Mop up

"A fire isn't out until twenty-four hours after the last smoke is spotted."

So said Fred Brauer, our fearless leader, at the very outset of training. That made good sense. After all, the fires we manned were usually pretty far back in the boonies, and if we followed that policy, nobody would need to jump the same fire twice. Besides, it was a matter of pride. Putting fires out before they got big was why they hired us in the first place.

"Early attack and suppression" was what they called what we did, and if we couldn't put the fire out, they flat out didn't need us. That's the reason we were careful to mop up. "Out" meant out. It's what is known as finishing the job, and it just made good sense.

Picture the scratcher of a gigantic chicken; that's what Spread Mountain reminded me of when we flew over it. There were ridges representing the toes of the claw spreading out from a central bald dome. The toe we were on ran in a northeasterly direction and we were on the northwest-facing slope.

The full force of winds from the northwest had fanned our fire. That and that fact that there was just so darned much dry fuel is why we had such a hard time with that fire. It wasn't burning just on the surface, it was smoldering underground in the ancient duff and in roots, too.

The area was a pristine wilderness. Loggers had never reached it, primarily because it was too remote. The outside world was barred from access by miles of extremely rough uphill terrain. Most weekend hikers preferred easier going. Mountain goats might have seen it, but buffalo had ever roamed there. It's probable we were treading where man never had. The accumulation of duff and ground litter, built up over the ages, fueled that fire long after the surface fuel had been consumed.

Trunks of ancient trees lay where they had fallen, perhaps centuries before. Some were practically invisible, buried beneath the cumulative layers of duff from a thousand seasons. This was the natural world we invaded in order to stifle that fire once and for all, and nature didn't make it any easier for us.

The big job for us, up until now, had been to check and contain the surface fire. We had done that and, barring a stiff spark-scattering breeze, we wouldn't need to do that again. Most of the surface fuel, such as trees, low brush and the like, had been consumed. There were still plenty of fires burning in downed logs, stumps and dead standing trees, but the fire was no longer spreading.

We began the mop up at the perimeter of the fire, which had been ringed by our hard-earned fire line, and worked toward the middle, throwing dirt on the fires that were still burning. Sometimes we chopped into hollow logs in order to get to the coals within, which were then buried in good, dry mineral soil.

The ground was covered in a layer of fine, powdery ash to a depth of several inches, which flew up at every step. We were constantly breathing it in, and, after a day or so in that kind of atmosphere, our noses were clogged. If we sneezed or blew our noses very hard, the sharp particles of ash would sever

capillaries, and a bad nose bleed would result. I think we all suffered that malady at one time or another.

By the end of the day, we had gotten most of the remaining fires out and were combing the ground for hidden beds of coals and still-smoldering duff, called hot spots. There were all kinds of ways for locating these places when we couldn't see them. Often, we could simply feel the heat; some were still putting up little puffs of smoke that we could see.

One of the surest ways of finding a hot spot was to watch for gnats swarming and swirling over a certain place. Look beneath the swarm and there was invariably a hot spot. Gnats liked the warm air.

Part of the last cargo drop wasn't food. They had also dropped some backpack trombone pumps, so-called from the kind of sliding-action pump handle, which produced a steady stream of water from a ten-gallon backpack.

The water wasn't used to extinguish a fire; it was used to locate hot spots. We directed streams of water into suspected hot-spot areas. If it was a hot spot, we got a loud sizzling and a cloud of steam. We then dug it up and buried the coals in fresh dirt.

By the end of the first day's mopping up, we resembled a troupe of Christie's Minstrels. We were covered from head to toe in ashes, soot, and grime. We couldn't tell who was who, unless we happened to recognize voices. We couldn't even tell who people were by their hair. We felt kind of silly, identifying ourselves to our best friends. The way we looked, even our dogs might have had trouble identifying us. Mopping up was not for the fastidious.

The good thing about mop up, though, was there was no longer that sense of urgency that went along with trying to stop a fire. There was plenty of food, even though we had eaten all the eggs at one time. We could take breaks now and then, and we could sleep at night until it was our turn to patrol the fire lines. We weren't taking any chances on that fire breaking out again at this late date. We couldn't totally relax. Given the right conditions, that dog could bite us again.

To tell the truth, I wasn't thinking of fires or biting dogs, or anything else much, when I finally tucked my tired, aching bones into my parachute-wrapped paper sleeping bag that night. I tried to recall a time when we weren't fighting that fire. It was hard to remember. That was all in another life.

For so long, we had been so totally focused on fighting that fire, all other thoughts were just crowded out. I thought of a quotation Prof Dickey had taught us. I think it was Gladstone, though it might have been Disraeli or some other Italian, who said, "Nothing tends to focus one's mind so wonderfully as the sight of the gallows."

I didn't think of that fire as exactly a gallows, but it sure did get out attention. Fire had been the gallows for thirteen of our buddies at Mann Gulch. Our class hadn't known them, but happened only a couple of years previously, and it was still fresh in the minds of the older men. That fire had simply blown up and trapped them. They were guys exactly like us. Wag Dodge, the foreman, had saved himself with a backfire, and two others had reached the safety of the rocks. Thirteen others didn't make it.

That thought was always with us. Maybe the spirits of those guys were

always reaching out to us, too. It was hard to know.

Tired as I was, sleep came on slowly. I lay a long time staring into the dark sky, punctured by thousands and millions of sharp, tiny lights; fragments of the Big Bang. I hadn't seen that many stars since I used to lie out on the night grass with my cousins at Grandma's in Bearswamp. There was no glare of big-city lights close enough to Bearswamp to spoil the view. Walhalla was the nearest town and it didn't produce much of a glare.

There were no lights at all on East Spread after we got the main fire out. A little breeze made an audible sound in the trees. The rustling needles only made my lair seem cozier. Mountain air was cool at night. Night sounds faded and sleep settled as the warmth of a mother's love. I had a fleeting feeling that I might have had a thought or two of Miss Howland had sleep not settled in. But that would have taken some effort and I was beyond effort that night.

Sometime fairly early in the morning, shouts alerted us that fresh, new people were arriving. It was Ranger Godfrey with a ground crew from Moncure Ranger Station sent to relieve us. It was strange to see people with faces that looked like faces, after seeing only grimy blobs with voices for so many days.

Ranger Godfrey was one of those men the Forest Service found too useful to promote. He knew his job and did it, and that seemed to suit everybody. His crew would relieve nine of us. It didn't hurt my feelings that I was in the group chosen to go. We had been among the first to hit the fire; now we would be the first to leave it. Unfortunately, the Forest Service hadn't figured out a way to get us from the ground back into the plane. As long as we got from the plane to the ground, and put the fire out, they were satisfied. In the meantime, we looked forward to about a twenty mile hike to Moncure.

After adding the paper sleeping bags and all our trash to the campfire and burying the empty cans, we packed our 'chutes, jumpsuits, helmets, and other gear into Bemis Seamless Sacks and stashed them in a pile by the trail. Then we flagged a nearby tree so the packer wouldn't miss them. I don't know how much money it saved Uncle Sam, but we left nothing of value behind.

Maybe some archaeologist a thousand years from now will dig it up and be able to figure out what was in those cans we buried. I doubt if the contents would have changed much; as it was already petrified. We sure didn't know what was in it, and it might even improve with age.

It didn't take us long to pack up, and, after assembling and counting noses, we set out single file back along the trail that brought Ranger Godfrey and his men in. We were swinging along making pretty good time in spite of the heat. We negotiated a long, rough, rocky ridge before the trail cut over into the woods and out again before it began a long descent into the valley where Moncure Ranger Station lay.

We had been walking a couple of hours or more when, by mutual consent, we called a halt in the shade of a huge boulder. We had worked up a pretty good sweat, and were beginning to get right thirsty. That's when we discovered we had only one quart canteen of water between us. I don't know who was the blessed soul who brought it, but it barely made one round with nine dry throats pulling on it. I was the last man, and I emptied it. There was just enough water left to coat my parched tongue.

We didn't tarry long and there wasn't much conversation as we continued on

down the ridge. We were too dry to talk. An hour or so later the trail crossed the ridge and again into the woods. That at least brought relief from the broiling sun. The trail now sloped downhill. But we were still dry and no one knew how far it was to water.

That uncertainty made us even more aware of our craving. Water could be miles away or right around the next bend in the trail. But as the bends came and went without showing a trace of water, we were beginning to think of thirst as a way of life. That's when someone thought he heard, very faintly, the gurgling sound of water running over rocks. We thought he was hearing things because he wanted to.

Then we all imagined we heard it. Though it might have been a mass illusion brought on by powerful suggestion, we believed it. Water! We broke into a run, the whole crowd of us. We ran and the sound became unmistakable Water!

The trail took a sharp bend to the left, and there it was! A good-sized brook, maybe twelve to fifteen feet wide and a foot deep, running cold, swift, and clear over a bed of pebbles where the trail crossed it. We didn't bother to stop; we dove in. There was plenty of room for all. The water downstream must have dropped a good six inches, as we drank, and our dried out sweat soaked bodies drank it up. We may even have drunk in a few trout for all I know. I don't think we would have noticed.

How long we stayed there, I couldn't say, but it was quite a while. Before we left, we ate the last can of the C-rations we had paced for the trip. We could even recognize each other again. The accumulated layers of grime were now polluting the pristine waters of the creek somewhere below our crossing.

About three hours later, we reached Moncure Ranger Station, a series of long low log buildings huddled on a big meadow in a valley surrounded by high mountains. Folks there were ready to receive us, and, Lord knows, we were ready to be received. We were ushered to the bunkhouse, and given towels and soap. When we emerged from the bunk house all shined up and immensely refreshed, we were informed that supper was ready. The cook set before us a mound of T-bone steaks, which quickly melted away. No more C-rations for awhile.

In what might have been an unfaithful act, I didn't think of Miss Howland again that night. For the first time since I couldn't remember when, I crawled into a warm, downy sleeping bag on a soft, springy cot. It was almost too much. I was thinking of putting my sleeping bag on the floor beside the cot when I fell asleep. In my sleep, I thought I walked all night. If anyone snored, I didn't notice. Miss Howland was totally neglected.

Chapter 15 - A man to ride the river with

Jim and I ran into Don Sweet and Al Caseri one night when we were in town to cash our first paychecks. They were there for the same reason. It wasn't long after we had gotten back from the Spread Mountain fire. Sweet and Caseri had been on a fire down on the Salmon River in Idaho while we were on the Spread Mountain fire. We hadn't seen them since letting them out at Big Prairie while we went on to Meadow Creek.

The nearest thing to a night on the town any of us had experienced since we had been in Montana was a hamburger at Nine Mile Tavern, and that had been on

credit. Missoula was twenty-six miles from the training base at Nine Mile, and, at that time, there wasn't the price of a haircut in the whole camp, anyway. The government always held the first paycheck for a month and paid us every two weeks thereafter. So we had gone all the way through training, and had made a fire jump, before we ever had a payday.

If that seems like a long, dry spell, it was. I guess it all evened out in the end, because that meant we had a payday after the fire season was over, and we had all gone home.

Banks in Missoula didn't do much business on Saturday nights, but we didn't have much trouble cashing our government checks. A place called The Silver Dollar seemed right willing to accommodate us. Not only was the cashier obliging, the place was full of all kinds of friendly people, especially some of the women. Two of them, a lady with grayish-red hair, wearing real flashy red lipstick, and a dark-haired lady with purple stuff around her eyes, and more feathers in her hair than that grouse we ate, came sidling up to us and asked if they might help us out.

We thought it was right neighborly of them, us being strangers and all, so we told them that we would like to buy a couple of nice, big, juicy prime ribs. The red-haired lady told us they had a couple of butt roasts that they were more in the habit of renting rather than selling. That seemed strange to us. We never had heard of anybody renting a steak. I told her I kind of liked owning mine outright, if she didn't mind. That seemed to tickle her, but she said they only rented theirs, and if we wanted to own it outright, we would need to go someplace else. She recommended a place called the Ox.

Caseri stayed behind at The Silver Dollar while the three of us headed up the street in the direction the lady had pointed, in search of the Ox. We hated to leave right then because the dark-haired lady seemed to be choking on something, but the red-haired one said she'd be fine as soon as we left. So, we left.

The waiter at the Ox looked at us kind of funny when we asked him if they rented steaks or just sold them outright. He had a kind of different accent, so we guessed he didn't know how some of them did business out West.

While we were eating those steaks that we bought outright, we compared notes on how much fun our projects had been and how much work there was to fighting a fire. Don told us the fire they had been on down on the Salmon River had smoked out a rattlesnake den and they had a time avoiding getting bit. Every time they turned around, there was a rattlesnake singing at them.

Now that was the kind of adventure that would have had Miss Howland gasping and asking what had happened next. Whereas, if I told about how I killed that grouse and ate it to keep from starving, she would probably just turn up her nose and feel sorry for the grouse. Women were like that.

Don's tales about their adventures would no doubt have left Miss Howland starry-eyed. They sounded a little bit unbelievable to me, but Don was such a matter-of-fact person, I didn't have the slightest doubt that every word was true.

In order to get the true significance of the story, there are a few important things to know. One of the greatest compliments one man can pay another is to refer to him as, "a man you can ride the river with." That is by

way of saying he's somebody you may rely upon, and is a term which, in some circles, is as meaningful as the Congressional Medal of Honor. It isn't bestowed lightly; a person must earn it.

One of the greatest things about the smokejumpers was, I met a bunch of guys I wouldn't hesitate to ride the river with. That's usually only figuratively speaking. Don Sweet and Al Caseri managed to bring to the phrase a whole new meaning.

Don wasn't much for talking, and he sure wasn't much for spinning yarns, so, as I said, the tale he told must have been the truth. He wouldn't know how to make up a story like that. Caseri filled in a lot of the details Don left out. Besides, they had some scars and wounds to show for it.

Caseri and Sweet were detailed to clean out an old storage shed at Big Prairie. It was a pretty dirty job, they thought, until they started finding all sorts of interesting things among the old snowshoes, rusty bear traps, and rat nests. Outstanding among those treasures was an old Navy surplus two-man rubber life raft, complete with paddles and pump for inflating it.

They didn't ask how such an item ended up in a storage shed in the middle of the largest wilderness area in the United States. Truth was they really didn't care. They were already thinking how they could use it to shoot some whitewater that weekend.

That's how, come Saturday morning, bright and early, they were seen launching their find on the broad sweep of the Flathead River, as it passed near Big Prairie. At that point the river is wide with low banks, few big rocks, and only a moderately swift current. They had little trouble getting their craft into the middle of the stream, and were soon swept out of sight around the bend.

Man, it was great. Maneuvering their craft around a few rocks and avoiding some snags that were hung up in the shallows, they couldn't have felt more like true mountain men on their way to trap beaver in Indian Country, than if they'd been wearing coonskin caps That's how wild and untouched the country was through which they traveled. They were making time and the roar of the river dashing off rocks and echoing off banks, now grown steeper, made their speed seem faster. Scenery rushed by.

Once they rounded a sharp bend and came upon a mama bear and two cubs on a rock, fishing. Mama bear hustled her twins to the safety of the rocky shore and stood watching in puzzled amazement as the strange craft, bearing two even stranger creatures. flashed by. It bore off down a long, straight stretch and disappeared from her sight beyond another bend, as she went back to fishing.

Caseri was in the bow, fending off an occasional rock, while Don, in the rear, was beginning to have some second thoughts about this journey. The current was becoming swifter, the banks were climbing higher and the rocks were becoming bigger and more numerous. Big Prairie was miles behind them when Don tapped Caseri on the shoulder and asked if he didn't think it would be a good idea to put into shore.

Al, who was having the time of his life, declined, but he had failed to notice what Don had seen. Up ahead, there was no longer a tree-lined shore. The river narrowed where it fed into a canyon with sheer, vertical rock walls. To Don, this spelled trouble. To Al, it spelled nothing, because he had become so busy trying to keep them from crashing into the suddenly multiplying boulders

that he hadn't noticed.

His answer, if he had made one, mattered little, anyway. They had already passed the point of no return. It was the beginning of what would seem to them to be if not the longest, certainly the wildest, journey they would ever make, and they had no choice. The river was reaching a crescendo of madness unimaginable in their minds a few minutes before. It frothed over rocks and dashed off boulders the size of barns, its echoes thundering off sheer canyon walls.

For certain, no Indian had ever paddled his canoe over these waters, unless he was absolutely daft. No wonder that bear had looked so puzzled; she knew what lay ahead. Any idiot with good sense would have scouted it out and avoided going there, but man had never been a very rational animal anyway.

Sweet and Caseri were too busy trying to obey the First Law of Nature - survival - to consider a too late shouldadone. As far as should-have-dones were concerned, they probably should have stayed in bed, like any other hard-working men with a day off. But they had heard the Call of the Wild and their Spirit of Adventure had put them at the mercy of the Spirit of the River. But right then their spirit was completely quelled by a battle for survival, a battle which, by all rights, they should have lost.

This was the same stretch of the river we had flown over on our way to Meadow Creek. As Don related the story, I recalled the long chute down the wild stretch of canyon, terminating about two miles below some waterfalls. Surely they hadn't ...

"We had no way of knowing what was coming," Don said. "We shot out over those falls like a cannonball and must have been halfway down before we knew what was happening."

Caseri had shouted something, but he just as well have whispered, for all the good it did. The roar of the falls drowned out everything, even thought. There was nothing to do but hang on and pray; which is what they did.

Their trajectory carried them out beyond the rocks at the foot of the falls, else they would surely have been pulverized. Neither did they pancake, but plunged into the water headfirst at a good angle. Down they went, straight to the bottom, still hanging on to the raft with death grips.

"We bumped along the river bottom forever," Don said. "I thought we would never come up."

They finally bobbed to the surface still clinging to the raft, but their ride wasn't over, yet. There was still a long stretch of canyon to negotiate - but it went by in a hurry. Finally, the rapids ended and they crawled ashore on a pebbly beach beside a large, placid pool, miles from Big Prairie. They were beat up, sore, bruised and exhausted.

Leaving their trusty raft where it was, they made their weary way back to Big Prairie, arriving about nightfall. They deemed it best not to mention their adventure to anyone right then - no one would have believed them, anyway.

I don't think either one of them wanted to ride that river again.

We finished our steaks and went back to the barracks. Al didn't get in

until breakfast the next morning. He didn't know what he had missed.

Chapter 16 - Interlude at the Remount Station

Some facets of the Forest Service were still in the 19th century. It seemed to work better for them. Jeeps were fine, and off-road vehicles were all right, but for back country travel, nothing beat a mule. If it was winter, and you got snowed in somewhere, you sure couldn't eat a Jeep.

Of course, there were other practical reasons. For packing things in and out, nothing beat a mule. And that's what the Remount Station was - a horse and mule farm for the packers who were what might be called the last of the Diamond Hitch Boys. Laugh, if you like, but they sure performed some fine services for us.

Smokejumpers had good reason to have a soft spot for the packers. It was the packers who picked up all our heavy gear and packed it out after a fire. If it weren't for the packers, we would have had to lug it out ourselves. Sometimes we did anyway, if a packer wasn't available. We depended upon the packers to do the job, and they never let us down.

Mules are probably the most underrated creatures on earth. They are much more reliable and sure-footed than a horse; much less excitable; infinitely steadier; and far less likely to get into trouble. A horse, tangled in a fence, will most likely kick himself to death or at least sustain serious injury. A mule probably wouldn't become tangled in the first place but, if he did, he would likely just stand there until someone came and freed him.

I remember one time we were following the packer out when, at a particularly steep downgrade, a mule's load, which wasn't fastened very securely, slipped forward, putting most of the weight in front of the mule's shoulders. Did he panic? Not a bit of it. He merely negotiated that slope on his two front feet, tiptoeing like a ballerina, rear end off the ground, until he reached level ground. He then stood there calmly in a partial handstand while the packer adjusted the load. Try that with a horse.

There wasn't much to do around Missoula, so Fred Brauer assigned me, Jim and Fred Eichenburger, the Pride of Fresh Pond Road, to the Remount Station, where there was always plenty to do. Not being too familiar with farm chores, or at least the way they do them in Montana, I'm afraid we weren't much help, but we tried. We loaded corn, toted bales of hay, and shoveled tons of mule manure. It was surprising how much manure those mules produced in a day - and I bet those stalls hadn't been shoveled out as clean as we got them in at least a year.

At least we didn't need to slop hogs, juice heifers, gather eggs, pick chickens, or plow the south forty - and there wasn't any cotton to hoe or sheep to shear, which was a blessing. We did find out a little bit about breeding mules. To breed a big mule, they breed a stallion to a jenny. That's called a "horse mule." The horse mule is more desirable for carrying bigger loads. For a small mule, sometimes called a "henly," they breed a jackass to a mare.

Of all livestock, the mule is probably the safest, outside of maybe a chicken. At any rate, a mule is considered safe because of his temperament. He's usually pretty docile, but, if he tries to hurt a person one time, he'll try to

hurt that person every time.

They had a little henny mule there that was like that. The way I found out, she laid her ears back and came after me one time, but I made it over the fence before she caught me. That was one mean mule, and not big as a big dog. She had a lot of spirit, but that kind of spirit is not admired in a mule. It isn't that the packers can't handle them. They have ways of reasoning with a mule. It's just that they have work to do and they don't have time to argue with an animal that won't listen to reason. Mules like that usually end up in a glue factory.

We stayed at the Remount Station for the better part of a week, which was long enough to convince them we weren't exactly top ranch hands, no matter how willing we were. After all, we were all from primarily urban areas and hadn't really had much ranch-type experience. I half way knew my way around, but Jim was from Knoxville and Fred was from a rural area of New York City called Brooklyn. We gave the work the best shot we had, but I'm afraid we didn't make a very good impression. They wanted somebody who already knew how, and that wasn't us.

I guess the day we were shocking wheat was the straw, to make a pun, that broke the camel's back. Jim and I were doing very well. At least we knew what a wheat field looked like. But Fred couldn't get the hang of it. His shocks kept falling over and his bundles fell apart. When the manager of the Remount Station commented on it, Fred replied, "Well, that's how we always did it in the hayfields of Brooklyn."

Brauer sent for us the next day.

Although we didn't exactly impress folks at the Remount Station with our skill as ranch hands, we probably helped some and had a great time trying. I don't think the Remount Station suffered too much. Besides learning a few things, we had made a lot of bemused friends, and left others shaking their heads.

I had some real prize photos I hoped Miss Howland would want to see. They were 35mm slides that we would need to dim the lights to see on a screen. I hoped the photos would serve in lieu of adventures, which were somewhat scarce, so far.

Anyway, Fred sent for us, and we ended up back in Missoula making fire packs out in the warehouse. It was hot and grimy, and wasn't much fun, but it was necessary work and we could do it. In fact, It occurred to me, if they could teach a monkey to jump, why couldn't they teach him to make up a fire pack, too.

I guess the most important thing was that we no longer felt like rookies. We were learning the ropes, and, what's more, we were learning each other. We had our special buddies with whom we felt pretty close. Still, I know it sounds corny, but the whole darn company was a Band of Brothers. There was no one I wouldn't be glad to jump a fire with. There was no one I wouldn't ride the river with ...except, maybe, Caseri and Sweet.

Chapter 17 - The Great Idaho Burn

There have been some big forest fires in this country, but they remain largely forgotten, because, while they affected large areas, they didn't affect

large populations. For instance, who remembers the fire that raged around Peshtigo, Wisconsin in 1871? It charred a million and a half acres, melted rails, locomotives, and burned crossties out of railroad beds. It destroyed several small towns, and even burned ships at dockside. More people died and destroyed far more property than the so-called Great Chicago Fire that got all the headlines, and was raging at the same time.

Nowadays, brush fires in California that threaten houses that shouldn't have been built on brushy slopes in the first place, get national attention - because camera crews run out and cover them easily for a media that thrives on crime, disasters, bad news, freaks, fires, and Hollywood gossip.

There is an old question that asks, if a tree falls in the forest without a living thing there to hear it, is there a noise? My theory is the answer is yes, but you must listen very closely. In the case of the Great Idaho Burn of 1910, a lot of trees fell in the forest, but no one paid much attention, except the people directly involved, and they were few and far between. It was, by far, the largest forest fire ever to occur on the North American continent, in the history of modern man.

The fire wiped out timber on two and a half million acres, or about four thousand square miles of the Idaho Panhandle. That's an area about the size of Connecticut, and bigger by a third than Delaware and Rhode Island combined. A haze of smoke was noticed as far east as Boston, and by captains of ships at sea. But it wasn't noticed by the Boston Globe or the eastern newspapers - they made only scant mention of it.

The fire jumped from mountain top to mountain top and burned the valleys. It leaped over rivers as if they weren't there. It killed people and wiped out farms and villages. All summer and into the fall, the fire raged unchecked. It takes a long time to burn that big an area. Finally, the first snows of the season extinguished it - one of the most tragic and unheralded calamities to ever strike the nation. To this day, very few people outside the Northwest have heard of it, and, to the outside world, it remains but a small bump on the Information Highway.

China had a similar disaster not too many years ago, when more than a million acres burned, but, unlike the case of the Idaho burn, they took notice of their problem. It's hard to sneak anything like a million-acre fire past a billion Chinese. But Mao's answer was to extinguish the chief of their Forest Service, who could not extinguish the blaze, but which did nothing toward putting out the fires. They just kept right on burning.

Shooting someone because the woods caught fire hundreds of miles from where that person happened to be at the time makes about as much sense as shooting Smoky the Bear because California has brush fires. But I don't think Mao was the kind of person who would let a little thing like logic keep him from having somebody shot, if he saw the chance. The surprising thing to me wasn't that they shot the Chief of Forestry, but, with a billion people living elbow to elbow, they even had room for a million acres of forests.

Anyhow, what all this is leading up to is that Mr. Brauer got tired of seeing us hanging around not doing anything much, so he decided to send all the surplus people, which included me and Jim, over to the Nez Perce Forest in Idaho to pile brush for awhile. Since there was not a landing strip handy to where he was sending us, we were forced to make the trip by truck. That was no easy jaunt; it turned out to be a real journey.

The problem was that the Bitterroot Range lay between us - that is, Missoula - and the Nez Perce, and roads are mighty scarce through the Bitterroots. We had to go around. That meant we took the highway that snakes along the Clark Fork up to Thompson Falls, then, leaving the highway, we followed a dirt track that ran westward through the woods and mountains until we picked up the highway that ran south of Weippe (rhymes with sleepy), Idaho. By far, most of the journey was on the dirt track that crossed the Great Idaho Burn. There were no towns, filling stations, stores or habitations whatsoever between Thompson Falls and Weippe, that I was able to discern. We didn't meet any traffic, either. There may have been a few hardy souls who lived back in there, but they sure weren't bothered by close neighbors.

There were pockets of mature timber, mostly white pine down along waterways, that the fire had skipped. But the thing that struck me was miles and miles of immature stands growing back over the seared land. Nature has a way of healing wounds, given time, but this was forty-odd years after the Great Burn, and these trees were yet small. How much time would it take? I guess it didn't matter much. There was no way of hurrying the process, and this timber would be just as useful and just as much in demand, whenever it did finally mature.

It always killed me the way folks get all upset and go ape about loggers making an honest living cutting trees, especially if they might be drinking coffee from a Dixie cup, while standing on a wooden platform, singing a protest song, written on paper, and playing a guitar made of a select portion of virgin Sitka spruce, walnut, maple and mahogany. They no doubt live in houses made of lumber, sit on wooden furniture, eat off walnut tables, carry pasteboard protest signs, wave restraining orders written on paper, play golf with persimmon head clubs, and, if they ever die, get buried in wooden coffins. Where do they think all that comes from? It just doesn't make a whole lot of sense to me.

These thoughts were running through my minds while we jostled along through the woods. I wondered how many houses could have been built from the timber burned in that one great fire. It must have been an awful lot, judging from the number of dead snags peppered over the landscape. It was eerie. It gave the whole thing the look of an immense graveyard. I guess in a way it was a graveyard for all those trees, and for some very unlucky people, too.

Could it happen again? No reason I could think of for it not to. Of course there are better ways of fighting fires now, and smokejumpers put out little fires before they become big ones.

Still, it could happen, if conditions were right. We had already seen how a fire could escape even with a line already dug around it, and a trained man standing every six or eight feet apart in the line. We manned fires every year right smack dab in the middle of the Idaho Burn. I was on a couple of them myself, but that was later, and I don't want to get ahead of the story.

We bumped and bounced across the old burn area most of the day and stopped a couple of times to stretch our legs. I don't know how far it was across there, but we had a good look at the country and didn't see another car all day. We didn't hit pavement again until we reached Weippe. We had left Missoula that morning right after breakfast, ate lunch in the burn area, and pulled into Weippe in time for a late supper. It was at least a hundred miles across the burn. That burn was a pretty fair-sized bonfire.

I was a little surprised that Weippe wasn't at least as well known as Las Vegas or Reno. I'd never seen so many one-armed bandits as was in Weippe. They must have been for the home folks, because I don't think there were that many tourists passing through or staying over. There was no place to go, and no hotel to stay in that I saw.

But it was a good place for dropping quarters into slots or for peace, quiet and good fishing. I kind of like it myself. It was really an old logging town right on the Clearwater River. It had been the scene of many a log drive in the old days, when they would raft up the logs and drive them down river to the mills when the water was high.

I wanted to stay and hear some of those rafting tales, but we needed to leave bright and early the next morning, which happened to be a Friday. The last leg of the journey took us through some farming country, where the main crop was Idaho baking potatoes. They had some piled on the ground, and I swear they were big as watermelons. They were so big, it would only take three to make a dozen.

Lloyd Brown, the same Lloyd Brown who had scrambled our eggs for us on East Spread, was driving and he didn't seem to be in any hurry. We eventually saw why. We had been rumbling along a dirt road beside the Clearwater River for quite some time when Lloyd turned off the road and up a steep draw.

We made it to Castle Creek just in time to knock off for the weekend. It didn't look like much, but it was going to be our home for a while. Get right down to it, Castle Creek made me yearn for the hayfields of the Remount Station. I didn't look forward to a long sojourn at Castle Creek. It seemed so far away from the familiar, it wasn't very homey, and I had a very a lonely feeling of remoteness

Chapter 18 - Nez Perce gold

Chief Joseph was the principal chief of the Nez Perce tribe during their last years of freedom. He was also one of the greatest Indian statesmen of any tribe at any time. He was able to keep the peace, even as his people were being crowded off their lands, cheated, swindled, cursed, murdered, threatened and abused.

A few refugees from the War Between the States, and settlers, ranchers, farmers, and miners continued to invade the region that was set aside as Indian Territory. The final blow came when the Nez Perce were forced to give up their ancestral home in the rich and beautiful Wallowa Valley of Oregon. That was the heart of the Nez Perce nation, the soul of the tribe's existence. That's where they bred the sturdy Appaloosa horse, raised crops, and shot game.

Even then, Chief Joseph counseled peace, but it was too much for the young bucks. In the spring of 1871, war erupted on Camas Prairie in Idaho. Settlers were massacred, and the Army was called in. Chief Joseph had no choice but to fight, and fight he did. He became as committed to war as he had been to peace.

The war involved every man, woman and child of the Nez Perce Nation. No one was spared, regardless of age or sex. As the mindless forces of destiny closed in, Chief Joseph led his people in running battles that carried them from the valleys of Oregon to the high plains of Montana in the dead of winter.. Having no other place of refuge, he had hoped to reach the safety of Canada - a

government more merciful to native peoples.

Only a handful of the chief's people were left alive when he was finally brought to bay less than a day's journey from his goal. With his people starving and dying of their wounds, Chief Joseph advanced toward his enemies with rifle raised on high and under a flag of truce and delivered himself of a short eloquent speech that should rank alongside the Gettysburg Address as one of the most eloquent of all time. It was every bit as poignant, sincere, and stated the case without guile or exaggeration. The speech ended with, "From where the sun now stands, I will fight no more." The relieved Army and winter closed in. Chief Joseph, after leading his nation on a 1,500-mile journey through rugged mountains, and that included nearly daily fighting, was done. Chief Joseph would fight no more forever. Fate and our Government was not kind to Chief Joseph and his people. They deserved much better.

The reason I mention this is to note that the Nez Perce were a gallant people. Naming a National Forest in their honor, and where they fought and died, was the least the government could do.

For my part, the Forest Service sure picked some woolly country for that honor, though. The Salmon River, otherwise known as "The River of No Return," and the Clearwater Rivers flow through it. Two rugged rivers. Sweet and Caseri sure weren't making any plans to go rafting on those rivers. Neither were the rest of us.

Castle Creek Ranger Station didn't have much to recommend it, as far as the beauty of the setting was concerned. It consisted mostly of a white frame building stuck off up a muddy draw. It couldn't sprawl because there wasn't room to cuss a cat up there. But I guess it was adequate for the purpose. The only reason I could think of for locating it in that spot was they needed to put it somewhere.

Castle Creek ran nearby. It was just a little spring fed trickle of a brook, heading up back in that draw somewhere. The mountains and hills surrounding the ranger station weren't at all ugly, by any means, but they weren't the snow-capped peaks one might associate with, say, Big Prairie or Meadow Creek.

The one thing Castle Creek had going for it, as far as I was concerned, was the cooking. Their cook was an old hobo aptly named Bo, who planned to move on after the season, but he could have been an executive chef in the finest restaurant in the country, if he chose. I would certainly recommend him. His presence made Castle Creek the only Four-Star ranger station I ever heard of.. That he opted to stay at Castle Creek for the summer, instead of yielding to the freedom of the road, proved to be to our benefit.

That boy could lay out some groceries. He greeted us with Steak Diane for supper. The only time I had ever heard of Steak Diane was off a menu I couldn't afford, in a place that didn't serve the hot dogs I was looking for. Of course, this meal had a sort of smoky hobo-ish cast to it, but it was definitely Steak Diane, and that's what he called it. He had gathered the mushrooms himself, but we didn't find that out until after we were through eating, else we might have been a little more leery of diving in the way we did.

Bo was a funny little guy, kind of chunky, somewhere in his fifties, with two fingers and part of his right hand missing, but that didn't slow down his cooking. He could also lay out some tales. I think he might have baited us up a

little with stories about gold mining and the wealth and riches to be found in that area, but nobody questioned him. And there was a gold dredge parked out in the river, not far away. We saw it as we were coming in. That ought to have been proof enough to silence any skeptic.

Jim and I weren't skeptical and, notwithstanding the fact that our knowledge of panning for gold was practically nil, we determined to test our skill on Castle Creek in the morning. Dawn found us hard at work with a dishpan provided by our obliging cook. He said he would have gone with us, but he was afraid the lure of gold might tempt him to give up his cherished freedom in favor of the empty promises of a fickle fate. We thought he was a bit daft to pass up an opportunity like that, but, as they say, to each his own.

We took turns shoveling gravel out of the creek, while the other swished the gravel and water around in the pan looking for gold nuggets. That was darn hard work, turning over all those rocks to get a shovelful of gravel, but that's how Bo said to do it. By midmorning, my back ached from shoveling, my hands were blistered, and my feet were cold from standing in the icy water of Castle Creek.

We must have mined about a ton of iron pyrite, the fools' gold of legend. There was plenty of that and, although we hadn't turned up any of the real stuff yet, we had learned to identify fools' gold by its brassy look, and by the fact it crushed when hit with a hammer. Real gold, being very malleable, would just spread out.

The trouble was, real gold was supposedly found right in there with the pyrites. You could have fooled us. We had looked through a mountain of the stuff and it all looked pretty brassy.

We headed back to the chow hall for a light lunch, consisting of a clear soup, followed by shredded salad and a main course of cutthroat trout etouffee, topped off with Cherries Jubilee and coffee. We'd be more apt to associate prospecting with baked beans, and we didn't normally think about eating like that when we were out in the wild. We didn't complain. There was a great danger we would grow used to the fare, if we stayed there long. It would be hard to go back to C-rations and Effie's greasy sunny-side eggs. Though, when I thought about it, C-rations would be hard to go back to anytime.

We labored diligently all afternoon without success. All I was able to raise was two more blisters. We decided that gold digging was a lot more difficult labor than fighting fires. By that time we had worked down the creek to where it emptied into the river. The gold dredge was right around the bend, and we decided to take a close-up look at it.

Gold dredges are interesting pieces of machinery, especially to someone who has been doing the same thing with a shovel all day, and still hadn't found the mother lode. The crew was gone for the weekend, but the night watchman noticed us looking at it from the bank. He waved us aboard.

I think he was a lonely old codger, plus Jim and I must have looked harmless, because he lowered a board they used for a gangplank and we scrambled aboard. He showed us around the dredge like a kid with a new BB gun. I can't really say how the thing worked, although he explained it. He seemed to know everything about it and was proud to show off his knowledge. Jim nodded his head as if he understood every word the old man said. They went on talking about machinery, and flotation processes, and centrifugal forces, and stuff like that. I stopped listening after he told us about how the dredge reached down to the

bedrock and brought up the gravel, which was then dumped into the sluice.

When the crew went home for the weekend, they simply shut her down where she lay and took off. Here was tons of the same type of gravel I had been shoveling all day, except it was off the river bedrock and bound to be loaded with gold. We asked him if he could show us some gold, and he allowed as to how he might. It took a long period of looking with a flashlight, but we finally found what we were looking for.

The old man referred to gold as "color." Jim saw it first and the old man confirmed his find.

"Yep, that's it," he exclaimed, "You got color."

The light needed to fall on it just right before I could see what they were so excited about. There it was - the tiniest fleck you could imagine, the underpinning of the wealth of nations, that for which men died or, worse, killed others. That for which women sold their bodies and men their souls. That which drove the Spanish Main, destroyed a culture, and purchased the crown jewels of Empire.

I won't say I was disappointed, but it really didn't look like all that much - I mean, for men to kill each other over. Considering all the tons of earth one needed to turn over to produce one infinitesimally tiny fleck of the stuff, it ought to be worth a lot more than the thirty-six dollars an ounce, at which it was once pegged. The man would have given us that fleck of color if we had had something small enough to put it in. It didn't matter much then, and chances were we would have lost it anyway.

I felt sorry for the poor saps that climbed Chilkoot Pass in the dead of winter, rafted down the Klondike, or crossed the Isthmus of Panama in jungle heat for the opportunity of breaking their backs shoveling gravel and straining their eyeballs looking for color. Somehow or another I had lost my taste for it. The ironic thing is that about the only people who really became rich were the ones who sold shovels. Levi Strauss sold them blue jeans with a brass rivet, and he is still in business.

One thing about it, after digging for all that gold, piling brush would be a snap, and there was always Bo's cooking to look forward to. Castle Creek wasn't Meadow Creek, but it was beginning to look better.

After a breakfast featuring Eggs Benedict, creamed beef gravy on toast, orange juice, crepe Suzettes with strawberries, and a platter of broiled Canadian bacon, we piled into the big two-and-a-half, ready to head for the brush piles.

But the call came in just as we were leaving.

"Take the guys to Grangeville. Johnson will pick them up. The Bitterroots are burning!"

So much for crepe Suzettes, good-bye Steak Diane, so long trout Menurie (Bo was a Cajun) - hello C-ratios.

I wondered if I could stand the shock.

Chapter 19 - There's Rocks in Them Thar Clouds

There was something about a fire call that always got me. I guess I was always ready, but, somehow or another, I was never prepared. I needed to get myself psyched up to step out of that warm, safe airplane, and I was always surprised that anything as flimsy as a parachute actually worked. Get right down to it, I couldn't always bring myself to totally trust the airplane, either. I needed to convince myself again every time I went up that the thing might actually fly. Flying was still new to to me, and landing was even newer.

As long as we were jumping every day, I guess I stayed psyched up, but after a long interlude, life had seemed to return to normal. Hackles tended to calm down and the adrenaline flow abated. Then, suddenly, the fire call went out, people were scrambling around again, as, Yogi said, "It's déjà vu all over again."

With the interlude at the Remount Station, and the experience at Castle Creek, the anticipation of a jump was completely erased. But with the long flight back over the Bitterroots to Missoula, the butterflies were back again. Right then, I wasn't sure they were all born of thought of jumping. That ride back from Grangeville was enough to give anybody a bad case of heebie-jeebies.

Bob Johnson, the Old Pro himself, was at the controls of the ancient Ford Tri-Motor that picked us up in Grangeville. Both were battle-scarred veterans of countless inter-mountain flights. Johnson's name was synonymous with Tri-Motor. So closely associated were they in everyone's minds that it was impossible to mention one without conjuring up a vision of the other. Bob had so many hours of bush flying, I think he had long since lost track of the number.

If it was experience one was looking for, it wasn't necessary to look any further than Bob Johnson, co-founder with his brother, Dick, of the fabled Johnson Flying Service. Pioneers in backwoods flying, home to some of the most skilled pilots on earth or above it, the service was a contractor with the U.S. Forest Service. No one else need apply. No one else had the company's experience, expertise, or high level of standards or equipment.

Johnson Flying Service owned three of the world's scant supply of Ford Tri-Motors, two of a couple of dozen available Travelaires, and the only flyable DC-2 in existence. The group had the look of a flying museum, but, believe me, in spite of my personal misgivings, they were not only rugged, serviceable aircraft, but filled a function that found more modern aircraft sadly lacking. They were kept in top shape by a staff of the best, most skilled, aircraft mechanics found anywhere. They were all, pilots and mechanics, a crotchety crew, whose standards far exceeded those of ordinary scheduled airlines. Several of their rare and prized planes hang in the Smithsonian and other museums today.

Like the men who flew and serviced them, the planes needed to meet certain basic specs or they would be useless for the tasks at hand. They needed to be able to take off and land on short dirt strips with minimal approaches. They certainly needed to be of rugged construction, have large cargo-carrying capacity, have long range, and be proven reliable. The Doug, the Tri-Motor and the Travelaire were three craft that met those specs. I suppose there were others, but those are the ones Johnson chose.

Of the three, by far the most appealing to me was the Tri-Motor. It appeared as if someone had attached corrugated tin wings and engines to a chicken house. It was about as pretty as a red-headed stepchild; not exactly

what might be called a thing of beauty. Having been assembled with by committee and spare parts. How it flew remains a mystery to this day. But fly it did.

As to design, the Tri-Motor appeared as if its designer had defied anyone to hang anything resembling an aerodynamic feature on the airplane. Corners were square, wings were exceptionally thick, and tail wheel and landing gear were fixed. All those features added drag. The only concession to streamlining on the entire aircraft was a windshield that divided in the middle and swept back slightly in an attempt to look racy. Also, someone had designed a wheel-strut cover that might have lessened wind resistance slightly. The net effect might have reminded one of a great-grandmother wearing a suit of long underwear beneath a bikini.

The interior of the plane was even more appealing. The cockpit resembled nothing less than the front seat and dashboard of a 1930 Model A Ford. In any case, there was a startling resemblance, but the clocks and dials on the dashboard of the plane were for the center, or main engine only. Gauges for the two outboard engines were located out on the engines themselves.

A ball of chewing gum dangling at the end of a string in front of the pilot served as a turn and bank indicator. There was a co-pilot's seat to the right of the pilot, just as there were two front seats in a Model A. I don't know what the co-pilot's function was, unless it was to take over in case the pilot suffered a heart attack.

Between the two front seats, a long lever stuck up out of the floor., as the gearshift lever in the car, but this was the Tri-Motor brake, which could be shifted to brake one wheel, left or right, or to brake both simultaneously. It helped to be able to do that while maneuvering on the ground.

Normally, the wicker passenger seats were removed when carrying jumpers. We sat on the floor. But because we didn't plan to be jumping on the trip over the mountains back to Missoula, they had reinstalled the seats and we were able to feel like regular passengers. Everybody had a window seat, but there were no pretty stewardesses.

It turned out we hung around the airport for the better part of the day, waiting for the plane, but that beat the heck out of piling brush. We learned later that the Ford had been busy all day, ferrying higher-priority people from their various projects back to Missoula and dropping jumpers on fires. We were low-priority people, but evidently moving up the jump list very rapidly.

A storm that causes a lot of fires like that is called a burst, because that's the way the fires occur, in bursts. We had an occasional single fire call from time to time, but mostly the fires came in bursts, and it's very easy to deplete all the available manpower. Apparently it was being depleted that day at a rapid rate. That's why they were so anxious to get us back.

Finally, after we had eaten all the crackers and peanuts in the airport machine, the old Tri-Motor came lumbering in. I always say "lumbered" because whether it's flying over a mountain, landing, taking off or taxiing down a runway, that's what the Tri-Motor did. It lumbered. It didn't scoot, soar, roar, rocket or scramble. Not matter the occasion, it lumbered, and on this occasion it lumbered onto the dirt airstrip in Grangeville at about twilight.

We didn't lumber while climbing aboard. We were happy not to stay at Castle Creek piling brush, even though we would miss Bo's cooking. There was

always an excited anticipation about a fire jump that affected everybody.

By the time we had cleared the low ridge at Grangeville and headed east over the Bitterroots, night was falling and a light mist, just beginning to form when we took off, was settling in thick clouds over the mountains below. The ground disappeared entirely.

Up where we were, though, the air was crystal clear and a full yellow moon cast a golden glow over the entire world. It would be hard to imagine anything more peacefully serene and lovely. It was a perfect scene for poets, lonesome wolves, and lovers. I didn't have much of the poet in my soul and a lover is no good unless he has someone to love. I probably felt like a lone wolf more than either of the other two. All I could do was yearn, and I still didn't have a lot to attract Miss Howland's attention. Maybe the coming fire jump would produce an adventure.

Conversation was discouraged by the noise of the three engines. Most of the guys were either sleeping or staring out the windows. Cabin lights were dim, but from my seat just behind Bob Johnson's, I had a good view of the cockpit. There hadn't been much money wasted on designing a dashboard for the airplane. Every once in a while, Johnson would fumble around under his seat for a flashlight, which he would aim at the dials on the outboard engines. I supposed everything was all right, because he seemed satisfied. I didn't see any sense worrying until he did.

There was one thing I noticed that was beginning to bother me, the nearer we got to Missoula. Those clouds didn't seem to be letting up, and I noted some particularly sharp-looking rocks peeking up through some of them. I was beginning to wonder how we were going to get down through those clouds without running into something hard and unyielding.

I didn't know too much about navigating, but I hadn't noticed any especially sophisticated-looking navigational equipment up there in the cockpit, unless I wanted to count that ball of gum on the string. I didn't see how that would be of much help. It was beginning to look like a game of Russian roulette to me, but I kept that thought to myself. No need to worry other folks with my concerns.

When Johnson finally pointed the nose of that old plane down, the last two things I saw were a big, snow-capped rock sticking up through a cloud and Jim Lowe's eyes - each bigger than that full moon. I wasn't the only one who was concerned. Then the clouds closed over and it became dark as Egypt. I couldn't see a thing.

I kept waiting for the crash I knew was coming, but the only thing I heard was someone praying. It might have been Jim. For that matter, it might have been me. Anyway, I sure wasn't thinking about Miss Howland and the future. Right then I doubted I even had a future.

Just when I thought the dive would never end, we broke out of those clouds, six hundred feet above the Missoula County Airport. I didn't hear the prayers anymore. I guess we didn't need them, after all.

Next morning, before sunrise, Jim and I were on board the Travelaire on our way north to the Cabinet National Forest. Far to the east, the sun peeped over the snow-capped peaks of the Mission Range. Farther yet to the north and east, the sharp steeples of mountains Clement, Chief, Grinnel and Bearhat defined Glacier Park. Nearer, but still far away, Flathead Lake lay like a mirror beneath early-morning mists. The coils of Clark Fork twisted and turned below us along the route of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, the country little changed since that day.

Geologists tell us that fifteen or twenty thousand years ago, during the last Ice Age, an ice dam formed at the bottleneck just where Clark Fork Valley narrows at Thompson Falls. In what is known by geologists as Lake Missoula, the waters backed up the valley well to the south and east of where Missoula now stands. There is plenty of evidence of the enormous depth of those waters, as shown by ancient shorelines well up the sides of Mt. Sentinel above Missoula.

Periodically, the ice dam would burst and an immense volume of water greater than that held in two of today's Great Lakes would let go suddenly and go crashing down the Columbia Basin, sweeping everything in its path, gouging out huge holes miles wide, and scouring down to bedrock the area now known as the Coulees in Washington. It occurred repeatedly through the ages, until the ice finally receded for good. A phenomena of this magnitude never occurred before or since anywhere on earth - and it took scientists years to grasp the truth of the evidence before their eyes. It was just too enormously huge to perceive..

Jim and I would never have figured it out on our own, of course, if we hadn't heard about it in geology classes. Still, it wasn't very difficult to visualize a huge lake filling up the valley before us. Times like this made smokejumping seem downright worthwhile. Where else could we have found jobs that took us to the most beautiful and interesting places in the great Northwest and pay us \$1.52/hour to boot - not to mention all the C-rations we could stand?

Speaking of which, it was getting time for us to earn that \$1.52/hour plus C-rations. The Travelaire circled low over a heavily forested area. There were no glades, meadows or open spots anywhere around. It appeared as if we were about to make our second timber jump. The fire seemed to be confined to one old dead larch snag sticking out like a bony finger, beckoning us to come cut it down and relieve it of its pain.

The snag towered high above the surrounding stand of lodgepole pine. Larch grew like that, attracting lightning like so many lightning rods scattered through the forest. We had to be careful not to land in larch trees because the tops would break off and dump us two hundred feet to the ground. Some bad injuries had been caused by just such an accident.

The plane munched in over the smoke and Herb Oertli, the spotter, put me out right where he wanted me. There was that moment of extreme helplessness just after leaving the door. If anything went wrong, there was darned little I could do about it. I couldn't get back in the plane, and I might flap my arms all I wanted, but I just wasn't meant to fly.

That brief moment before opening shock always triggers an adrenaline rush.. While that is going on, I never could understand how those heroic paratroopers in WW II movies always remembered to shout that Indian's name as they went out the door. I never could think of it until I got to the ground. After that, it was too late.

Anyway, when that 'chute blossoms, it might not be the end of your problems, but the beginning. Landing safely on the ground is a good start, but there are no guarantees in this old world.

I made a very soft landing in a stand of pole-sized lodgepole, not a hundred yards from the old larch snag, which was beginning to blaze up. If Jim and I hurried, with luck we could make short work of that old widow-maker; have her down and out, and be headed out to the ranger station by nightfall, maybe in time for supper.

I watched Jim land not far from where I had. I helped him roll up his jump gear and parachute, while the plane circled to drop our fire packs. The pilot came in low and fast, and Oertli kicked out the packs at the point where they should have landed right on top of us. That would have been true, if a little breeze hadn't kicked up right then and carried them over the ridge and about a hundred yards down the other side. We ran to retrieve them so we could get to work on our fire. That's when we discovered we were not alone.

The cargo 'chutes had landed squarely on top of an old sow bear with twin cubs - and she had already laid claim to our bundles. She wasn't showing any signs of wanting to share them with us, either. In fact, we thought she was being downright unreasonable, when she chased us up a nearby pine tree.

All of mine and Jim's experience with Smoky Mountain bears had taught us one thing: Don't argue with a bear who is eating, courting, nursing cubs, or just standing there. Of course, I'd never met a bear that wasn't doing at least one of those things. Well, I don't know if that bear was courting or not, but the way she was tearing into those fire packs sure made me think she was eating, and she surely had cubs. That was enough to make us extremely leery of climbing down out of that tree and duking it out with her right then and there. Of course, we had a high respect for Motherhood, too, especially Motherhood that was as fractious, ill-tempered, and unreasonable as that mama bear.

In the meantime, the longer we sat in that tree, the bigger that fire was liable to get. That thought crossed our minds when we got a whiff of smoke wafting over the ridge. No doubt about it, that fire was beginning to spread, as the sun rose higher and dried up the dew. But there wasn't a doggoned thing we could do about it as long as that old she-bear was laying claim to our fire packs - and she wasn't showing any signs of giving them up. Between Mama and the two cubs, they had things strewn all over creation. Bears can flat make a mess.

Finally, after what seemed like a couple of hours, Mama stood up and sniffed the air. She must not have liked what she sniffed, because she gave a "Whuff!" and went loping down the slope, her cubs following. I don't know if she didn't like the smoke that was beginning to pour over the ridge in larger and larger clouds, or if maybe she had sensed the presence of a boar-bear that might kill her cubs if he found them. Whatever it was, she left abruptly, and we were not sorry to see her go. We climbed down as soon as it appeared safe. We couldn't wait too long, because that darn fire was burning straight toward us.

We gathered up the fire tools and made a quick check of the damage. The sleeping bags were in shreds and the C-rations had been scattered everywhere. She had bitten into every single tin can we had - I don't know if she could read labels or not, but she had eaten all the good stuff. She had even eaten the candy-soap bar - but she rejected the two crackers and the lima beans with ham. I couldn't say as I blamed her, but that left us with a fire to fight and not

much to eat.

While we were up that tree the sun had risen much higher, the morning dew was gone, and that fire was taking off. It had gotten into some heavy brush and was about to get completely out of hand. We flew into digging line as fast as we could, but the fire was getting ahead of us and was headed up that slope faster than we could dig.

By noon, it was pretty obvious that two men weren't going to be able to stop that fire. It must have been obvious to the guy in the lookout tower, too, who later turned out to be a lady. About two o'clock we heard the familiar sound of the Tri-Motor and parachutes began to blossom. We couldn't take much time to watch, though - fires didn't take breaks.

We were still flailing away at the fire when Jack Demmons and seven other guys joined us. There wasn't much time for a great deal of idle chit-chat. The fire was spreading up the ridge. Jack wasted no time getting the guys spread out and digging line on the uphill flank. That way we gradually got ahead of it.

By dark, we had a line all the way around, and it was beginning to die down a little. Fires usually did that at night, anyway, but Jim and I could never have done it by ourselves.

I hated to tell Jack about the bears. It was too unbelievable. But I needed to account for the loss of our food when I started begging for some of his. To tell the truth, Jim and I were famished, not having eaten since about five that morning. We didn't much care whether they believed us or not, as long as we got some food. Besides, there was plenty of evidence around. I don't think anyone could have accused us of biting those holes in the cans. It looked like someone had used them for target practice.

We stayed on that fire for three days, but we had it controlled and halfway mopped up by the time a ground crew relieved us. I don't think I've ever been so beat in my whole life as I was by the time we finally straggled out to the ranger station.

Word of our bear episode reached Missoula ahead of us, and we took a lot of ribbing about it. I wouldn't have minded it so bad if they hadn't kept referring to us as "the old bear wrestlers," and things like that.

I hope that old mama bear choked on those C-rations. It would serve her right.

Chapter 21 - The Seeley Lake monster

We hung around the Parachute Loft a week or more, cleaning gear and assembling fire packs, before Fred Brauer found another project for us. I admit it was a pretty good one. He sent me and Jim and Dave Lodzinski out to the Seeley Lake Ranger Station, forty or fifty miles east of Missoula.

I don't mind saying that, as far as the work was concerned, there really wasn't much project to it. We cleaned up a little bit around the station, clipped the hedges and put new gravel on the walkways, but mostly we fished and took pictures that would grace any calendar. There was no end to the scenery at Seeley Lake. We could hardly point a camera at anything that wasn't worth taking

a picture of.

As to fishing, it was hard to get a fly to land on the water for long. Rainbows or cutthroats would grab a fly as soon as it hit the water or before. They knocked the feathers out of the fly I was fishing with, until there was nothing left but a raw hook and a little bitty piece of tinsel that was used to tie the feathers on - and they were still hitting it.

We didn't catch any great old big ones, but we caught enough twelve- and fourteen-inchers to feed the whole crew. Trout are absolutely no trouble to clean and, fried or broiled, they are hard to beat. But folks in Montana didn't know how well hushpuppies and grits go with trout. I think that's just too bad. Regional prejudices sure do get in the way sometimes. I have never had any prejudices as far as food is concerned. I always look forward to trying the specialty of the area, although I might have trouble with those sea slugs the Chinese dote on so much.

A lot of people had summer homes around Seeley Lake. Our buddy, Dick Krietzberg, had people among them. Jim Lowe, Dave Lodziski and I had already been their guests one weekend near the end of our training. Mrs. Krietzberg sure knew how to bake a bean, and she also slipped in an elk roast that was about the best meat I had ever eaten. I thought it was prime beef at first. I learned later that it was elk. All I can say is, no wondering Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse were so upset with Custer. He was trying to take away their buffalo and elk - or rather, take them away from the elk and buffalo. I would have squawked, too.

Not too far from the ranger station was the little settlement of Seeley Lake. I don't remember too much about it now, but I think there might have been a grocery store and filling station in addition to the long, low log building that served as a tavern. Because we didn't have a car, or need groceries, I'm not sure about the first two buildings, but I am sure about the tavern. It was a right lively place on weekends, especially payday weekends and holidays.

The tavern's principle custom depended upon loggers, fishermen and simply vacationers, in that order. Itinerant smokejumpers contributed very little. This particular evening, the smokejumpers - meaning me and Dave - had pitched in the whole amount of the cost of two hamburgers, two beers and an order of French fries, which we split.

We were seated in a corner near the door, enjoying the fruits of our labor, when the band struck up. The crowd was pretty orderly, everything considered, but as the evening wore on, the band grew louder, so, naturally, so did the crowd. There was a big sign stuck up beside the band that said, "No Dancing!" It seemed right odd that they had a band, but didn't allow any dancing. Still, it wasn't any of my business, and I figured they knew what they were doing. Besides, it took a pretty good imagination to believe that those people jumping around in the middle of the floor were actually dancing, even if they intended to and thought they were.

Pretty soon, they weren't jumping around. They were mostly staggering, and holding on to each other to keep from falling. For the most part, although you couldn't always rely upon it, it was huge bearded men holding on to mostly un-bearded women. You couldn't tell for sure.

With a gross shortage of dancing partners, and considering the quality of those available, it really made little difference. Dave and I wisely kept a low

profile. Attracting attention from any of them, men or women, didn't seem to be the most prudent move to make right then. We hoped to just remain part of the furniture.

What happened next is kind of blurry, but I will tell it straight as best I can. The bad singing, led by wails from a frowzy-looking brunette with buck teeth, was reaching a sort of climatic crescendo. The "No Dancing" dancers, who were still on their feet, were beginning to bounce off the walls and each other..

One of the dancers, strapping young lad of gigantic proportions, red shirt and blue beard, detached himself from the group, climbed upon a table and proclaimed himself to be the toughest man in the house. To prove it, he took out a pint of chainsaw oil and downed it before the astonished red eyes of all. Before anyone could make a move, he also proved beyond any reasonable doubt that he was not only the toughest man in the house, he was also the sickest, and without question the dumbest man in the house.

His friends quickly bore the inert form out the door, dribbling from his beard a mixture of chainsaw oil, beer, pretzels, peanuts and cheap rot-gut whiskey. They soused him in the icy, shallow waters of Seeley Lake, where his body became the center of an oil slick, the first that pristine shore had ever seen. He became a sort of living precursor of the Exxon Valdeze of latter-day infamy.

We thought the crowd had enjoyed enough fun and excitement for one evening, but we were wrong. Evidently they had come down for a brawl, and they weren't going away without one. A little incident such as the one we had just witnessed, might amuse them for a while, but it surely wasn't going to deter them.

No sooner had the crowd come back from dunking their oil-guzzling buddy in the lake than somebody shouted the old classic, "I can lick any man in the house!" "No, you can't," someone else answered. "I bet you can't lick him," indicating a guy over at the bar slumped over his beer, mind a thousand miles away, completely oblivious to what was about to happen to him.

The challenger, a burly barrel-chested Swede about an axe handle broad across the shoulders, stood spraddle-legged in the center of the floor, ham-sized fists cocked and ready for action..

"I'll show you," he said, whereupon he strode over to the bar, snatched the unsuspecting victim off his stool and slammed him to the floor.

The astonished victim's eyes revealed nothing but pure bewilderment as he was hoisted overhead, but he was beginning to understand a little bit of what was happening to him as he dragged himself to his feet.

"Get up and whup him, George," the first voice shouted. "He can't do that to you."

"Shut up, you dumb Swede," said the victim. "You're going to get me killed!"

With that, he aimed a punch at the Swede, and it began to rain fists.

Dave and I, anticipating what was about to happen, made a move toward the door, but we weren't quick enough. A ham-sized first hammered me right between

the shoulder blades, and I was on my face on the floor, gasping for breath. There were chairs flying that didn't break apart nearly as easily as they did in Hollywood manner. All I could hear were shouts and all I could see were feet. All about was naught but mayhem and confusion.

I had lost sight of Dave, but I wasn't quite as concerned about him as I was about my next breath. I thought it would never come. In the meantime, I thought, if I just lay there without moving, maybe nobody would notice me. It worked pretty well. At least, nobody hammered me again. A lady did step on my neck for a second, but she didn't weigh much and didn't stay there too long.

When I finally got my breath back, I started dragging along the floor toward the exit, trying still not to attract any notice. Dave, whose lip was bleeding pretty badly, was crumpled in the next corner. He saw me and motioned for us to vacate the premises. It looked like a good idea to me, and I sure didn't need any encouragement. Getting out of there ASAP was much on my mind.

The brawl reached its climax shortly after we abandoned ship, but not before that crowd had just about dismantled the place as well as each other. There would be plenty of time to put it back in business, though. It was two more weeks before another payday.

Dave and I went down to the lakeshore to bathe our wounds. The cool water and fresh air revived us considerably. The din of the battle raging fifty yards behind us didn't disturb us a whole lot - we felt safe there.

The shattering explosion of the big picture window being splintered into a million shards of crystalline uselessness seemed to mark the climax, and the din of mortal combat roared on for awhile, then began to abate. The thunder of battle finally receded into the distance - a thing with that big a head of steam just doesn't stop at the flick of a switch.

Yellow light from a couple of unbroken bug-repellent bulbs on the porch of the tavern filtered down to where we were. I could see that Dave's left eye was beginning to close. He was applying his sippy T-shirt to his lip and eye.

"You know," he mused philosophically, "I believe if I had a hundred eyes, every durn one of them would be black."

I didn't comment, but, from the way my back ribs felt, it seemed like a reasonable assumption. Where the lady had stood on my neck didn't feel too good, either.

The sound of laughter mingled with the moans of the wounded, as the crowd departed. Consensus of opinion among the partygoers, seemed to be the evening had been a huge success, and they were looking forward to the next party.

We sat in silence for the most part, each occupied with his own aches, pains, and thoughts. Dave couldn't talk with a mouthful of busted lip, and I didn't feel much like it. I hadn't thought about Miss Howland lately. Maybe now would be a good time. It was getting to where I needed to remind myself to think about her, whereas it used to be automatic. I had a queasy feeling about that, sort of as if I were being unfaithful or something.

It was a funny thing, conjuring up visions of that angelic face just after I had been involved in a barroom brawl - it felt downright sacrilegious, as if I'd unwittingly involved her in that kind of low-down sordid doings. I felt even

guiltier and miserable. Here I'd come all the way out to Montana to have some adventures with which to impress her, and what did I have to show for it? A busted lip, a sore back, and an aching heart; that's what.

Well, let's see. (I began to tick off things in my head). I had been on three fires, one of which got away and burned off the side of a mountain and another one in which I was chased by a bear. Nothing much in those two episodes.

I had caught a lot of fish, but women of Miss Howland's set weren't interested in fish or fishing.

I had been kicked out of Glacier Park, and had come close to spending the night in the Kalispell jail. There wasn't much there to brag about.

Now, through no fault of my own, I had gotten involved in a tavern brawl. The summer was coming to an end, and I hadn't had a single adventure that she would be interested in. Except for the \$1.52/hour the government paid faithfully and on time, I didn't have much to show for my efforts, unless I wanted to count numerous cuts, bruises and a monumental headache.

While entertaining those gloomy thoughts, I had rolled up my pants and was wading aimlessly about in the cold, shallow water. Every once in a while I would pick a pebble off the sandy bottom and skip it idly across the water. I could get five or six skips per pebble. If that was the extent of my talent, it wasn't apt to attract the likes of Miss Howland or any other fair damsel, for that matter.

Growing tired of that useless pastime, I waded toward a big rock shining in the moonlight. It looked like a good place to sit while I mulled over my status and pondered my fate. I was within several feet of it, when I became aware of a powerfully pervasive overpowering nauseating stench, which, up until now, I had been conscious of in only the rearmost recesses of my brain. But I was now downwind and very much conscious of it. While my olfactory senses were still reeling from the initial onslaught, the rock sat up and emitted an enormous, booming belch, just the sound waves from which were almost strong enough to knock me over. My eyes watered and I reeled backward, evidently making noises of my own, because Dave came running up the narrow, pebbly beach wanting to know what was going on.

At that point, the rock stood up, shining in the moonlight, dripping water, pebbles, algae, vomit, oil, torn clothes and, for all I know, maybe a couple of dead trout. To us it looked like the Creature from the Black Lagoon. Dave let out a yelp and took off. I became the second man to walk on water.

The tattooed blue-bearded giant; the erstwhile toughest, dumbest, sickest man in the place once again emitted a mighty rumbling burp, stretched, shed some algae, and, without a word, strode out of the water, crawled into his ratty-ass pickup and slowly drove off. His dragonesque redolence lingered on the night air and turned it foul.

Dave and I witnessed his departure from behind some shrubbery before we dragged our weary bones back to the bunkhouse. I didn't think of Miss Howland again for a long, long time.

Chapter 22 - California, here we come

There wasn't much doing the next few weeks. A fire call down on the Salmon River interrupted our Seeley Lake project, and we never went back. After we returned from the Salmon River fire we had one up in the Kaniksu. Neither fire took more than three or four days. In those two areas, the worst thing that usually happens is that a lot of brush is burned up - and that's exactly what happened that time.

There is an old saying that Montana has nine months of winter and three months of poor sledding, while summers are short but glorious. Already there was a nip of fall in the air and long twilight evenings were growing shorter. Dog Days were coming to an end and even ducks, which had better sense than to Over winter in Montana, were heading south. The fire season was winding down and it was getting time to hang it up.

I wasn't nearly as glad to be going home as I thought I would be. For one thing, there were more than a hundred guys with whom I'd shared not only a hunk of my life, but hard times, good times and, for the last three months, some of the most memorable times of my life. I had made some special friends, but there's wasn't one of the whole crew I wouldn't have been willing to trust with anything I had, including my life. I've never known that feeling before or since.

Jim and I had already planned to make the trip home by thumb, when an unusual opportunity came along. Dick Kreitzberg and a couple of his school buddies were planning a trip out to San Francisco as soon as the fire season ended, and they invited us to go along with them. True, California wasn't exactly a shortcut to the Land of Cotton, but it looked like it had the makings of a good trip. We jumped on it.

Dick Kreitzberg was from a flying family. Dick's older brother had a flying service in California. His younger brother, Sparky, not yet fifteen, had a twin-engine rating, and Dick was a fine pilot as well as a smokejumper. He had flown us all around Missoula - over mountains and up and down canyons. Inexperienced as I am in the air, I always felt a whole lot safer flying with Dick, than riding in a car with him.

Cars were a different story with Dick. He just never seemed to get the hang of driving one. Simply going to the store with Dick was an adventure in itself. He never saw a stop sign he didn't hate, and he never saw a centerline, period. Traffic lights were a nuisance to be ignored. He was never convinced that in order to be somewhere you should arrive in one piece, and deliver your passengers the same way.

He always wanted to be there without going through the process of getting there. When we got right down to it, contrary to flying airplanes, Dick just never did catch on to driving an automobile very well. For that reason, if for no other, this trip promised to be an exciting one.

Good-byes around the base were usually short, devoid of emotion, but deeply sincere. "See you next year" had a hollow ring, because we knew that more than likely we wouldn't see each other the next year. Some would be in school, some would be off gathering research data on poisonous jungle snakes and man-eating polar bears or some such, and others would be bumming rides just to see what was over the next hill.

Several of the guys, Dave Lodzinski among them, would end up in Korea being shot at, that being the place the Army was sending guys in those days. The

CIA came around and recruited several guys for clandestine activities in Southeast Asia, which was just beginning to heat up. More than half of them were never heard from again.

Knudsen was killed in a hunting accident that fall. These were people who lived at, on or near the edge, and I guess we expected things to happen to some of them that wouldn't happen to ordinary people. But that didn't mean we didn't miss them.

A bright, clear Saturday morning around Labor Day weekend found Jim and I bound for home the hard way, through Idaho, Washington, Oregon and California. Never mind that none of these states lay even remotely on the direct route to our destination. In fact, it was almost the opposite direction, but that didn't bother us a great deal. It couldn't be any more difficult to catch rides in California than in Montana, and either was a long way from the Carolinas and Tennessee.

By the time we got to Spokane, we were becoming used to Dick's straddling the white line. We merely referred to it as, "flying the beam", although it did become a little hairy when we met a semi. The good thing about the roads in Washington is that they were wide enough to accommodate two vehicles meeting, when one of them is partly across the centerline. At least, they were wide enough if one of the vehicles moved over onto the shoulder. Some of them moved plumb over into the ditch, but I think they were just over-reacting to a car traveling down the middle of the road. It really wasn't necessary for them to give us that much room.

It didn't seem to bother Dick all that much, although he did tend to get irritated with those folks who didn't want to move over at all. He called them road hogs, and shook his fist at them.

We didn't plan to stay in motels, but were prepared to sleep under the stars. That worked fine out on the deserts of eastern Washington, but it was beginning to shower a little by the time we got down to Oregon. We took a side trip up to Crater Lake and it was so cloudy up there on the rim of the crater, we rode all the way around that lake and never had more than a glimpse of it.

We were going to stay in the lodge and try to see the lake the next day, but the girl who waited on us in the restaurant was so doggoned nasty when Jim and I asked her to take the greasy potatoes back and bring us some grits, that we decided to move on. I think she had her panties in a wad and didn't like grits.

We stopped in a little roadside park that evening. What we camped under that night was not stars, it was clouds. Although we didn't have a tent, we did have ponchos. It wasn't raining when I laid my poncho out and put my sleeping bag in the middle, but the ground was soaked where it had been raining earlier. I folded the poncho back over the sleeping bag, crawled in and went to sleep.

There came a regular frog strangler during the night, but I pulled the poncho flap over my head and stayed dry and warm as toast all night. When I woke in the morning I was still dry, but I had floated about twenty feet from where I was when I went to sleep. Jim had found refuge on a picnic table and the other guys had slept in the car.

We hit the Redwood Highway that day and started meeting logging trucks with only one gigantic log on them. Dick decided to give them all the room they

needed. I thought I had seen big trees before, but these were by far the biggest trees I had ever seen. The biggest trees I had ever seen before looked like carrot stalks beside those redwoods. Two-story houses set among them appeared to be no bigger than dollhouses by comparison.

It's hard to imagine, but some of those trees are as high as a forty-story building and, to be honest, I had never seen a forty-story building. We stopped all along the highway and gawked until our tonsils were sunburned, but it was still hard to imagine. The government has since made a park out of that area. Now visitors can't stop anywhere except where the rules say and then there's no parking places. Don't even think about camping there now, as we did then.

We found out a lot of things about redwoods at a little park where a California ranger was telling a bunch of tourists all about them. No one has ever seen a standing dead redwood. They just grow until they get too tall for their roots and then topple over. Then their limbs take root and grow into another forest. The bark is so thick and spongy fire won't hurt them and the seeds are so small it takes two thousand to weigh an ounce.

Talk about mighty oaks from small acorns - they ain't seen nothing. A redwood will outgrow most any tree in the world. Most folks can't tell an old-growth redwood forest from one that was harvested say, a hundred years or so ago, and grown back. Lots of redwood forests have been harvested two or three times. It's not necessary to plant back a redwood forest; it sprouts from the stump.

About the only way to kill a redwood forest is to dig up the stumps and pave it over, which is what the government will need to do if they ever want to have enough parking places for the people coming to see Redwood Park. Only trouble with that is then the people won't have anything to look at when they get to those fine parking places. My guess is, following its usual logic, that is exactly what the government will eventually do.

We rolled into San Francisco about the time the neon lights were coming on. Not having very much money, and not wanting to spend any we didn't need to, we headed for the local YMCA. By pooling our resources, we made up a little capital. Dick and Jim went in and rented a room with a double bed, while the rest of us stayed out of sight. The concierge gave them the room number - and they told us - and they headed upstairs.

The rest of us followed one at a time until we all made it up. The YMCA was a right nice place. I mean the cardboard walls were clean but you could hear a kitty cat walking on a shag carpet through them. It wasn't the Ritz-Carlton.

A bathroom and showers didn't come with the room. They were down the hall and everybody on that floor shared the same one. That made things a little inconvenient, especially because we had only two towels and a little bitty piece of soap between us. I was ready to go back to Meadow Creek or Seeley Lake, where things were a little handier. I had gotten spoiled.

We let Dick's buddies have the bed, as they weren't accustomed to roughing it, and the rest of us found a place on the floor. It was hard, but at least there weren't any rocks or limbs poking us in the ribs. We each picked out a spot and laid our things out on the floor, and then flipped to see who got first choice on the two towels. I was not a winner, so I got out an old T-shirt to use as a towel and headed down the hall with the rest of them to take a shower.

If any of us were intending to keep a low profile and our presence there a secret, we shouldn't have planned to take a shower or do anything else in that facility. It had four commode stalls, a row of urinals, two lavatories and six showers in a big, shower room. The whole thing was clean and nicely tiled, which made it into an immense echo chamber. That, combined with the fact that the walls in the entire building must have been made of paper, let everybody in the whole building know we were there.

Everyone could hear somebody taking a pee and toilets flushing from clean at the other end of the hall. We tried to be discreet, but five guys all taking a shower at once makes a lot of noise, even though we weren't talking. We weren't yelling or anything, but even a whisper was magnified into a shout.

There were cries of "Shut up!" and "Knock it off!" from all over the place. Some of the shouts could have been coming from five floors up or down, for all we knew. Those of us who were not what we might have called "legitimate guests" finished showering as quickly as possible and scampered back to the room before the management could be summoned to investigate.

When the big, burly house dick showed up, we could hear him chewing Jim and Dick out, plain as day. We knew whenever anybody went to the bathroom all night long. It usually happened just about the time we were drifting off to sleep. It was a far cry from the night sounds on Spread Mountain. I began to feel a little homesick, but I wasn't sure where "home" was.

Chapter 23 - Life in a labor camp

As we were awake nearly the whole night, listening to toilets flushing and doors slamming, I couldn't say we "woke up" the next morning. It was more like we just gave up and got up. Anyway, San Francisco was the end of the line for me and Jim. From now on it was either shank's mare or lucky thumb. We were anxious to get an early start, since we were going to be on our own.

Breakfast and a warm farewell to Dick and the guys, who as a final gesture gave us a ride to the outskirts of the city, and we were on our way from a starting point about five hundred miles farther away from home than when we started.

I think I might have been wrong about it being just as easy to catch rides in California as in Montana. I figured there would be more cars in California and more cars meant more chances for rides. I was right about the cars and the chances, but I would need to say I was badly disappointed about the number of people who chose to pass up the chance to pick us up.

That never happened in Montana. Usually no more than a half dozen cars would pass before we had a ride. Of course, we sometimes ended up with somebody trying to blast us out of our britches, spitting cherry pits at us, and beating the fire out of us with a belt, but their hearts were in the right place.

We had about worn our thumbs out and had traveled all of twenty or thirty miles in two rides when Jim thought of making a sign telling folks where we were headed. We found an old piece of cardboard and made us a sign that fairly shouted, "Dixie." Sure enough, the next car that came along slowed to a stop and motioned us in.

The first two questions the guy asked us were, "Can you drive," and "Where the hell is Dixie?"

That kind of shook us up a bit, but a ride is a ride and we were glad to be moving. It turned out the fellow needed to make Bakersfield by sundown and he had been driving nonstop from Seattle. He was whipped out and looked it, but he couldn't have looked or felt much worse than we did. We told him we were ready to drive anytime.

He pulled off at a filling station-diner, filled the tank, bought us lunch, gave me the keys, crawled into the back seat and crashed. His last words were, "Let me know when we get to Bakersfield."

I probably would have felt better about the whole deal if I'd known where Bakersfield was. I looked at a map of California on the wall of the diner and got a general idea. The highway we were on seemed to head in the right direction, and that's the direction we went.

Apparently it was a good guess, because eventually we began to see signs advertising Bakersfield. It was about dark when we started seeing the shacks that heralded our approach to the city. These were the camps of the Mexican migrant laborers who made their living harvesting crops in the Imperial Valley. They grew all kinds of things there - fruit, vegetables, plums, peaches, onions, oranges, horseradish, lettuce.

The sight that amazed me the most was the cotton they grew. We grew cotton in South Carolina, but not like that. Those cotton plants were trees and the rows were miles long. Cotton pickers would have to be eight feet tall to pick it, and it would take the better part of two days for a man to hoe one row, if he didn't starve to death before he reached the other end. It was a relief to learn they had machines to hoe and pick it. Pop used to brag about the bale to an acre in South Carolina. Those people must grow about a bale per stalk. Pop would never believe it.

We got out near the middle of town and thanked our benefactor, who went on his way. We planned to splurge on a motel room that night, but nothing was open. In fact, it was downright spooky. It wasn't that late, but the streets were deserted and there were very few lights. Bakersfield resembled a ghost town. Windows were boarded up and shuttered, streets were covered with litter and there were no streetlights burning. I didn't notice any traffic lights working, either, but that didn't matter - there was almost no traffic. The place looked bombed out and deserted.

A constant sound of semis shifting gears sounded far off, and we started walking in that direction, as that seemed to be the only sign of life. It felt as if we had been walking for miles before we came to a truck stop out on the bypass, where all the activity was. In contrast to downtown, it was lit up, and trucks were coming and going.

Upon inquiry, the cashier informed us that Bakersfield had been hit by a major earthquake only the day before. Several people had been crushed when buildings had fallen on them, and there were a lot of injured. Lights, water, gas and everything else was off downtown. This explained the deserted streets and the bombed-out appearance.

The owner of the truck stop had rigged up a gasoline generator, so they could operate the pumps and burn a few lights. The cashier informed us of a few

other bits of news, too. No, there weren't any bunks in the truck stop that weren't full of truckers as it was the height of the sugar-beet season - and she doubted any truckers would be taking on any riders that time of the evening. Most of them weren't even allowed to because of insurance company regulations.

She didn't recommend staying in Bakersfield that night, either, as there had been several severe aftershocks during the day - and besides, there was no place to stay. Everything was shut down. No, she didn't have any recommendations as to how we could get out of town without walking, but she did highly recommend that we not stay. Police were always on the lookout for looters and potential looters, she added with a meaningful look.

Jim and I stepped outside to talk things over and to decide what we might do. There wasn't much point in staying there. Bakersfield was a ghost town. All the truckers were in a hurry and weren't taking riders. So we decided to start walking in the direction of what we hoped was home.

We didn't expect to walk all the way but at least it would show we had faith and determination. After walking for what seemed miles and passing nothing but darkened, abandoned-looking farmhouses and outbuildings, we had worked up an appetite and a thirst too. We should have eaten at the truck stop but, to tell the truth, that food hadn't looked much more appetizing than C-rations..

We had settled for a pack of crackers to tide us over until we found a weenie stand, and that had long since worn out. The Coke we washed them down with had turned to sweat, and we were dry as well as hungry. There were no weenie stands in sight, but we did see a pinpoint of flickering yellow light ahead.

It must have been miles away when we first spotted it because we trudged on forever before it began to appear any nearer. Eventually we began to make out people moving around. A peal of childish laughter rang clear on the desert air. Someone was trying to coax music out of a cracked guitar, and not having much luck.

We could smell food cooking in a big, black pot hanging over a fire and my stomach growled. I thought surely they must have heard it, but, in case they hadn't, we decided we had better warn them of our approach. It didn't seem polite to crash the party without announcing ourselves with no more than a couple of growling stomachs.

We gave a couple of hallos when we came within good hearing distance. The strumming stopped and a couple of kids scampered behind a woman who must have been their mother. The rest stared in our direction, although we weren't yet visible. We gave them a couple more calls, as we trudged on toward their camp. We were definitely trying not to spring any surprises, but evidently we had sort of thrown a damper on the party, as we could see when we finally dragged into the circle of light thrown by the fire.

An old guy, maybe forty or more, seemed to be their leader, came forward and said something in Spanish that I couldn't begin to understand. When he saw we didn't understand, he repeated it louder.

"Say something in Spanish," Jim said, punching me in the ribs. "We don't want him to think we're dummies, do we?"

"I don't know any Spanish," I whispered.

"You said you had it in high school, didn't you?"

"Well yeah," I admitted, . "but I didn't learn to talk it."

"Tell him we sure would like some beans," Jim said, rubbing his stomach.

"Como esta frijoles?" I blurted out.

The man looked puzzled. I guessed it was my accent. The guy with the guitar laughed and there were some other snickers, too, from the dark.

"I think you just asked him, 'How has he bean?'" Jim whispered.

"Well that's a sentence, isn't it?" I shot back. "You try something."

I shouldn't have been that sharp with Jim. I guess my hunger was making me irritable, and those beans smelled so good.

"No capeesh," Jim said, and the poor guy looked even more puzzled.

"That' Italian, dummy," I said.

"Well, it's all the foreign words I know besides E Pluribus Unum, and I don't know what that means either, except I guess it ain't got nothing to do with beans," Jim declared.

"You would like some frijoles, si?" the man spoke up.

Jim and I jumped in surprise, which seemed to tickle the onlookers right much. But they were still kind of ill at ease and edgy.

"You speak English?" I asked, somewhat startled.

"Un porquito, senior. A little. I thought you were crop pickers, like us. That's why I speak first in Spanish. You would like frijoles? We have plenty, but I'm afraid that's all we have, if you mean to rob us"

"Rob? Oh, no. We're just hungry," I said.

"There are those who rob, pillage, steal and murder. We must guard ourselves against them all the time. Last week they rob Manuel, beat his wife, rape his little daughter, leave her for dead, but she lives. We do not live safe lives, senior. There are bad men in some of the camps. They do not work; they just steal."

It occurred to me that the twenty-five or thirty bucks that Jim and I had between us would probably represent a fortune to these people. I took some comfort from the fact that right then we didn't look like anyone who might possess such enormous resources.

"We haven't eaten since noon and we've come a long way," Jim said, eyeing the simmering pot of beans. I was about to faint from hunger myself.

"We will be glad to pay," I said, holding up the half dollar that made up the total of my available wealth without removing my shoes, and excluding the two silver dollars in my pocket and the ten-dollar bill stuffed into my sock.

I hated to flaunt wealth like that in front of those people, but we were getting desperate. Jim was about to fall on his face, but I noticed he didn't offer any of his spare change to sweeten the kitty.

Without hesitation the man accepted our offer and signaled the little girl who was peeping out from behind her mother's skirts, to grab a couple of tin plates for us. She scurried to obey, and, when she proffered the plates I was happy to note that her hands seemed to be not quite as grubby as the little cherry-pit spitters in Montana.

"I am sorry we cannot offer you anything to drink but water, senors," the man said as he handed us the plates that Mama had filled with beans and topped with three tortillas, which we were to use in lieu of forks or spoons. "We have no coffee and no money until the beet crop is in."

Effie, the cook back in Missoula, had given me a big five-pound can of coffee she wouldn't need, as everybody was leaving, and which I had stuffed into my duffel bag before we left. I got it out and gave it to him. I was glad not to lug it around anymore and he seemed very grateful. I got the distinct impression that Jim and I were beginning to look like a couple of Santa Clauses to those people, but they were still edgy and ill at ease around us.

They watched in silence while we made our meal. I think we could have eaten every bean in the pot, but seeing how desperately poor those people were, we didn't ask for seconds, and they didn't offer any. After we finished eating, Jim and I washed our mouths out real well and got out our harmonicas. If we didn't wash before we played, we'd turn our harmonicas into cafeterias and that gums up the works.

Harmonicas had gotten to be almost standard smokejumper equipment. Everybody around the base had one stuffed in shirt pockets somewhere. They were small, light, easy to carry, a lot of company on a fire, and we could make a lot of music on one. I'm sure it was bragging a little bit, but Jim and I were about the best duo on the base.

For instance, it wasn't supposed to be possible to get sharps and flats on a little ten-hole diatonic, but, we could do what was called "bending a reed" until we could get that sharp or flat we needed to play a particular song just right. Jim and I had become pretty good at that technique, and we could play almost anything.

We started out with "South of the Border" to see if we couldn't get something started. It worked like a top. I bet we hadn't gotten three measures into the song before the guitar started hitting chords in a Latin beat. It sounded a little cracked, but it was in perfect time and that's the most important thing in any kind of music, from a war dance to a symphonic movement. Hitting clinkers is one thing, but get the rhythm wrong and the audience would head right out the door.

We didn't get the rhythm wrong, but I guess our audience would have stayed anyway. They had no place else to go, and, as the evening wore on, they relaxed more and more. Finally, we had played every Latin song we knew at least once, including three renditions of "Spanish Eyes," and two of "Malaguena."

When Jim and I got up to leave, they protested loudly and sincerely. Hernando reminded us of what had happened to Manuel and his family because

thieves had assumed they had a little money. Actually that was a thought that had never left our minds and we agreed to stay the night.

There is no doubt about it. Music is the Universal Language.

Chapter 24 - Where the heart is

It was a long way from bombed-out Bakersfield to Knoxville, where Jim lived, and to Jacksonville, where I lived. In fact, it was a long way from Bakersfield to Dallas, where Jim's sister lived and which was our next target.

The aroma of freshly brewed, courtesy-of-the-government coffee rolled us out before daylight, which was fine with us, as we were anxious to be on the road before the sun grew hot. It was good we had slept out under the stars, because we had spent a goodly portion of the night digesting beans and tortillas, which is not only a tuneful process, it also doesn't do much for the atmosphere, either.

We had a cup of strong black coffee, but declined sharing a Mexican breakfast on the grounds that we didn't want to overstay our welcome. I don't want anybody to get the idea that I'm trying to portray myself as the savior of the downtrodden, but doggoned those people were poor. They were honest, they were legal, and they had done us a great service. I just wanted to pay them back a little. When Hernando's little daughter, Maria, came to hug me good-bye, I pressed one of my silver dollars into her hand.

"Take this to Mama," I told her, "and don't tell her where you got it until we're gone."

"Tengo dos," she squealed happily. "Tengo dos!"

She went running to her mother, who was inside the hovel preparing whatever they were going to have for breakfast. I didn't know what she meant, but obviously she was happy. I could hear her chattering away happily.

"Dos?" her mother asked.

We didn't make a big deal over leaving, mainly because it wasn't that big of a deal. Jim and I walked out to the highway and toward the South. We hadn't gone too far before an ancient jalopy of a school bus passed us, taking the workers to the beet fields.

"Adios, amigos!" Hernando called from a broken-out window, waving to us.

As the bus wheeled by, my eyes met those of the guitar-playing brother-in-law sitting beside him. He smiled a knowing smile, sort of like one musician to another, and was gone. I didn't feel too much like a musician, since I had left my harmonica with Maria, too, or at least I had left it where she would be sure to find it. Harmonicas were cheap; I could get another one.

We walked on for quite a way and the sun was up pretty high before a guy in a pickup gave us a ride to a truck stop and diner at a highway intersection way out in the desert. From there, we stood a good chance of catching a trucker going east. If we couldn't catch a ride, at least we could eat breakfast and freshen up a bit in the wash room.

I paid for breakfast because Jim's money was stashed away in his duffel.

"I thought you always kept out enough to eat on," I said.

"I must have lost it," he answered.

"You mean you 'lost' it to Maria," I guessed.

"Well, she did have big, brown eyes," Jim admitted a bit sheepishly. "Besides, they were awfully poor and she didn't have any toys."

"You noticed that, too? Did you give her your harmonica?"

"She said she would share it with her brothers and you still have yours," he declared a bit defensively.

I decided not to say anything about my harmonica right then. Jim would find out about that soon enough.

"I can always buy another one," he added. "They're cheap."

I agreed.

There's one thing about the Great American Southwest. It's just like the Northwest, as far as having a lot of wide-open space is concerned, but it's hotter and drier. Towns are far apart. As in Montana, if people are going anywhere, they're going a long ways. You don't get short rides in an area where people think nothing of traveling three hundred miles just to shop.

We made it to Las Cruces that day and to Amarillo the next. Not skipping any details - there weren't any. We caught long rides with truckers and camped at night on the desert. Coyotes howled, and once we heard them get into what sounded like a knockdown, drag-out brawl, but it didn't last long. Wildlife wars are of exceptionally short duration and are usually over before someone gets hurt.

I thought that if humans are supposed to be so smart, we would have learned to settle disputes quickly, too, instead of letting things drag on forever while millions of people get killed in the process. I wonder if God thinks He made a mistake and has decided to go with the coyotes when we kill ourselves off. He could do worse.

It was drizzling rain in the late afternoon when we climbed down from a truck at the stockyards in Fort Worth. Jim called his sister, who made the short drive over from Dallas to pick us up. Short for Texas, anyway - it was only thirty miles or so.

But, Fort Worth and Dallas were worlds apart. Fort Worth was a cattle town, with cowboys, saloons and rodeos. Dallas is a cosmopolitan town, with salons instead of saloons and stockbrokers instead of stockyards. Both towns survived and grew because each attracted its own kind of people and neither was attracted to the other. As a result, each grew up in its own world, neither competing with the other.

A person can accumulate quite a bit of road grime, traveling the way we had. I guess we were pretty rank. I'm surprised Jim's sister didn't hose us off

before she let us in the house, but she merely handed us towels and showed us the shower as soon as we walked inside. Our clothes went into the washer. I think she would have rather burned them, but they were all we had.

Cool sheets and a soft bed felt awfully good in contrast to the hard ground and a scratchy sleeping bag. Even at that it felt strange, and I lay awake a long time straining to hear night noises. There were none, and I guess it bothered me. There weren't the sounds of commodes flushing all night, either. I found I didn't miss that noise. I finally found my flat side and drifted off.

Jim decided to stay and visit his sister for a few days, but I was anxious to get home. Hitchhiking was getting pretty tiresome and I just didn't have the heart to keep it up - especially alone. So they took me down to the bus station the next day, where I borrowed a couple of bucks from Jim and spent almost all my remaining reserve to buy a bus ticket to Jacksonville.

Jim and I shook hands with a firm resolve to get together that fall when the Gators played the Vols in Knoxville. I climbed aboard the bus and they waved me off. The summer was about to come to an end.

When I saw a black lady sitting on the bank of a pond in Greenville, Mississippi, fishing for catfish, a wave of good feeling engulfed me. For the first time, I felt I was home. I'd only been gone a little more than three months, but it felt like a lifetime. Maybe it had been, so much had happened. Anyway, I was once again among my own people.

Night had not long fallen when the bus pulled in to the Bay Street Station. I didn't have a dime in my jeans. I didn't have the eight cents it would take to catch a bus, or a nickel for a phone call. I could hoof the five miles home. What was that to someone who had hiked twenty miles on short rations, after fighting fire all day?

Mom and Dad were on the front porch trying to catch a breeze when I crossed the lawn, suitcase in hand, duffel across my shoulder. The welcome was warm; Mom fixed me supper. But it was a little quiet. They didn't know the questions to ask, and I didn't know where to begin.

I had a little trouble getting to sleep that night. The Florida night was too hot and muggy. I finally took a pillow and light blanket out to the hammock in the back yard. The night sounds were different; the air was heavier, and the sky was not so big. It was going to take a little doing to fit back into a smaller world again.

It was great to be home, but I had strange feeling I had left something somewhere.

Chapter 25 - Back to reality

There was Miss Howland in the front row of our English Class. It was kind of a shock. I hadn't thought of her since...Let's see...When was it? I guess it was that night back in Oregon when the rain nearly floated me to the next county. What was even a greater shock was when she looked at me and spoke, a little quizzical Mona Lisa smile playing around her lips.

I smiled and nodded, but decided to let well enough alone. I couldn't

impress her, and I was no longer sure I wanted to. I hadn't had a single adventure that would interest her in the least.

I wondered what Maggie was doing that evening.