An Interview with Wayne Williams

Missoula, MT

May 4, 2023

NMFSH Catalog No. 2021.074.072

00:00:04 James Wall: Could you tell me when and where you were born?

00:00:08 Wayne Williams: I was born May 17, 1956, in Redwood City, California.

00:00:15 James Wall: Well, happy early birthday.

00:00:18 Wayne Williams: Oh, thanks.

00:00:20 James Wall: And did you grow up in Redwood City?

00:00:22 Wayne Williams: Well, no, that was just where the hospital was. The first place I lived was Mountain View, California, and then moved to Sunnyvale, where I spent most of my time all the way up until high school. And then, as I mentioned to you earlier, I graduated from high school a half-year early and at age seventeen went right into wildland firefighting.

00:00:55 James Wall: And could you tell me about your parents? What were their names?

00:00:59 Wayne Williams: My dad's name is Wayne Williams and my mother's name was Pam Dunmeyer. And of course, like a lot of people in the fifties, she adapted my dad's last name. She passed away a few years ago. My dad is still alive. He's roughly ninety. He's almost ninety-four. Still on his own, still driving, doing great.

00:01:33 James Wall: And what did Wayne, Sr. do?

00:01:35 Wayne Williams: Wayne, Sr., he originally worked for a paper company called Blake, Moffitt, & Towne. He was a salesman. And then he later went into becoming a insurance broker, independent insurance broker. And that's what he would retire from. He actually retired after I did. And my career was over forty years. His was over fifty, but he had his own business.

00:02:01 Wayne Williams:
My mother was at first, she was a stay-at-home mom and her hobby was ballet. So, she was in a semi-pro ballet company called the O'Patterny Company that was in the South Bay Area. And she would perform all the way up till, I think she was thirty-five or thirty-six years old, which back then in the sixties was pretty impressive for a ballerina to go that long.

00:02:32 Wayne Williams:
She was also quite athletic. She was a figure skater. I probably spent more time outdoors with her than I did with my dad because my dad, he worked a great deal.

00:02:50 James Wall:
Wow. And brothers and sisters?

00:02:52 Wayne Williams:
I have two real sisters and three stepsisters because both my parents got remarried later on in life. They divorced, and the divorce was very peaceful, you might say, and they got along quite well and they both got remarried, and so we sort of had an extended family from there.

00:03:19 James Wall:
Wow. So, you're the only boy.

00:03:20 Wayne Williams:
I am.

00:03:21 James Wall:
Now, did you get out in the woods when you were growing up? You said with your mom that she would take you out more.

00:03:26 Wayne Williams:
Yes. Both her and my dad, of course, they would. We lived very close to the Santa Cruz Mountains, which is a redwood forest. And so, that was sort of my first place that I did a lot of hiking. And of course, my parents, at first, introduced me to it. But as time went on, when I got into like junior high and high school—I think some people call junior high, "middle school"—I started just backpacking on my own with friends, and we would lean on our parents to drive us to trailheads.

00:04:04 Wayne Williams:
And eventually, they would be so kind as to drive us off to the Sierra Nevadas, to the big mountains, to go backpacking when we were in high school. And they would drop us off. Back then, parents were different. They would drop us off on the west side of the Sierras, and the four of us kids who were in high school at that time, we'd hike and do a Trans-Sierra trip and we'd pop out on the east side, and they'd pick us up ten days later. And our parents thought that was a good thing that we were out there carrying our food and our water on our backs and cooking

00:04:43 Wayne Williams:
for ourselves, sleeping out in the wild, doing navigation. And so, that's where I really got the "outdoor itch," you might say.

00:04:54 James Wall:
Now, you started real early. Well, actually, fire, a lot of people start fairly early. But how did you get into the fire business?

00:05:03 Wayne Williams:
Well, the way I got into it is that I didn't want to go to college. In fact, you'll find this funny, but I used to have nightmares about going to college, so I wanted to get right out to work right away. And so, I wanted pretty early in life to be a smokejumper. I had seen two television shows, one called "A Fire Called Jeremiah," which was a Disney film on jumping.

00:05:32 Wayne Williams:
And then I also saw the “Mutual of Omaha Wild Kingdom” that also did a show that focused on jumping. And the bottom line was that's what I wanted to do. So, I had to start at the bottom. And when I graduated from high school, I was able to get on a crew that was mainly conscientious objectors to the Vietnam War.

00:05:58 Wayne Williams:
They were people who were doing their alternative service and they were able to do that in California as firefighters. Most of them were from all over the United States. They were Quakers, Mennonites, Christians, draft dodgers, you name it. They were there doing their alternative service, and I was able to get in on those crews because the war was coming to an end.

00:06:22 Wayne Williams:
The Vietnam War, that was 1974, and those crews were thinning out and they were hiring, and they hired me at seventeen, figuring I'd be eighteen by the time fire season started.

00:06:36 James Wall:
And you yourself were not a conscientious objector, though?

00:06:40 Wayne Williams:
I was not. Interestingly enough, I was amongst all these conscientious objectors who are giving me all sorts of advice because my year was the last year of the draft. And a lot of people may not remember this, but they had a—I'm trying to remember what the term was. It's where they put your birthday into a—almost like playing bingo—and the first hundred birthdays that they pulled out of this this whatever would be the first hundred people who would be drafted.

00:07:28 Wayne Williams:
And so, if your birthday was after that hundred, then you weren't drafted. I guess you would call it a “lottery,” I guess is the best way to put it. And so, I was lucky. I was like 280 by time my birthday came up, but I probably would have been drafted anyway, just because at that point there were no longer any U.S. troops in Vietnam and North Vietnam was already taking over South Vietnam in 1974.

00:08:01 Wayne Williams:
But I had plenty of jailhouse lawyers, conscientious objectors, to advise me, nonetheless.

00:08:11 James Wall:
Did they convert you to the philosophy of pacifism and all that? Were they always trying to wax poetic about their beliefs, or were there some where it was like, “Do you really believe this? Or you just don't want to go, huh?”

00:08:26 Wayne Williams:
Well, at the end of the day, it was a variety of a lot of people. There were some people who it was definitely their philosophical or religious beliefs that they just simply

couldn't raise arms against another human. There were some who simply just got lucky and put in for a CO [conscientious objector status] and they got it.

00:08:46 Wayne Williams:
And then there were some who, like I said, were draft dodgers, and they were basically caught and by the FBI and they were given a choice by the judge: "You can either go fight fire in the state of California for two fire seasons or you can go to jail. The choice is yours." And so, most of them thought fighting fire might be a better deal.

00:09:07 James Wall:
So, that was 1974. And was that a couple of years?

00:09:10 Wayne Williams:
I worked for them for fourteen months. And then from there I got hired by the Eldorado National Forest. And it was a part of California Department of Forestry, which is now Cal Fire, but it was called the Ecology Corps, is what they called it. And it was a program that was started by the Reagan Administration because at that time he was governor of California.

00:09:38 Wayne Williams:
And so, we did a lot of really interesting things. It was not just wildland firefighting. We did a lot of timber stand improvement. We worked on Federal Forest Service property, like the Forest Service would hire our crews during the winter months to do lop and scatter, BD [brush disposal] crew-type work, piling, burning, things like that. So, it was a great place to get experience.

00:10:12 Wayne Williams:
And then, like I said, fourteen months later, I'd be hired by the Eldorado National Forest and already had this really good foundation because of the people I worked with and the places that I was able to go to work at.

00:10:31 James Wall:
Sounds like a good start. So, when you got on the Eldorado, so that must have been a seasonal, right?

00:10:40 Wayne Williams:
Yeah. So, that would be a seasonal job. And I got hired in the end of May, and there were two full-time people. It was an engine crew, and I was working on an engine that was called a "Model 40," is what they called it, and we had two Model 40's at the station. They were basically heavy duty pickup trucks with 200 gallons of water each.

00:11:10 Wayne Williams:
And they were sort of really handy because we were at like 6000 feet in the Sierra Nevadas, just east of Placerville, California, and west of Lake Tahoe. So, these trucks were kind of ideal. They were four-wheel drive, and they weren't huge trucks. But if you got two of them onto a fire, instead of one truck with 400 gallons, you had two trucks with 200 gallons, and it was a nice setup.

00:11:42 Wayne Williams:
And it also had more opportunity because they needed more. Back then they called the trucks, not engines, they called them "tankers," and they always needed what they called a "tank truck operator." And my second year on the Eldorado, I ended up being one of the tank truck operators. And that meant you stayed with the truck, and you operated the truck where the hose was laid and the water was delivered to the fire.

00:12:12 James Wall:
You remember who was running that crew?

00:12:14 Wayne Williams:
Yep, I do. It was a guy named Earl Trimble and another guy named Ron Hancock. And they were the two main crew guys. There were other people, but they were incredible mentors for me, particularly Earl. Earl taught me all sorts of stuff. He taught me how to fall timber correctly. He taught me how to do a Humboldt cut, a boring back cut.

00:12:46 Wayne Williams:
He taught me a great deal about how to drive vehicles. I knew how to drive a car, but I wasn't very good at backing up. I wasn't very good at using mirrors on both sides of a rig. I wasn't very good at driving big vehicles. And although Earl sometimes kind of hammered me a bit, he had enough patience that he taught me a lot of stuff.

00:13:07 Wayne Williams:
So, that second year as a firefighter when I worked for Cal Fire, I gained a bunch more experience from Earl and Ron on a lot of those things that most people don't think about as far as fighting fire. Like, another thing I learned was how to sharpen tools correctly and how to assess a fire. Because my first year as a firefighter, I was just kind of just trying to grasp the whole idea. The second year,

00:13:37 Wayne Williams:
Earl and Ron really brought me along, and there were other people there. There was a guy named Mike Logan, who was on some of the fires occasionally, and there was the District FMO [Fire Management Officer], Dick Allard, and another guy named Mike Pert. He was the Assistant Fire Management Officer. Those guys were sometimes on the fires, and they would take time and help you out, too. It was sort of like they were bringing up the community, and they'd been around for years and years and years.

00:14:15 Wayne Williams:
I know Earl is still alive and Ron is still alive. I think Dick Allard is still alive. I think Mike Pert is now no longer around. I think Mike works for the fire department, like a structure fire department outside of Sacramento or something.

00:14:31 James Wall:
Yeah. Did they give you a nickname?

00:14:34 Wayne Williams:
They did not give me a nickname, but I would get one when I became a jumper.

00:14:38 James Wall:
Yeah, a nickname is a badge of honor. But I was at the Hotshots Reunion, and they made the point that you would just get a nickname, usually from your crew boss or whatever. But if you fought the nickname, it would stick that much harder.

00:14:58 Wayne Williams:
[laughs] That's very true.

00:14:59 James Wall:
So, I'm sure it was the same with the smokejumpers. Now, at the time you're starting out on an engine crew. You said you always wanted to be a smokejumper, but at that time, were there such things as career smokejumpers? That might have been early. There might be a few, right?

00:15:18 Wayne Williams:
There were a few probably, but the term, “Ignorance is bliss.” I didn't know that. And of course, I wanted it so bad I would have done it as a seasonal too, because that's what I was, was a seasonal on the Eldorado. But I would end up—what was interesting, one of the beauties of working on these district crews, you're not tied to that engine.

00:15:48 Wayne Williams:
So, a lot of times we'd hike into fires and put them out. So, we might drive the engine as far as we could get on the trail, throw as much stuff on our back as we could, and we'd hike to the fire. And the other thing that I really appreciate about Earl and Ron is that they always had us cut fireline with hand tools to practice.

00:16:13 Wayne Williams:
No chainsaws. We'd use double-bit axes, we'd use brush hooks, bush hooks, McLeod's, pulaskis, and they wanted us to be proficient with hand tools. And we did a lot of practice with hand tools. And that was another thing. I got a lot of practice when I worked for Cal Fire, too. But I even got more practice when I started working on the Eldorado. The art of hand tools was still very prevalent in wildland firefighting back then, and although you might have one or two chainsaws on a fire, the majority of work was done by hand tools.

00:16:54 James Wall:
Yeah. Now, that was in the early days anyways, probably, of chainsaws. For a while, they were using these garbage, American-made chainsaws. I can’t remember. We interviewed Charlie Caldwell, I don’t know if you know him?

00:17:08 Wayne Williams:
Yeah. Yeah. Charlie's a great guy. He's still doing okay?

00:17:11 James Wall:
He's still alive, yeah.

00:17:11 Wayne Williams:
Yeah? Ok, good.

00:17:12 James Wall:
He's still working.

00:17:13 Wayne Williams:
Well, I used to always see him at the warehouse in Redding, California, when I'd go out there on booster crews. And I used to enjoy talking to him. He'd be sitting on a forklift, and we'd have these conversations in between him moving things back and forth.

00:17:27 James Wall:
He's a character. And I think he still works at Redding, or at that base, just because he...

00:17:33 Wayne Williams:
Oh, I bet he does.

00:17:34 James Wall:
He said he retired for like, I don't know, a week or something, and he just couldn't do it.

00:17:40 Wayne Williams:
I think that's great.

00:17:40 James Wall:
And then he was a sheriff and all this stuff. But yeah, he was the one who told me that he was sort of there when they first started using chainsaws, but they gave him... Initially, because there was this law that you couldn't buy foreign stuff, and they had to get a special dispensation because the chainsaws that they had were such crap.

00:18:00 Wayne Williams:
Homelites and McCullochs.

00:18:01 James Wall:
Homelite. Yeah. And they just really were not up to snuff.

00:18:06 Wayne Williams:
And they got worse, too. What was interesting, I remember having this conversation with Charlie about those early chainsaws. When McCulloch and Homelite first started on the scene with the Forest Service, their chainsaws were actually decent. They may not have had any sort of vibrating reduction on them, but they were decent saws. But as time went on, by the time you got into the late seventies, both companies, they were trash. And we'd see these Husqvarnas and these Stihls that were beautiful saws that had dampening handles and the exhaust was in certain areas that it would keep it away from you.

00:18:42 Wayne Williams:
They were well thought-out saws. And what eventually put it over the edge—because everybody got sick and tired of doing these special forms in order to buy these things—eventually Stihl started building chainsaws in the United States. And then we could get them. GSA [General Services Administration] would them. And to this day— I still have a Stihl out my garage—to this day, I still think the—although "Huskies" [Husqvarna] are in general, a pretty powerful saw, maybe more powerful than a Stihl.

00:19:15 Wayne Williams:
You can just abuse a Stihl and it'll just keep chugging. It'll just keep chugging. It may not be the fastest saw, but you don't have to baby it.

00:19:23 James Wall:
But initially, you had one to two: the rest of the time, you're using hand tools.

00:19:28 Wayne Williams:
Right.

00:19:30 James Wall:
Getting the lay of the land that way. Did you get good at sawing trees? Did you take a turn as a sawyer?

00:19:36 Wayne Williams:
I did. That was another good thing about Earl and Ron is that they would rotate that. There were obviously people who are better at sawing than I was, but in general, they always would rotate us in to keep us somewhat fresh. And I was better at using bow bars in brush than falling trees in the beginning. But towards the end I got better at falling trees towards the end of my career. And of course, the bow bar became a tool that was sort of, it wasn't necessarily, it was just sort of struck from the inventory because a lot of people thought it was really unsafe.

00:20:21 Wayne Williams:
And I don't know if you know what they were, but they're a big bow. So, the chain is on a big bow and there's a stinger at the end of that bow. And you would use that stinger to lock in whatever you were sawing for brush. So, you could really just go into a pile of brush with a bow bar.

00:20:40 Wayne Williams:
And the bow bar was open inside. It wasn't a solid bow: it had an opening. So, as soon as you push that bow bar into the brush, the opening will allow that brush to flop out after you saw it. And it would flop off to either side, and the stinger would just kind of keep you at bay, sort of guiding you along.

00:21:01 Wayne Williams:
And a lot of people didn't like kind of the wildness of the bow bar. But I did. I thought it was a great tool. To this day. I still think it's the best way to saw brush.

00:21:11 James Wall:
Wow. So, what happened? You were a tanker operator and then how did you work your way up from there off the Eldorado crew?

00:21:22 Wayne Williams:
Well, so always in the background, I was applying for jumping jobs in every state that there were jump bases. Because back then to become a jumper, on paper, all you needed was one season of fire and one season of general, which could be anything. And so, once I had worked for Cal Fire, I actually was qualified to put the applications in.

00:21:55 Wayne Williams:
So, I put in an application in 1975 and was turned down. So, I went back to work for the Eldorado. I put in an application in 1976 and I was turned down. And I was getting ready to go work for the Stanislaus National Forest because I wanted to beef up my application, so I would be a little more desirable for the people who were reading the applications at smokejumper bases.

00:22:29 Wayne Williams:
So, I wanted to get on a Hotshot crew. So, I got a job on the Stanislaus National Forest. And the idea was is I would be a tank truck operator, but they would allow me to work on the hotshot crew also. So, I was going to do that. And then, all of a sudden, I get a letter in the mail—because back then everything was done by mail—and it said: "You have been chosen to try out as a rookie as a Missoula Smokejumper."

00:23:01 Wayne Williams:
And this was

00:23:02 Wayne Williams:
in 1976, 1977. And because I'd already been turned down by all the bases and all of a sudden, I get this. And it just shocked me. It floored me. So, I lived in a cabin with a friend of mine that was sort of off-the-grid and I didn't own a car back then. And so, the guy who I was living with, he drove me down to the highway because there was a dirt road up to this cabin.

00:23:40 Wayne Williams:
And he drove me to the highway, and I hitchhiked down to the Bay Area, and then from the San Francisco Bay Area, I jumped on a freight train outside of Oakland. I didn't have any money, I had 200 bucks to my name. I took that freight train all the way to Portland. And in Portland I hopped another train to Spokane. And then from Spokane

00:24:07 Wayne Williams:
I hopped the wrong train, and I ended up in Whitefish and I was trying to get to Missoula. But that was sort of—hopping freight trains back then was not a was not a weird thing. It was ingrained in the culture. People who were working on the trains didn't care. It wasn't a weird thing

00:24:30 Wayne Williams:
like it would be considered now, where it would be considered some sort of a security risk. It was a way that people got around. And I ended up in Whitefish, but I was a lucky guy. My great uncle lived in Whitefish, and I called him from a payphone just outside of the train yard. And I said, “Ralph, I'm in Whitefish.”

00:24:56 Wayne Williams:
And he was a guy who wasn't short for words. And he goes, “What the hell are you doing in Whitefish?” And I said, “I got accepted at the Smokejumper Center, and I got to be down there in two weeks for training.” He says, “Well, you're welcome to stay with me and I'll drive you down there once you're ready for training.”

00:25:16 Wayne Williams:
And I said, “Great.” So, I would stay with my great uncle and my great aunt. He was quite an interesting guy. He also was a blue-collar worker. He was electrician. He started as electrician, a civilian electrician during the Second World War, wiring boats at Treasure Island in the San Francisco Bay. So, if boats came in, they either needed maintenance, or if new boats were being outfitted, he would be part of the crews that would wire the boats.

00:25:50 Wayne Williams:
And he was pretty interesting. He told me that living in San Francisco Bay Area during the Second World War, where there were hardly any men, his roommate was a Buddhist monk, and it was a really interesting combination between the two. But he said it was great. He just said there weren't that many men. He said it was easy to meet women and it was just a good time in his life.

00:26:12 Wayne Williams:
And I really enjoyed his stories. He traveled all over the United States.

00:26:19 James Wall:
How did he end up in Whitefish, of all places?

00:26:21 Wayne Williams:
He ended up in Whitefish because he was originally from—I hope I got this right—he was originally from Yakima, Washington, and he always wanted to settle back in the Northwest, where he was from. And so, him and his wife, who was also from Yakima, my great aunt, they bought some land in Whitefish in the 1960s, and they were just going to build a place there.

00:26:51 Wayne Williams:
And that's what they did. And then he would die like a year later. And then my great aunt moved down to San Diego and she went back to school. She was quite a character. They were both characters. But like I said, he drove me down to the jump base and he dropped me off out in front.

00:27:14 Wayne Williams:
And I went in with my backpack: all I had was a backpack and a unicycle to my name.

00:27:21 James Wall:
Who was running the training program when you were going through it?

00:27:26 Wayne Williams:
Well, there were several people, but the person who really stands out, the two trainers who really stand out, was Lowell Hanson, Bill Meadows, Larry Fite, Walt Curry, kind of taken deep here. There was another Walt, and I can't remember his last name. I feel stupid. Walt Smith was his name. And then there was Lloyd Whittaker. He particularly was a real help when I was young. A guy named Gary Youngquist, another real helpful guy.

00:28:16 Wayne Williams:
But those were the guys who were—oh, and a guy named Steve Claremont. Those were the main guys that I remember in my rookie class.

00:28:27 James Wall:
Yeah. And Missoula has the historical aspect to it. It really is kind of the original smokejumping place.

00:28:36 Wayne Williams:
I call it “Old Rome.” [chuckles]

00:28:38 James Wall:
Did it feel really cool to start out in Missoula as opposed to one of the newer bases or things like that? That this was kind of—obviously with Mann Gulch and all that stuff—it has this strange, interesting history. Or were you just happy to have…

00:28:58 Wayne Williams:
Well…

00:28:58 James Wall:
The gig?

00:28:59 Wayne Williams:
I was kind of ignorant about the history of the smokejumping bases. So, when I came to Missoula, I was not aware that Missoula and North Cascades were the first two bases, operational bases. I wasn't aware of it. And I didn't have a great deal of knowledge about Mann Gulch either. I knew of Mann Gulch just barely because it was used as examples

00:29:24 Wayne Williams:
in some of the fire refresher classes that I had on the Eldorado, but in general, I didn't know a great deal. But once I got to Missoula, the feeling that you were referring to, I felt. And what I remember is that when I went into the lobby of the dormitory, there were all these photographs, basically a timeline of the Missoula Smokejumper Base.

00:29:51 Wayne Williams:
And they weren't necessarily photographs of just people, there were aircraft, there were parachutes, there were the countryside, there were fires, and they're all black and white, and they were all over the place. And the other thing I remember, and I don't know what ever happened to this, but they had an old wood phone booth in that dormitory lobby that they must have got somewhere from downtown Missoula, like maybe one of the old hotels or whatever.

00:30:24 Wayne Williams:
But there it was. And there was no more comfortable place to sit to talk to your family than that phone booth. And I never knew what happened to it, but the whole thing was made out of wood, hardwood. And the other thing I remember that I thought was so cool about the jump bases was they all had their own kitchens that were not just industrial food that you might get in a prison or a high school.

00:30:50 Wayne Williams:
But they were like, for instance, the person who was the main chef at our kitchen, there was a guy named Jess. I don't remember his last name, but Jess used to run a restaurant in town, and I don't know for what reason, but he ended up running our dormitory kitchen. And we had three squares a day, seven days a week.

00:31:18 Wayne Williams:
And he had a crew in there. And he was a very skilled butcher as well. So, I remember he used to go down the Bitterroot and get a half a side of beef and bring it back to the base. And he would saw it up into pieces and the meat was so fresh. And he'd get fresh seafood.

00:31:43 Wayne Williams:
And we always had seafood like on Fridays, which is such a tradition, from the 1960s and the 1970s. Kind of interesting. We had seafood on Fridays. Everybody would always look forward to that. He always would make omelets to your liking in the morning. Their thing that was very interesting is that all the other federal employees that were in town would come out there and and eat. And the rookies were always at the end of the chow line.

00:32:15 Wayne Williams:
So, of course, it was the rank-and-file jumpers who were in the very front of the chow line. And then it was the employees from other Forest Service offices, and then the rookies, us, at the very end. Literally, we would be outside the dorm, is where our section of line would start. And then all along the inside of the dorm, all the way to the kitchen, was the line.

00:32:38 Wayne Williams:
That's how big it was. And it would operate for a long time. That's the sad thing that those kitchens went away. Just a sad thing. It was just incredible. No matter what

jumper base you would go to, they had those kitchens, and it was just such a great tradition. It's just too bad.

00:32:59 James Wall:
Now, how many people crapped out of your training program?

00:33:03 Wayne Williams:
That's a good question. Let me think. I think we started roughly with about fifty because back then we had pretty big rookie classes, and I think we ended up with just a little over thirty.

00:33:18 James Wall:
And what was the hardest part of the training? The physical fitness tests and stuff like that? The running?

00:33:24 Wayne Williams:
The physical fitness test wasn't that tough for a young guy. But the all-night dig and pack-out where you would start digging fire line at two in the afternoon. You would dig it all night long, and then at seven in the morning, they would just throw a bunch of stuff in front of you with a pack board.

00:33:46 Wayne Williams:
And a lot of people in the Forest Service don't even know pack boards are, but it was just two chunks of hardwood with a piece of canvas strung between the chunks of hardwood, and then a steel frame reinforcing the hardwood to the straps. And then basically they wanted us to throw a bunch of stuff into these bags and arrange it just right.

00:34:13 Wayne Williams:
It was over a hundred pounds of stuff and you would have to string it. There are these hooks on these backboards where you just string back and forth, back and forth, back and forth, with parachute cord and then tie it off at the bottom. And they wouldn't give you any instructions or nothing. You just had to figure it out. Now, luckily, I'd done a lot of backpacking and I always knew you always want to put the heaviest shit at the bottom.

00:34:41 Wayne Williams:
The heaviest stuff needs to be at the bottom, the lighter stuff up top. And the thing was there was so much stuff that it was way above your head. 105, 110 pounds of stuff. And we did like a, I want to say it was like a three-and-a-half mile course over hill and dale with people screaming at you to go faster. And so, I'd say that was probably the hardest part.

00:35:05 Wayne Williams:
And the units weren't exactly easy, they ran you through each one of the ground school units for jumping. So, you had the obstacle course. Then after that, you might have the letdowns. Then you might have the landing simulator, then the exit tower. And then you would have what they called, "the mockups," and you would go through those at a really

fast pace. And sometimes you would do the—usually what they would do, and it was absolute torture—

00:35:42 Wayne Williams:
they would have you do those units in the morning, and it was all fast-paced. You ran from one unit to the next. And then the obstacle course was just a really hard obstacle course. And I don't know if they use that much anymore, but of course it was a great tool to sort of weed people out because you had to be sort of physically fit from top to bottom to do well in the obstacle course.

00:36:06 Wayne Williams:
If you didn't have upper body strength, or if you weren't that fast down below, obstacle course would weed that out. But anyhow, they would have us do that in the mornings and then we'd go and eat that huge meal in that kitchen. And then we had to go to the classrooms and go through our fire behavior classes and fuel things and everything else and tools.

00:36:35 Wayne Williams:
And you're in a classroom, and it's warm in there, and you just had this huge meal, and you've worked like a dog earlier in the morning. And if you fell asleep, they always threatened us that they would fire us right there on the spot. Now, they never did. But there were so many times where I was nodding off and just slapping myself to stay awake. Because sometimes you're getting a lecture on the different helicopters they use on fire.

00:37:00 Wayne Williams:
And you already had a pretty good idea of what they were? You know, you get a little tiring.

00:37:04 James Wall:
Yeah. What type of equipment did they have? What type of parachute were you jumping with back then?

00:37:11 Wayne Williams:
I started with the FS-10, but I was fortunate enough to jump the 5A in my timber jump, which was the predecessor to the FS-10.

00:37:30 James Wall:
And where did they have y'all jump? You were still jumping in Missoula at that time, right? They hadn't moved people out to Ninemile. That was way later, right?

00:37:40 Wayne Williams:
Yeah, yeah. Ninemile actually happened while I was still jumping. But the very first place we jumped as rookies was right out at—and they don't do it anymore because it's just too crowded—but it was out at Blue Mountain, that big meadow out at Blue Mountain. That's where we did our first jump, and then we also did our reserve

deployment jump out there, where you jump on a main parachute. And then you wouldn't break away from your main.

00:38:07 Wayne Williams:
You would keep it inflated, but you would manually throw out your reserve. So, you would be under two parachutes. And it's a little hard to steer, so you need a big space. But they wanted us to get the feeling of what it was like to be under two canopies, or at least to be aware of that reserve parachute and where it was when it opened.

00:38:30 Wayne Williams:
I'm not so sure if they do reserve deployments anymore in training. And yeah, those were both at Blue Mountain. And then we would jump around town, sometimes we would jump just west of town in the Lolo National Forest. Sometimes we would jump up towards Arlee a little bit. Sometimes we would jump out by Ninemile.

00:38:59 Wayne Williams:
There were a couple of spots there that they had been using for years and years and years. And then we would do a water jump, too. And I'm not sure if they do water jumps anymore either, but the water jump was out at... Oh, is it called Frog Pond, or... It's just that pond west of town, right off the interstate.

00:39:25 Wayne Williams:
I can't remember the name of it, but that's where we...

00:39:29 James Wall:
Yeah, I think I know what you're talking about.

00:39:30 Wayne Williams:
Yeah. And then we also did water jumps out by Ninemile, too. There was a pond out there that we did water jumps. And the Holiday Inn Hotel—I always thought this was really cool—the Holiday Inn Hotel used to allow us to practice our water jumps in their swimming pool. Now, the Holiday Inn used to be...

00:39:53 Wayne Williams:
It's a different hotel now, but it's right on the corner of Mullan and Broadway on the right, kind of next to McDonald's and all that. But that was the closest hotel to the jump base that had a pool. And they would let us, even when they had customers and stuff. I don't know, maybe it was a selling point.

00:40:13 Wayne Williams:
But, you know, we threw all our parachutes into the water. Because there's an art, sort of, if you do a water jump, sometimes the parachute can flop over your head. So, you have to calmly be able to get that thing over your head. And then you need to break away from the parachute, but not have it sink. You don't want to lose it.

00:40:30 Wayne Williams:
So, you had to learn how to do that correctly. And then you had to learn how to backstroke with your jump gear on. And the reserve, although it was getting wet, it acted as a flotation device. And the jump gear acted as flotation because the jumpsuit was insulated with this sort of synthetic rubberized compound.

00:41:02 Wayne Williams:
I think it was called "Insulite," is what they called it. They used to use it for backpacking, for sleeping on top of, I think it was called "Insulite," but I might be wrong. But that was sort of what the jumpsuit was lined with, and you would just backstroke. And we would do that in the Holiday Inn Hotel pool.

00:41:18 Wayne Williams:
And all the people who were staying, they'd sit out there drinking beer, watching us do this, it was just funny. But yeah, I'd end up getting about five or six water jumps in my career. I always thought it was a good thing to do, myself. But they were all practice water jumps.

00:41:38 James Wall:
So, the smokejumpers have a reputation for partying. That's no secret.

00:41:44 Wayne Williams:
Yeah, I think most firefighters do.

00:41:46 James Wall:
Hotshots and smokejumpers, for sure. And Missoula in particular. And I don't know if you know Barry Hicks. He was probably…

00:41:55 Wayne Williams:
Oh, yeah, I know him very well.

00:41:56 James Wall:
Five or six years before you. We did a podcast episode with Linda [Hicks], and she would talk about—there was a bar, and no one else that I've interviewed, maybe Jeff knew it—but it was called the Paddock Bar. You remember that?

00:42:12 Wayne Williams:
The Paddock?

00:42:13 James Wall:
She said The Paddock Bar. Maybe she misremembered it. But there was essentially a bar, it was *the* smokejumper bar in town that they would go to.

00:42:21 Wayne Williams:
I always thought it was the Heidelhaus.

00:42:23 James Wall:
Oh, really? Yeah. She had said—this was in the 1960s.

00:42:26 Wayne Williams:
Yeah. That was way before my time.

00:42:27 James Wall:
And it was called The Paddock Bar, she said. And there was almost kind of an understanding because Barry would always be out at the bar. But then if you would call the bar, you would be like, "Is Barry there?" The bartenders would say, "No, he was just here, but he's not here anymore." Or, "Yeah, we've never seen Barry." He's right there.

00:42:45 James Wall:
So, what were the off-hours like in the training? And when you're in Missoula and you're not jumping.

00:42:54 Wayne Williams:
Right.

00:42:55 James Wall:
I have a lot of stories I've heard of people who were at a bar having a really good time, and the phone call comes, and then you've got a jump coming up. [laughs]

00:43:06 Wayne Williams:
Right. That's happened to us all.

00:43:07 James Wall:
Was that part of the culture back then, was hitting the bars after a long day? And as we often hear?

00:43:17 Wayne Williams:
Yeah. That happened less to me than maybe some of the—not that I don't like to drink, I do—but there's only been a couple of times where I got caught like that. And in this time of "wokeness," it was usually because I was at a bar, but I was drinking less and trying to meet women more.

00:43:43 Wayne Williams:
And so, I sometimes would be at somebody else's house when I'd get that call.

[Recording Paused]

00:43:59 James Wall:
So, yeah, things were going along and occasionally you were at the bar, but mostly talking to ladies and getting through. Now, when you got through training, where they start—I'm assuming you're jumping all over, right?

00:44:16 Wayne Williams:
Right. So, our rookie training I think lasted for six weeks. We had seven practice jumps and then I think my very first fire, interestingly enough, it wasn't a jump.

00:44:33 Wayne Williams:
It's the last thing that a smokejumper rookie wants to do, but it's what happened to me. The Pattee Canyon fire started outside of town here. And we didn't load up on an airplane. We loaded up on a green bus and drove there and we, the term we used, "pounded the fire." We walked into the fire because a lot of homes were at risk, and they wanted resources, and they wanted them fast.

00:45:01 Wayne Williams:
So, that was my very first fire as a smokejumper. And that's where I met Jeff Kinderman and met a lot of the smokejumpers that were the rank-and-file because I'd been sort of in with all the rookies at that time. And I met another guy named Bruce Ford, and they had just come back from New Mexico and that sort of got me this bug about this enchanted place to jump down in Silver City, New Mexico, that they talked about.

00:45:34 Wayne Williams:
But yeah, no, that was my first fire. My first jump fire was in Yellowstone National Park.

[Recording Paused]

00:45:46 Wayne Williams:
Yeah, it was in Yellowstone National Park in a huge meadow. We jumped at first light. I remember there were a bunch of elk in the meadow. I think the fire was about five acres. We put sixteen people on it and we jumped out of the DC-3. And I remember the Assistant Spotter was Larry Eisenman, who was the Base Manager at that time.

00:46:13 James Wall:
So, was it different than training?

00:46:17 Wayne Williams:
It is.

00:46:17 James Wall:
Because you are at that time when you're training, you weren't jumping on to fires, right?

00:46:24 Wayne Williams:
No, you're just doing practice jumps.

00:46:25 James Wall:
Do you see the fire when you're jumping towards it?

00:46:28 Wayne Williams:
Yeah. Yeah.

00:46:29 James Wall:
And the smoke? That's a different sensation, I guess.

00:46:31 Wayne Williams:
Well, it's kind of interesting. Because as the plane is flying, it's going towards the coordinates of the fire. So, the first thing you see, of course, is the smoke. Then once you get to the fire, then the Spotter and the Assistant Spotter are assessing where to put the jumpers. And they're talking this over with the jumper who is going to be in charge of the crew.

00:46:52 Wayne Williams:
So, the three of them are in the front of the door and the plane is circling around and they look for a jump spot. They agree on it, and then the spotter starts throwing streamers out to figure out what the wind's doing. And one of the reasons why we used to jump so early was because it was the best time of day to jump because there were hardly any wind. And there was no wind in this case.

00:47:12 Wayne Williams:
The biggest hazard were all these elk that were in this meadow. And this meadow must have been about a hundred acres. It was huge. Great place for your first fire jump. But it was just interesting jumping out of the plane and seeing these, well, they were spots at first, and then eventually, start making them out, they're elk. And they're moving because they're just not quite sure about, "What's this stuff falling out of the sky?"

00:47:37 Wayne Williams:
And there's no real way we can kind of shoo them out of the jump spot before we land. Eventually they get the idea because they would go to the sides of the meadow. Well, it was just interesting. That was really my first obstacle in a jump spot were elk.

00:47:56 James Wall:
Yeah. And so, that was a relatively benign, small fire. Good one to start on.

00:48:01 Wayne Williams:
It was a really good one to start on.

00:48:02 James Wall:
And an easy jump, outside of the elk. So, then over the years, so you've stuck, based out of Missoula but then jumped all over. But that's a Forest Service luxury. Usually they move you around, base to base to base. And a lot of jumpers jump for BLM [Bureau of Land Management], jump for the Forest Service. You were here. So, how did that work out? After a couple of seasons, did they start to… Every year, you know that they're going to keep bringing you back and bringing you back? Or was it sort of like, "Well, I might be doing this next summer. I'm not sure?"

00:48:41 Wayne Williams:
No, I wanted to do it for the rest of my working career. There was no doubt in my mind about that. And the reason why I stayed in Missoula was because Missoula had the most

opportunity than the other bases did. And I also got an appointment my second year as a jumper in Missoula. So, that was another reason. Missoula used to give people appointments.

00:49:04 Wayne Williams:
They weren't the greatest appointments, but they were "6 & 20's," and I got it my second year and that certainly was a good enough reason to stick around Missoula. But the opportunity in Missoula was just way better. They had way more details because the base was so large that we could spare people to leave the region and still be able to cover the region.

00:49:27 Wayne Williams:
So as an example, we had the sub-base in Silver City, New Mexico. We had a detail up in Alaska that were two regular details, and then we would always boost the other bases because we had the numbers to do it. So, I pretty much got to jump out of almost every base and even some of the bases that don't exist anymore, like La Grande and Cave Junction.

00:49:52 Wayne Williams:
I got jumps out of there. I had two jumps out of Cave Junction, one jump out of La Grande, a jump out of Boise when it was a Forest Service base. Now, of course, it's a BLM base. And yeah, so I felt pretty fortunate that I was able to jump out of every base. I got quite a few jumps out of Silver City, New Mexico, over, pretty close to... Fire jumps,

00:50:23 Wayne Williams:
I think I got close to sixty-some. And then I had more if you include the practice jumps or the rescue jumps. That was my favorite place to jump. I really enjoyed the Southwest because it was very challenging.

00:50:40 James Wall:
Why is that?

00:50:41 Wayne Williams:
The reason why Southwest is challenging is that there's usually no jump spots to speak of. There's usually always wind. There's usually rocks. And there's usually high altitude, where like if you jump... There's tough jump country also in places like North Cascades, there's tough jump country, there's tough jump country, Cave Junction. Redmond. There's tough jump country in Redding.

00:51:07 Wayne Williams:
But they may not have all those things coming at you at once. So, they might have a really tight jump spot or no jump spot. They might have tall timber, they might have high altitude, they might have a lot of those things. But you can almost bank in the Southwest you would have always those things: high altitude, high winds, no jump spot, rocky conditions, almost every single jump.

00:51:32 Wayne Williams:
So, I don't know. I liked it. I like the fact that it was challenging. I liked the fact—and they don't do this much anymore—we used to have a term that we used down there. We didn't screw around. It was sort of like we would throw out one set of streamers and see what those streamers did, knowing that there were thunder cells in the area.

00:51:52 Wayne Williams:
And what we might say is, "Well that those streamers missed the spot by a hundred yards, move the plane over a hundred yards, we'll go." And we used this other term that was called, "Roll your own," which they don't like to use anymore. But what it meant was there's enough openings down there. There's not like a general jump spot, like a meadow or what you might call an opening.

00:52:15 Wayne Williams:
But there were big enough places for you to stick your two feet into or to stick your canopy into. And I used to like that. I used to like when they say, "Yeah, it's a 'roll your own,' anywhere in that general area where those streamers were," and to me that was a good thing. When you had like, "That's your spot," to me, that was… I like the more abstract way of jumping.

00:52:37 James Wall:
So, how long after you started jumping did you feel confident in jumping? How many seasons did it take before the door would open on the plane and you'd say, "Alright, I got this"?

00:52:57 Wayne Williams:
I would say somewhere between 1979 and 1980. So, like my third, fourth year.

00:53:13 James Wall:
So, at that point you'd had enough jumps, you had seen enough that not much was going to surprise you. Is that accurate?

00:53:20 Wayne Williams:
Well, and there were a couple of unique jumps that came up, too. Like, for instance, in 1979, I came back from New Mexico early and there weren't a lot of people who were qualified in Region One yet to be jumpers. They were going through training at that time. And you probably heard about this, and Jeff Kinderman was on this as well, but a DC-3, Forest Service

00:53:42 Wayne Williams:
DC-3 crashed in the Selway [Bitterroot Wilderness]. And that was like my third year. 1977, 1978, yeah, my third year. And in a lot of ways the only people who jumped on that were mainly overhead because they had already trained, and then a few of us who had returned from Silver City, Jeff Kinderman being one of them. We both drove back together from Silver City because the activity down there was real slow and we'd end up jumping this plane wreck on both sides of the Selway River.

00:54:14 Wayne Williams:
It was sixteen people in a DC-3, put eight on one side, eight on the other. There were no jump spots. It was definitely a "roll your own." And the Nez Perce [National Forest] can be a challenging place to jump. And I really do think that that was the one jump that put me over the edge to where I felt better because I jumped with this thing that stuck out this far and it was this deep and it was insulated with glass saline solution bottles in it because we were jumping with a lot of rescue gear.

00:54:51 Wayne Williams:
And of course, we didn't know how bad it was down there. I think there were three survivors out of… And one would die. There were three survivors and two dogs. And the two dogs survived. And eventually one of the survivors died on the scene. Everybody else died. So basically, at the end of the day, there were two humans and two canines that survived that wreck, and everybody else died.

00:55:24 Wayne Williams:
And I think it was roughly twelve people died or something.

00:55:28 James Wall:
And you were jumping as a rescue operation shortly after the plane had gone down.

00:55:34 Wayne Williams:
It went missing and no one knew where it was. And what I remember specifically about that day, it was the day that John Wayne died. It was just kind of a weird thing. On the news, it said John Wayne had died. And I remembered that it was odd. But it was a strange day to begin with because being I had already trained and come back from New Mexico, we were sort of like doing whatever was needed to help with the training.

00:56:06 Wayne Williams:
And all of a sudden, Bill Meadows, I remember this. He was one of the foremen that I mentioned earlier in the rookie training. Bill comes up to me and he handed me two water bottles and he looks kind of concerned and he says, "Will you fill these up for me?" And I said, "Yeah, yeah, sure." So, I went to go fill up these water bottles.

00:56:24 Wayne Williams:
I brought them back to him and he goes, "You might want to go fill a couple up for yourself." And I said, "What the hell is going on?" He says, "Well, a Forest Service DC-3 is missing. We don't know where it is. The last time they heard from it, it was someplace near Grangeville [Idaho] and it was flying into Moose Creek [Ranger Station] and we haven't heard from it."

00:56:44 Wayne Williams:
We don't know where it is. No one knows where it is. I think we're going to take you guys who came back from New Mexico to help with this." And so, well, all of a sudden, I'm running around and thinking, "God, this is weird. I'm jumping on a plane crash. This is different."

00:57:01 James Wall:
And so, are they flying you around looking for this plane, essentially, on the Nez Perce?

00:57:08 Wayne Williams:
So, what was interesting, the DC-3 that we were on, looking for the other DC-3...

00:57:13 James Wall:
Which, that's got to be surreal because you're looking for a DC-3 that crashed and you're on a DC-3 that's also a Forest Service plane. That's got to be a little eerie.

00:57:24 Wayne Williams:
Right. It was a contract ship, and of course the one that crashed was a Forest Service-owned ship. So, what the DC-3 did is that the pilots brought it in to what was the last known location of the DC-3. And then we flew up the Selway. That's kind of what I remember. I might be a little wrong like that, but that's kind of what I remember, is that they were they were trying to copy the flight path, the last known flight path of that aircraft.

00:57:53 Wayne Williams:
And then also I remember Larry Eisenman, he was on board, and I think Larry was spotting, but I might be wrong. Maybe he jumped, too. I know Lowell Hansen was on board and he did jump. Maybe Larry was spot. No, I think Larry did jump, too. I can't remember. But whatever the case was... Yeah, Larry did jump because now I remember. They saw the plane and it was in pieces and they would end up, I think they jumped a couple of people first and they would go to one part of the wreckage of the DC-3.

00:58:30 Wayne Williams:
You guys need to interview Larry Eisenman because I know he's still alive. And I think Larry and somebody else had used a Pulaski to cut open the fuselage to look for people. And then I think later on they actually—and I don't know if they've spotted this from the aircraft, I just don't remember—but they spotted some people actually moving a little ways from the wreckage and they jumped eight guys there.

00:59:00 Wayne Williams:
And then the rest of us jumped on the other side of the river to build a helispot. And most of us jumped with the medical supplies. That's why I jumped with all that glass of saline. that thing must have weighed close to fifty pounds, probably, and it stuck out like this. And I remember they told me to hang up in a tree and rappel out, and that's what I did.

00:59:26 Wayne Williams:
I hung up in this big ponderosa, purposely rappelled out with this big, huge thing. None of those bottles broke. They all made it safe and sound. And when we got to the side, I grabbed the saw and start helping cutting out the helispot. Meanwhile, they were working on the injured. There were two injured people. One was fading fast and then there was a third who had gone for help with his dog.

00:59:55 Wayne Williams:
And he'd gone up the river. So, eventually what happened was, is they wanted—because I was a fast hiker—they wanted me to hike up the trail to see if I could tie in with the person who had left to go to Moose Creek, the survivor who had left with his dog. And they wanted me. So, they gave me a radio and told me to start hiking up the trail.

01:00:23 Wayne Williams:
So, I started hiking up the trail. Meanwhile, they're continuing building the helispot. They're trying to figure out a way of getting supplies over to the survivors.

01:00:34 James Wall:
At the same time, are people encountering the people who didn't make it, the corpses and things like that?

01:00:40 Wayne Williams:
No. Interestingly enough, we didn't find those people until either the next day or the day after. My memory is a little vague and I'll tell you a little bit about that. But no, we didn't find any bodies right away. And so, what happened was I started hiking up the trail and I didn't get more than maybe a mile-and-a-half up the trail.

01:01:02 Wayne Williams:
And I was moving. I was like in a little sprint. I get a call on the radio, and they said, "Hey, we need you to come back. The guy, the survivor who left to Moose Creek just got there. So, we know where he is and he's safe and sound. So why don't you just come back, help out?"

01:01:21 Wayne Williams:
And he goes, "In fact, could you help us? What we need is a boat to move back and forth between the two spots: the survivor spot and the survivors' helispot." And there were a lot of riverboats going down the river. There was a company called ARTA, American River Touring Association. And so, they were training their boatmen and they were going down the river.

01:01:50 Wayne Williams:
So, I decided, "What the hell?" So, I just got out there and I was above the spot that they needed the boat. And I just kind of waved this boat down and they pulled over. And like I said, it was a bunch of people getting ready, river boatmen who were practicing, getting ready for the season.

01:02:17 Wayne Williams:
And they're from all over the United States where there were rivers. And so, I told them what was going on and they said, "Yeah, yeah, we'll help." back then people didn't question that stuff. It was no big deal. nowadays I don't know what would have happened. They said, "Yeah, yeah, get in the boat."

01:02:33 Wayne Williams:
So, I call on the radio and I said, “Yeah, I got a boat. We're heading down there,” because they couldn't land the helicopter on the other side. So, we had to somehow move those people over. So, the boat came down, and I kept looking at the main river guy who was paddling, and he looked really familiar. And it would be an hour later, but I figured out where I’d saw him. He had picked me up hitchhiking in California, months before.

01:03:03 James Wall:
Small world.

01:03:03 Wayne Williams:
Yeah. Isn't that a small world? It was the craziest thing. But anyhow, those guys got down there. They dropped me off on the helispot side of the river. And then we rigged up this system where those guys were incredibly helpful, moving stuff back and forth. So, what we ended up doing is—one guy died on the other side, his internal injuries just did him in—and Jeff Kinderman and I remember Lowell Hansen were working on that guy, trying to keep him alive.

01:03:33 Wayne Williams:
The other guy survived. The other survivor was okay. And so basically, we used the boats to move the deceased person across, and we used the boat to move the person who was injured but stable, okay. And we got him over to the helispot side. And then the helicopter that came in, I think it was the forest helicopter.

01:04:03 Wayne Williams:
But anyhow, so I think that's how we got the survivor out and also got the deceased out, was with the forest helicopter. And then I want to say the next day, a… And then the survivor who was up at Moose Creek, he flew out on a single engine aircraft with his dog. We would find a dog, that night we found a dog that belonged to one of the deceased that we had not found yet.

01:04:35 Wayne Williams:
And it had a broken pelvis. And we put that dog in a fire shelter. And we, because we didn’t have a lot of like luxury stuff with us, but for some damn reason we had fire shelters. Put that dog in a fire shelter and we built a fire. And I remember it was Duffy was the name of the guy who had found the dog, a really kind man to begin with, just a real humanitarian kind of guy.

01:05:08 Wayne Williams:
In fact, he would later on do the eulogy at the Mann Gulch Memorial in 1991, just to give you an idea of his where his heart was. But he pretty much stayed up all night with that dog and kept that dog warm and alive. And then the next morning, another helicopter came in and I think it was a National Guard ship,

01:05:29 Wayne Williams:
but I might be wrong. And they hauled the dog out. And I want to say a vet at a veterinarian clinic in Grangeville adopted the dog, and the dog lived. And then it would be, maybe not the next day, but the day after… The next day, they flew out a lot of the overhead that were on that rescue to go back, help with training and they just left a few of us to look for the deceased because at that point we figured we weren't going to find anybody alive. And we would pull bodies out of the water for the next five days.

01:06:06 Wayne Williams:
And we had the help of the sheriff's department and their frogmen or whatever you want to, they flew in. And we found bodies in different spots along the river. We found everybody within a week except for, I believe it was the pilot, and he'd be found downriver several months later. And the thing that was so interesting about that wreck is that the pilot almost pulled it off.

01:06:40 Wayne Williams:
He had found a straightaway in the river where he was trying to put the plane down. You could see it. And it appeared what happened, and I don't remember, but it seems like the plane hit something right before it got to that straightaway. And that made the plane maybe flip over, or maybe go so that it wasn't able to ditch

01:07:03 Wayne Williams:
like what I think the pilot was trying to intend to do. I think the pilot stayed the pilot and the copilot stayed with that plane all the way. And maybe if they were part of the wing up was broken off because in the survivors' helispot there was a large tree. And at the bottom was maybe nine feet of the left wing of the aircraft.

01:07:27 Wayne Williams:
So, that got knocked off and maybe that's what made the plane go in. But the plane had all sorts of issues. What caused the problem was that the engines were rebuilt, and they weren't put back properly. And make a long story short, both engines basically caught on fire and the pilot did a hell of a job of keeping that plane flying. I don't remember the specifics, but shutting one engine off and just going with another engine and then shutting that engine off and turning on the other, trying to nurse the thing to Moose Creek or to someplace.

01:08:01 Wayne Williams:
And there's other people who probably remember those details better than me.

01:08:07 James Wall:
So, the frogmen, the divers for the sheriff are essentially the ones fishing the bodies out of the river. And you're there.

01:08:18 Wayne Williams:
We would put them in body bags and load them onto the helicopter.

01:08:21 James Wall:
And you did that, like physically...

01:08:23 Wayne Williams:
Yeah.

01:08:24 James Wall:
Take the bodies and put them into the body bag?

01:08:25 Wayne Williams:
Well, back then there wasn't like this... I don't know how to describe it, but it was sort of like we were there, and we had a job to do. So, the frogmen would pull the bodies out from the wreckage that was underwater. There was like two main places where the bodies were, and then the frogmen would bring them as close as possible and instead of having them get out of the water,

01:08:50 Wayne Williams:
we would grab the bodies, pull them up on the side, and then we would put them in body bags and then we would open up a spot for a helicopter to land and we would load the helicopter with the bodies. And we would do that for the remainder of that. I think I was on that for four or five days total, including the jump itself.

01:09:13 James Wall:
So, they had been in the river for a day or two, or multiple days? It must have been...

01:09:18 Wayne Williams:
Yeah, but the river was freezing cold, So it wasn't like there was any sort of...

01:09:22 Wayne Williams:
Some of the bodies were not in the best of shapes, but in general, it wasn't that bad. They were... I'll just put this way... Well, it was not the first body recovery I was on, and it was not the worst.

01:09:42 James Wall:
Yeah.

01:09:43 Wayne Williams:
I would have body recoveries later that were way worse.

01:09:47 James Wall:
Sure, sure. How did it affect you at the time?

01:09:49 Wayne Williams:
Well, in general, I think the thing was is it didn't really affect me much at all, to be honest with you. Kind of like, to me, it was work. It's like, we got to take these bodies from the frog guys. We got to put them into these body bag and we got to build a helispot.

01:10:07 Wayne Williams:
Put the bodies in the helicopter and get them out of here. Get them to the morgue. That's where they need to go. And I guess even to this day, I don't like feel any kind of like there was some sort of like I had lost something that day. I didn't lose anything. I was just really doing a job.

01:10:34 Wayne Williams:
What can you do in a situation like that? It's not like it was my fault. It's not like it was their fault. It was just a circumstance that needed to be dealt with. And that's how I looked at it. I didn't really want to grab a dead body, but on the other hand, if it wasn't me, then who? It wasn't like there were people hanging around.

01:10:57 James Wall:
Were these also jumpers?

01:10:58 Wayne Williams:
It was all jumpers who were doing the... So, it was the sheriff's department and the jumpers who were doing the movement of the bodies. And basically, the frogmen did the harder work. They had to go into that wreckage that was either partially submerged or underwater.

01:11:14 James Wall:
Yeah. I meant the victims. Were they also Forest Service jumpers?

01:11:18 Wayne Williams:
They were Forest Service employees. I didn't know any of them. I never met them. So, they were Nez Perce employees and they were flying into Moose Creek because back then, I don't know if they do this anymore, back then they used to have a lot of people working at Moose Creek. It was like a little town back there.

01:11:41 James Wall:
Yeah. And you had to fly in. There was no other way in.

01:11:43 Wayne Williams:
Yeah, that's how you got there. And so many times, as a jumper over the years, we would fly into Moose Creek and old Emile Keck would come out. I'm sure you heard that name. He'd come out and say, “Yeah, I got some food for you boys.” We’d land, he'd feed us, and then we would take off.

01:12:00 James Wall:
That might have been when Barry was [District] Ranger out there. Or I don't know. Barry Hicks was Ranger at Moose Creek for a while.

01:12:07 Wayne Williams:
Right. Yeah, I think it was a different... I think Hicks had just left.

01:12:10 James Wall:
Yeah.

01:12:11 Wayne Williams:
But I might be wrong. There was a different guy who was the Ranger because I remember meeting him and his name's going to come to me. I think it was Magnuson, maybe? Does that ring a bell?

01:12:26 James Wall:
Sounds familiar. Yeah.

01:12:28 Wayne Williams:
I might be wrong, though, but whatever the case is... The other thing that made that a tolerable situation is that everybody just worked really well together. Not just the jumpers or the sheriffs, but the helicopter pilot. His name was Forest. He was top notch pilot. Hell of a pilot. Worked for Minuteman Aviation, I remember. There were the, for the district, the District Ranger, the District FMO, all those people were just solid people.

01:13:02 Wayne Williams:
I think the District FMO was named Wickersham. But all the people were a solid bunch and everybody worked really well together. Like I said, we found everybody except for the pilot. And I think like I said, I think it was several months later they found him quite a ways downstream.

01:13:26 James Wall:
So, that essentially was just a full-time job for a while, for a week or so.

01:13:34 Wayne Williams:
Right.

01:13:34 James Wall:
Of doing that. And were you part of an investigation after that?

01:13:38 Wayne Williams:
No, I was not on the investigation group at all. In fact, what they ended up doing after a week, they flew us out. And then it's interesting, the FAA [Federal Aviation Administration] came in there the next morning. I remember that. I don't remember a lot about it, but I remember they did come in the next morning. I don't remember much more about the investigation because I think most of the investigation sort of centered around where we worked that first day to try to help the survivors.

01:14:15 James Wall:
Those survivors, did you have any sort of face time with them in the moments?

01:14:21 Wayne Williams:
No, I never saw the kid who had walked to Moose Creek, and I wasn't near when they loaded the guy who survived on the helicopter that day. I can't remember where I was. We were running around doing all sorts of stuff. And I was a young kid back then, so I was sort of a mule, I did a lot of mule stuff, carrying stuff on my back and running saws and things like that.

01:14:54 Wayne Williams:
So.

01:14:55 James Wall:
So, this was around 1980?

01:14:57 Wayne Williams:
1979.

01:14:58 James Wall:
1979.

01:14:58 Wayne Williams:
It was spring of 1979. I remember it vividly. And then we flew back to Missoula and then it would end up being a pretty active fire season that year in 1979.

01:15:13 James Wall:
Yeah. So, life goes on. Keep jumping out of Missoula. The 1980s roll on. At what point did you begin to kind of run your own crew?

01:15:27 Wayne Williams:
That would happen. I became a squad leader in 1990. That's when I started running crews was in 1990. But I also did a little bit when we got really busy fire seasons, they would sort of lean on the senior smokejumpers that weren't overhead but had been around for a while. So, I'd done a little bit of it prior to that, but it really started in 1990 when I started leading crews.

01:16:02 James Wall:
And what about 1988?

01:16:06 Wayne Williams:
In 1988…

01:16:08 James Wall:
Did they jump you at Yellowstone? Or were you just jumping at every other fire that was happening that year?

01:16:13 Wayne Williams:
I did jump at Yellowstone. I jumped all over the region that year. 1988 was a great fire season. I even worked on the Canyon Creek Fire, too. Jumped on the Canyon Creek Fire.

01:16:26 James Wall:
Isn't that the one that started out as a prescribed natural burn and it busted out?

01:16:29 Wayne Williams:
Yeah, I think they let it... What's interesting about that fire... Right. Right. It started naturally, I think, but I think they let it burn for a while. And I remember it was Orville Daniels was Forest Supervisor and Jerry Williams: was the Fire Management Officer. And the two of them just said, "Yeah, let's try this."

01:16:47 Wayne Williams:
And they actually got away with it throughout the summer. And the fire didn't go berserk until, I want to say September, or late August, early September. And we would go in there sometimes and sort of corral it in certain places. It was kind of fun. We'd jump in there and they'd say, "Yeah, just stop the fire on this one flank."

01:17:09 Wayne Williams:
And one time we used fire line explosives because it was the best way to put in fire line. And that was kind of fun. And other times we just would put in helispots and allow people to get in, get people in. But what's interesting about Canyon Creek, and a lot of people forget about this: that fire in one day burned almost 70,000 acres.

01:17:34 Wayne Williams:
So, when you hear a lot of these people who say, "This is a new normal, this fire burned 40,000 acres today," it's not a new normal. It's just a new normal for them. And it's not that I'm saying that global warming doesn't exist. It does. And it has an effect on fires. But a lot of people who are in fire now do not have the background in history that they should. A lot of them never heard of the Peshtigo Fire.

01:18:01 Wayne Williams:
A lot of them maybe heard of the 1910 Fire. But in general, that's another thing lacking in a good comprehensive view of wildland firefighting experience is not only the experience itself in fighting fire in different geographic areas, but actually the history of fire, understanding that. Then you have a better... Then you don't say things like, "This is a new normal,

01:18:27 Wayne Williams:
40,000 acres."

01:18:29 James Wall:
Were there hints and rumors that 1988 was going to blow up?

01:18:34 Wayne Williams:
Yes, from the very beginning. And I think what was interesting to me is that I felt that Yellowstone bit off more than they could chew, that they just let too many fires go. And they should have they should have had a better plan where they could have had their cake and eat it by letting some of them go but contain others.

01:18:56 Wayne Williams:
Because what ended up happening in Yellowstone, and I would end up working in Yellowstone. It was my last fire assignment in 1980 where I would go there back there in September and work as a Division Group Supervisor. And we pulled so much junk out of those fires because initially Yellowstone didn't want to have all this impact from fire equipment, but because they let too many of these fires go, they actually created a worse situation where there was just tons and tons of impact: pumps, fuel, hoses, fire retardant, all sorts of stuff.

01:19:34 Wayne Williams:
And I don't quite know exactly why Yellowstone did what they did that year. I have heard rumors from people who be who have said things like that they had gotten along for many years by letting fires burn because they had favorable conditions and then once the conditions were not favorable, or were not perfect for what they were trying to do, they didn't really have the background to understand that.

01:20:11 Wayne Williams:
And when you look at the National Parks in general, I'm a big fan of them, but when you compare someone like Sequoia & Kings Canyon, which had been doing prescribed fires for a long time, and they got a huge history in fire, and then you see Yellowstone, who just sort of was dabbling in this stuff, but really didn't have maybe the experience to really pull it off.

01:20:37 Wayne Williams:
There was two big differences between these two National Parks, and I always just really questioned some of the decision making in Yellowstone, because seeing the impact from them thinking we don't want to have a big impact actually created a bigger impact. And basically the Forest Service bailed Yellowstone out. They bailed them out. No ifs, ands or buts.

01:21:01 Wayne Williams:
And if anybody in the Park Service wants to fight me over that, who was from that time period, so be it. But all I can say is my girlfriend at the time would joke and say, “You've been down in Yellowstone so much of this fire season, you might as well buy some property down there.” That's what she said. I spent a lot of time down there.

01:21:20 James Wall:
Yeah. That was an all-timer, that year.

01:21:21 Wayne Williams:
Yeah, it was. And it was a bad combination of things too because it was during the Reagan Administration’s being President, and the Reagan Administration had cut the budgets of federal firefighters. And so, it was kind of a one-two punch. It was kind of interesting how it all ended up. And I always just kind of wonder: if you wouldn’t have cut the budgets and you had more firefighters and you had more people at hand, would you actually have spent less money?

01:21:51 Wayne Williams:
I don't know. But I wonder.

01:21:53 James Wall:
Yeah. So, 1990, you start running your own squad, more or less. How was that? Taking over the ship?

01:22:06 Wayne Williams:
Oh, I liked it. And like we talked about earlier, I had good mentors like Jeff Kinderman and Bill Meadows and Floyd Whittaker, Walt Smith, just to name a few. There's way more who—there's nothing better than having—you need more mentors, not less. And I had a ton, and I really am appreciative of that because I don't think people now have the luxury I had with the mentorships that I was able to have.

01:22:39 Wayne Williams:
And I also don't think they had the time that I had. I always call the experience that I got in as far as being an overhead, it was more of a honeymoon than forced down my throat. And what I mean by that is nowadays people may not have more than five years before they're thrown into an overhead position, and they may have very few mentors in that process where I had a long period of time from from really from 1974 to where I was running crews in 1990 with a ton of mentors from people who were in Cal Fire to the Eldorado National Forest, to the smokejumping organization, and then some

01:23:23 Wayne Williams:
of the places where I did details, I had mentors, mentorship there, too. Just an incredible opportunity. And I did it over a period of time where a couple of things were happening. I was going to different geographic areas and learning about how to fight fire there. And at the same time, I was aging, I was getting older. Where you think about now, some of those people don't have that same luxury.

01:23:46 James Wall:
Yeah. And so, when you're finally running your own squad and the fires are starting to get worse and worse and worse every year, probably. Or at least the ones that do break out. Is that an accurate depiction?

01:24:04 Wayne Williams:
I don't know if I would... That's a good question. So, I definitely noticed that fires were getting harder to manage. But the other thing I noticed as long as I stayed with the fundamentals and the fundamentals were find a good place to anchor and bring the black with me. It didn't matter what the fire did, no matter what.

01:24:28 Wayne Williams:
And to this day, I still believe that the fundamentals is where your greatest safety is. And don't get me wrong, global warming, climate change, whatever you want to call it, is affecting wildland firefighting. There's not a doubt in my mind, but so many people want to make it simple that this is the reason why this is happening.

01:24:55 Wayne Williams:
It's a combination of a lot of things. It's not just the aspect of the global warming. It's also the fact that when I started fighting fire, your Type 2 crews were solid wildland firefighting crews that were almost as good as Type 1 crews. Nowadays, you're hard pressed to even find a Type 2 crew, and if you do, they probably don't have a lot of experience.

01:25:20 Wayne Williams:
So, that's a big change. Most of the people who were in the Forest Service when I was fighting fire, they may not have worked in fire, but they knew how to fight fire. So, if they were on a trail crew and you needed people to help you fight fire, those trail crew guys knew how to fight fire.

01:25:38 Wayne Williams:
If you were a forester, you knew how to fight fire. If you were a wildlife biologist, you knew how to fight fire. Where nowadays in the Forest Service, it's all compartmentalized and it's all specialized. So basically, everybody staying in their little general spot. And that's, to me, one of the things that has caused a lot of problem with wildland firefighting is that you don't have that experience, you don't have the people who have a knowledge of geographic differences between fighting fire in a place like Southern California or fighting fire in Mississippi or Alaska.

01:26:19 Wayne Williams:
And so, I think a lot. And then the other factor, and this is a huge one, is structures. In the past, like some of my first fires as a being a firefighter in California, we'd go down to Southern California. And back then—and you could still get photographs—back then, we didn't protect structures. We knew the best thing to do was to go after the fire.

01:26:47 Wayne Williams:
The homeowners had to take care of protecting their structures. That's kind of how it was. And it was, I don't know, in my opinion, it was a really… And back then, the homeowners totally were okay with that. They were okay with it. They wanted that. And there's photographs in the Getty Museum of Richard Nixon on his roof in the 1960s, spraying down his roof with a hose.

01:27:16 Wayne Williams:
And you can get that if you want. I got it on my computer. I always thought it was interesting, But to me, and that was in Southern Cal, to me, that sort of showed the different attitude. But nowadays with the urban interface, a lot of these people feel pressure to protect those structures. So, when you protect structures and you don't fight the fire, what does the fire do? It gets bigger. And if a fire gets bigger, it's harder to fight. So, one of the reasons why fires are getting bigger is because they're not fighting the fires, they're protecting the structures, and they're actually just kicking the can down the road. It's a really bad strategy and to me, it's a worse situation than the effect of climate change or global warming, because if you don't fight the fire when it's still manageable, it's only going to be harder.

01:28:06 Wayne Williams:
If that was the case a hundred years ago, it's the case now. It's always going to be harder to manage when it gets bigger. That's a given.

01:28:15 James Wall:
And then there are times, though, to let it burn, right?

01:28:18 Wayne Williams:
There are times to let fires burn. But I also think too, in this day and age, do we want to put a lot of stuff in the atmosphere? Would it be smarter for us to maybe try to keep fires at hand for five or maybe ten years to keep stuff out of the atmosphere? And then once we get the climate back in shape, maybe then start putting more stuff up there?

01:28:42 Wayne Williams:
So, I think it's kind of interesting. Some ways, I think the environmentalists are putting their foot in their mouth when they're... You put stuff in the air, that's just adding to the issue. Maybe they want to burn things and get the forest back in shape. And that's true, too. But that needs to be balanced, and I don't think they're thinking that way.

01:29:09 Wayne Williams:
I don't think they're going, "We're putting a bunch of stuff in the air." And a bunch of stuff in the air just makes the climate worse, the climate change worse. And some of these fires... So, that's another reason why I almost think that maybe we need to just kind of kick back and do a little more all-out suppression and corral the fires while they're small and try to keep that stuff out of the air.

01:29:33 Wayne Williams:
And then once we sort of get the climate cooled down a little, then maybe start getting back into burning again. And there's always going to be acres that are going to be burned and maybe there'll be opportunity where there's good dispersion, where you can burn. But I think again, it's not so simple as, "Climate change is our enemy, our all-out enemy." It's not just that simple. There are a bunch of other factors that are involved.

01:30:02 James Wall:
Alright. We're going to talk about South Canyon. Before South Canyon. So, you were a squad leader in 1991-ish, for a couple of years before that. Was it a possibility in your mind that you could die doing this or was it just a job?

01:30:25 Wayne Williams:
Well, there was always a possibility. There were a couple of times where I had some close calls, but again, I stuck with the fundamentals that I was taught. And I never trusted the fire shelter. The fire shelter was never going to be my last resort. That's just all there was to it.

01:30:44 James Wall:
So, you never deployed your shelter?

01:30:46 Wayne Williams:
Hell no. Never even came close. And I was a firefighter from 1974 to 2016. So, I think I think following some of those fundamentals was pretty good. Because I'm not the smartest guy in the world and I'm not the safest. But I did follow those fundamentals in firefighting.

01:31:07 James Wall:
So, do you remember sort of when you heard about it, about the fire, about the burnover?

01:31:13 Wayne Williams:
Oh, in South Canyon? Oh, I remember it well.

01:31:15 James Wall:
Yeah.

01:31:17 Wayne Williams:
Well, I was there.

01:31:18 James Wall:
Yeah. Well, let's talk about that. How did you find yourself in that area?

01:31:23 Wayne Williams:
Well, so it's kind of an interesting thing. I actually was down in Springerville, Arizona. There was a little jump crew out of there, and Colorado was pretty active already and we weren't doing much. So, they loaded up the DC-3 and they flew us to Craig, Colorado, and we jumped a fire up there. And they demob'd [demobilized] us into Grand Junction and we became a part of that BLM crew.

01:31:49 Wayne Williams:
And that would just be a few days before South Canyon. And what happened is when I got off that fire from Craig, Colorado, Jeff Kinderman came out. He had been there for a while and he said, "I've been stuck here spotting rounds. Will you spot some rounds so I can get out on a fire?" And I said, "Yeah, sure." It's time for me to do my... I just got off a fire: he hadn't been on one.

01:32:18 Wayne Williams:
So, that's what I did. That next day, I was on spotter duty and Jeff jumped a fire first thing in the morning. And then the sequence of events after that kind of all fog together. But I think what happened either later that day or the next day, they started putting people on South Canyon. And I want to say that maybe they jumped the first crew that second day that I was there, I was on spotter hold.

01:32:54 Wayne Williams:
And then they jumped another crew the next day, and then it became really windy. We knew the wind was coming in. It wasn't like some unknown thing, and we knew that

jump operations would probably be shut down because it would just be too windy to jump.

01:33:08 Wayne Williams:
And so, they asked if some of us wanted to be pounders to help at South Canyon. And what the idea was is that the guys who are at South Canyon were going to dig fireline in one direction and we were going to come in underneath the interstate and dig fireline towards them. That was what the basic idea was.

01:33:28 Wayne Williams:
And then we would join together and that would hopefully corral the fire. That's what the thought was. So, we loaded up on a bus and we drove to South Canyon. And as soon as we arrived, the fire blows up. A big, big ole column. And the squad leader in charge was a guy named Ken Wabunzie. And Ken and myself—I was the other squad leader—we had about over twenty-five people were with us on that bus. I'm not quite sure why we had so many people, but we did. And so, at that point we started realizing—we were trying to get ahold of the jumpers that were on the hill. We were able to get ahold of some, but not others, and we weren't sure what was going on.

01:34:17 Wayne Williams:
In the meantime, there was an ex-jumper who was flying lead plane, Cliff Navo, and he had spotted some fire shelters, and so he had a air tanker come in and drop retardant because the fire was still pretty hot near those shelters, I remember. It was nice to have him up there because he was in my rookie class, so I knew who he was.

01:34:46 Wayne Williams:
So, Ken and myself were talking about, "What do we want to do about this? Obviously, we've got to go up there and see what the hell is going on." And so, we were able to corral a helicopter and Ken asked me if I would be the squad leader because I had some rescue experience. And so, I said, "Okay, I would do it."

01:35:09 Wayne Williams:
And so, we started ferrying people up to the hillside. In the interim, some of the people who had survived South Canyon had come out and around and told us, and some of them had minor burns like Eric Hipke, but he was already on his way to the hospital. I shouldn't say minor burns. Eric had severe burns, but they weren't life threatening, I guess, is what I meant to say.

01:35:37 Wayne Williams:
They were definitely serious burns. So, we got some information from those people and we still were not able to get ahold of some of the people that we knew were on the fire. So, we flew up there and I remember I was with a BLM jumper whose last name is Steele. I can't remember his first name,

01:36:01 Wayne Williams:
I don't why. It's funny how your brain plays tricks on you, but… George. George Steele. And so, I have this habit, when I'm around other people with radios, I turn my radio

down to save the battery, or turn it off, just because I don't figure we need a bunch of people with radios on. We just need one so we can hear.

01:36:20 Wayne Williams:
And so, we get to this one point on the ridge and that's where we find our first body. And it's an interesting… It was hard to figure out, but we later on did figure out… The guy almost made it over the top of the ridge and obviously his lungs gave out on him. He wasn't burned…

01:36:47 Wayne Williams:
He was burned pretty severely, but he wasn't burned beyond recognition like some of the other people that we'd find later. And he was on his knees, upright on his knees. And then right near him was a video camera. It was all busted up, but we didn't quite figure out what that was all about. Later on, we'd find out that was Eric Hipke's, because he had already gone over the top of the ridge.

01:37:11 Wayne Williams:
And then we started what I always refer to as "death row." We start going down the row, the fireline, and finding more bodies more severely burned. And then all the way down at the bottom, we found people who were literally burned beyond recognition where they were burned so bad that they literally looked like somebody had taken a skeleton out of a science class or something and sprayed it with black tar, like a thin layer of black tar.

01:37:48 Wayne Williams:
That's kind of what it looked like. That's how severely… Others weren't burned that bad. And some were still recognizable, but some were burned so much. I remember a femur, and the tibia and fibula were separated. They were just separated from the body, from how intense the heat was. And the other thing I remember as we were going down that line—and George myself were kind of going back and forth on, "What the hell we do? Do we gather all these guys up and haul them off the hillside because they're our people? What do we do?" And we're trying to run all this stuff through our heads, and then I get about halfway down death row, and my radio is turned off, and I start hearing this squawking coming. So, here are three bodies over on this one side. And there's worthless fire shelters sort of fluttering in the wind, a couple of fire shelters.

01:38:57 Wayne Williams:
The people are as dead as they can possibly be dead, but their damn radio is working. So, this is the moral of the story: the fire shelters saved the radio, but it didn't save those people, not even close. And that stuck on my mind that not only did I never trust a fire shelter before then, but I for sure as hell was going to go on a campaign to say, "Fire shelters, they are evil. You stay away from them. If you think that thing's going to save your life, you've made a mistake. If you've got to wait to deploy a shelter, you've made a mistake. You have to always keep from doing that. And there's a lot of people who have deployed fire shelters and say that they survived. But sometimes I wonder the statistics, would they have survived anyway, but maybe had some burns? And one of the things that has always bothered me about the statistics of fire shelters, they don't have statistics

that say people who deployed shelters that didn't need to. People who deployed shelters, and if they hadn't, maybe they would have been more severely burned. But all I can tell you is when you see a lot of dead people under fire shelters, that's what's going to stick in my mind for the rest of my life. And I would go on to campaign for the rest of my firefighting career. And it was to the dismay of Missoula Technology and Development.

01:40:23 Wayne Williams:
It was to the dismay to a lot of people who thought fire shelters had a place. I say they are evil. They don't have a place. And I can't believe people would ever trust their life with them. And I will never change that as long as I live. That's all there is to it.

01:40:41 James Wall:
The folks that deployed the shelters, they were on the top of the ridge, right?

01:40:45 Wayne Williams:
They were mid-ridge.

01:40:48 James Wall:
But that fire was—to do what it did to especially the bodies at the bottom—was burning so hot, right?

01:40:57 Wayne Williams:
Right.

01:40:57 James Wall:
That that might have even breached the, or certainly breached the limits of what a fire shelter could mitigate at all.

01:41:04 Wayne Williams:
Well, right. But what you have to realize is a fire shelter starts deteriorating after 500 degrees. Most fires, regardless if it's if it's climate change or whatever, they're burning at over a 1000 degrees. What's interesting about South Canyon was it was preheated Gamble's oak. So, it was brush. This is what kind of duped those guys: the fire had burned underneath the Gamble's oak, but never caught the Gamble's oak on fire.

01:41:36 Wayne Williams:
So, they kind of thought that it just wasn't going to burn. And that's why they decided to dig fireline top down instead of bottom up. If they would have dug fireline from bottom up, that situation never would have happened. Now, obviously, I'm looking at it from a different perspective because I have that luxury and I'm not trying to put blame or anything else.

01:41:58 Wayne Williams:
But one of the main fundamentals of digging fireline in brush is you don't want to dig downhill. And they did dig downhill. And the other thing is all that fire did when it burned underneath that brush, was that a preheated that fuel, so when the fire came back again, now it was ready to burn. But brush fires have always burned at

01:42:22 Wayne Williams:
1000, 2000, 3000 degrees, that's nothing new. And I've always wondered deep down in my craw if those same people were in Southern California where the fuel type looks different, if they would have had a different decision. I can't tell you how many times I've been in Southern California, and we've had, well, back then it was Sector Bosses which would later become Division Group Supervisors.

01:42:47 Wayne Williams:
I remember our Sector Boss one time said, "I want you guys to dig from this road down." And we saw smoke down there. And I remember luckily, the Foreman on the Forest Service crew from the Eldorado, his name was Duane Casita. He had he had been on the Oak Grove Hotshots, which I don't think is around anymore, but he knew fire.

01:43:08 Wayne Williams:
And he said, "I got a better idea. We'll, load it in the bus and we'll drive down to the bottom and we'll start digging fireline uphill. When you do those fundamentals, you just eliminate the chance of those things happening. And I think that that fuel type kind of duped those firefighters that day. And there were people on that fire who told me outright that they weren't really happy with the strategy that was unfolding on that fire.

01:43:40 Wayne Williams:
But again, that's all hindsight. It's really easy to do hindsight. But at the end of the day, what I'm really trying to say is don't trust a fire shelter and stick with the fundamentals. That's all I'm trying to say. And don't broker your safety off to other people.

01:43:56 James Wall:
Yeah, I think one of the common refrains of the... Well, before that, when you're finding all these bodies, you're starting to count them up. Was there a realization of the scale of this? That this was...

01:44:13 Wayne Williams:
Yeah. That's a good point.

01:44:14 James Wall:
Going to be one of the worst ever?

01:44:18 Wayne Williams:
Yeah, that is a really good point. And yes, there was. And the reason why is because when I had done the Mann Gulch Memorial back in 1991, now that sort of was one of the major safety talking points in fire behavior was the Mann Gulch Fire and the number of people who had died there. And we had already counted more than how many had died at Mann Gulch.

01:44:51 Wayne Williams:
So, the magnitude was definitely there. And it became apparent pretty quickly that this was going to be one of the worst fires in many, many years. Now, there are other fires

out there were a lot of people have died that aren't as popular as Mann Gulch or 1910, where more people did die. But when you think about the ones that, for lack of a better term, that sort of made the news, Mann Gulch and South Canyon,

01:45:26 Wayne Williams:
and then, of course, later on... Funny, I can't think of the fire. It's so funny. Get older, your brain just gets... Yarnell Fire. But the whole thing that was interesting about the South Canyon Fire... eventually, because I'm going to wrap this up because it can go on and on. Eventually George Steele, myself, and some other people, we were talking, we felt the best thing to do was to leave the site as untouched as possible. And we had that luxury because we knew that MTDC [Missoula Technology & Development Center], that Ted Putnam and his crew was going to be there the next morning. We knew that because some of that information had gotten to us. There were no cell phones, but there was one jumper who would use the phone if some of the people who were homeowners down below South Canyon had asked to use their phone and he had called MTDC and Ted said, “Yeah, we're gathering people up and we'll be there the next day.”

01:46:34 Wayne Williams:
So, we kind of thought, “We know that. We should leave this the way it is so Ted can really do a good job of trying to figure out what happened here with this crew.” So, we hiked down the mountain. We left everybody up there. We get down to the bottom and those people, I don't know who they were, but the people who let us use their phone, there was over twenty-five of us, I think, and one at a time, myself and Campbell Bunzie thought the best thing to do was to have each person go in there and call their loved ones and say, “Yeah, we're here, but we're fine.” Meanwhile, I had to go to a meeting with the IC [Incident Commander] and the forming overhead team. So, I went to this meeting. Everybody else was going into this homeowner's house, using their phone, and they were nothing but gracious.

01:47:27 Wayne Williams:
They brought out food and stuff. They were just wonderful. That whole community there was just insanely—their arms were open to help us in any way we needed it. And I'll never forget their generosity. I'll never forget that. So anyhow, I go to this meeting, and I was by myself at first, and I go into the meeting, and I think the Incident Commander was a guy named Winslow,

01:47:52 Wayne Williams:
but I might be wrong. And I think there was already a Type 1 or Type 2 crew, Type 2 team coming in to take the fire over. They were working out of one of the homeowners’ garage. I got pictures of all this stuff. I look at them occasionally. But so, I went into that garage, and I wasn't sure if they knew that they had a bunch of dead guys up there.

01:48:20 Wayne Williams:
I wasn't sure, and I didn't really want to blurt it out because of some of my information training. I didn't want to just blurt out, “You know you got a bunch of dead guys up there?” So, I thought the best thing for me to do was get ahold of the Incident Commander.

01:48:35 Wayne Williams:
And I think his name was Winslow. I might be wrong. I took him outside the garage and I said, “So, you know you got a bunch of dead guys out there?” And he goes, “Well, how many?” I go, “I think fourteen. Two are missing, but we think there's fourteen up there.” And I said, “We counted twelve, but we think there's fourteen.” And he goes, “Well, we kind of had an idea.”

01:48:55 Wayne Williams:
And I remember we sort of talked about it a little bit, and then things became pretty foggy in my mind. In the interim, some of the jumpers are sort of showing up at the bottom of the driveway. I think the garage door was open or something, but they saw that I was sort of animated in there with my hands up. And what it was...

01:49:22 Wayne Williams:
And this guy comes up to me, and I think he was my age, maybe a little younger. And he told me that we—and he wasn't the Incident Commander at all. I didn't know who the hell he was, but he came up to me, and he was kind of a demanding guy. And I'm not a very violent guy.

01:49:41 Wayne Williams:
I’ve never hit anybody in my life, to be honest. But this guy was so irritating, I was actually debating about just hitting him and getting him out of my face. And he kept telling me that we needed to move these, move the bodies and blah, blah, blah. And I just kept saying, “Look, man, I know that the investigation group is going to be here first light tomorrow.”

01:50:05 Wayne Williams:
They chartered an aircraft. So, I go, “Something bad happened up there. And we need to know, we need to get facts from what happened. And not destroy the evidence. It would be foolhardy.” And he's just really getting angry at me. And he says, “Well, the Governor,” something to the effect of, “The Governor wants him off the hillside,” or something like that.

01:50:26 Wayne Williams:
And I said, “Well, you can tell the governor to get fucked! We're not moving them off the hillside.” And then, meanwhile, the jumpers are slowly but surely oozing up this driveway, some of them. And I'm not sure what they were thinking. Maybe they were going to come to my... I never did understand all that, but I just saw them down at the end of the driveway there, and they're getting closer.

01:50:50 Wayne Williams:
Meanwhile, this guy walks up to me and he's wearing a clean fire shirt. And I thought maybe he was a safety officer. And he said, “Why do you feel that way?” And I said, “Something really bad happened up there and I just don't want to disturb the scene. And he goes, “It's not something like we figure it out right away.

01:51:07 Wayne Williams:
We had to go up there and see it and realize how important it was to leave it as is." And I said, Who the hell are you? And he goes, "Well, I'm the governor of Colorado. My name is [Ray] Romer." And he shook my hand, and he says, "Okay, that's what we'll do." And politicians today would not have the pragmatic approach that he took.

01:51:32 Wayne Williams:
He listened to what I had to say. He knew I'd been up there, and he made a decision. He said, "Okay, let's..." And Governor Romer and myself would run into each other at the South Canyon Memorial in Washington, DC, and then later on at the memorial at Glenwood Springs a year later. And we had good exchanges. He didn't take it personal that I said, "Fuck the Governor," at all. And I don't even know if he heard it, but whatever the case was, that's something I really remember.

01:52:08 James Wall:
So, what was your lesson of South Canyon? Obviously, multiple, multiple, multiple things went haywire with that.

01:52:18 Wayne Williams:
Yeah, it's most of the stuff that I mentioned about the strategy and about not being familiar with the fuel type.

01:52:28 James Wall:
Have an exit route. Yeah.

01:52:29 Wayne Williams:
Yeah, just a lot of things. But at the same time too, all of us have done things that we thought we could get away with, including me. But I became much more instilled in those safety strategies after South Canyon, realizing that you always think, "It can't happen to me." But that was the point where I realized, "Yeah, it can."

01:52:54 James Wall:
Yeah, because that was a good crew.

01:52:56 Wayne Williams:
Yeah, it was a solid crew.

01:52:56 James Wall:
I think, you know...

01:52:57 Wayne Williams:
It just...

01:52:58 James Wall:
You couldn't find anything that would have said, "Oh, that would have happened."

01:53:02 Wayne Williams:
Yeah, right. Exactly.

01:53:02 James Wall:
Just because of who they were.

01:53:04 Wayne Williams:
That's right.

01:53:04 James Wall:
You know?

01:53:05 Wayne Williams:
That's right. And later on, the investigative crew would come in, and then there were some things, like I would help with getting… I helped with the exchange from… it was kind of a weird thing, but I'd end up being an Information Officer for the surviving family members in the morgue. I kind of brokered some of the information for them, and that probably wasn't the smartest thing for me to do, but I was asked to do it. And they kind of said, "It'd be kind of good if you did it because not only were you on the fire, but you're a firefighter and you happen to be an Information Officer. And it might be…" So, I did it. And I kind of prolonged my agony of the fire. But I did get rewarded. And after we loaded the last few people on aircraft and sent them back home, the coffins, sent everybody back home, I went back and got on the jump list at Grand Junction [Colorado] and jumped this good deal fire in Canyonlands [National Park] in Utah there. It was just a great fire. Yeah. So, that was a nice way to sort of… And then I stayed down there until I… I didn't want to go home. I didn't want to go home because everything had shifted north. The bodies had shifted north, the drama had shifted north, everything had shifted north.

01:54:32 Wayne Williams:
Now, Grand Junction was relatively quiet. The investigative team had left everything, and I thought I'd just stay there and just be a jumper until they kicked me out. And that's what happened, they kicked me out.

01:54:44 James Wall:
Wow. So, 1998, became a foreman, right? And that was where you finished up in R1 [Region One]. What's the difference between a foreman and a squad leader? There you're done jumping, essentially?

01:55:01 Wayne Williams:
No, no, you're not, actually. You could be. You could do a lot less jumping, but foremen take bigger crews. I'm pretty proud of my record. I jumped for thirty-three years, and in those thirty-three years, I never got seriously injured. And I never missed a fire season. And that included one year when I had cancer. I literally finished chemo, took two weeks off from the chemo.

01:55:37 Wayne Williams:
Did some light duty around the base for another two weeks, and then got back, took the PT [physical training] test, got back on the jump list. And I was a field-going guy my whole career. There were opportunities where I could have stayed back, but I was a field-going Squad Leader and a field-going Foreman. And I did that my whole career.

01:56:00 Wayne Williams:
And later on, I was hired by the Montana Department of Natural Resources as their Wildland Firefighting Safety Officer.

01:56:16 James Wall:
So, if they hadn't forced you out in 2010, would you still be doing it?

01:56:20 Wayne Williams:
I could have still jumped. I still had a few more years that I could have jumped. But I heard about this job with the Department of Natural Resources in Missoula, and it sounded like a really great sunset job. What it was is they want someone who has experience to travel throughout the state and keep an eye on their wildland firefighters.

01:56:41 Wayne Williams:
And they want someone who was field-going, which I—the Forest Service, a lot of their safety was getting away from the field. They weren't as field-going, and I wanted to be a field-going guy. I even put in for a field-going position with the Forest Service, a safety position. And they said it no longer needed to be field-going. And I kind of thought, "Do I want to work for an organization that doesn't think safety should be a field-going occupation?" So, the writing was on the wall. I still trained as a smokejumper in 2010 and I would finish my career jump-qualified in 2010, and then go over to the Montana Department of Natural Resources as a qualified smokejumper.

01:57:33 James Wall:
Wow. So, but essentially, 2010, you had to hang it up.

01:57:38 Wayne Williams:
That was the end for the… Right. Although I would go on Forest Service fires and run into a lot of my old friends over the years.

01:57:47 James Wall:
Is there a tradition for old smokejumpers going out to sea and riding off into the sunset? [laughter] Do they make you do one last jump in your parachute, or anything like that?

01:57:58 Wayne Williams:
Well, no, they don't. No, but I wanted to go out as a qualified smokejumper. I could have easily… They knew I was going to go work for the Montana Department of Natural Resources. I could have easily not even gone through refresher training that year, but I wanted to go out as a qualified smokejumper. I wanted to, every year that I jumped, I wanted to be a qualified smokejumper, a field-going guy. And that was important to me.

01:58:28 Wayne Williams:
But yeah, and I know you've heard this, but the Forest Service was a changing organization, too, at that point. And the other thing that was very attractive about going to work for the State of Montana was they still were very field-oriented and still very collective in their approach to everything, which kind of reminded me of the old days of the Forest Service. So, in a lot of ways it was kind of nice taking that step back in time.

01:59:01 James Wall:
Yeah. How long were you at the DNR [Montana Department of Natural Resources]?

01:59:04 Wayne Williams:
I worked for them for six years, and it was a really great experience. It's great people. I started with a state agency, and I ended with a state agency, and I can't say enough good things about some of the people I met working for the State of Montana. A lot of their administrators were great people to work for. They were very concerned about the field, something that the Forest Service used to be about because the Forest Service, all their administrators used to be field-going guys. Nowadays, a lot of them have never been in the field, and it's really sad. It's kind of like someone telling someone how to ride a bike, but they've never ridden a bike. But they said, "Well, look, I studied it! I studied this class on how to ride a bike."

01:59:56 James Wall:
Yeah, classic middle management.

01:59:58 Wayne Williams:
Yeah, but a couple other things that—I know we're coming to an end—but I just want to mention a couple other things that were really... I want to mention the Mann Gulch Memorial in 1991.

02:00:10 James Wall:
Yeah, we skipped over the—so, 1991 and 1999—there were two different memorials. How did you get involved with 1991? I assume being in the Missoula smokejumper community that you were already aware this was coming up?

02:00:23 Wayne Williams:
Yeah, the centennial was coming.

02:00:25 James Wall:
Yeah. That you were going to have a role in that?

02:00:28 Wayne Williams:
Yeah. So, being that I worked for the [Missoula Smokejumper] Visitor Center and that I was a Qualified Information Officer, that I was usually the guy they approached when they wanted to do some sort of a PR thing. And so, the region, Region One was going to do a lot of different things to celebrate the centennial of the Forest Service. And so, they asked myself and a couple other people to come up with an idea.

02:00:54 Wayne Williams:
So, we decided, “Why don't we do a Mann Gulch Memorial? And what we'll do is that we'll try to get ahold of as many of the surviving family members as we can, invite them out to Missoula. We will build a memorial at the base that will not only be a Mann Gulch Memorial, but also caveat wildland firefighting memorial.

02:01:22 Wayne Williams:
And then we'll have some guest speakers, and hopefully we can get [Robert] Sallee, the only, I think he was the only surviving member left at that time. So, that was our idea, and it was pretty grandiose, because we had no money to build a memorial. We had no organizational system in place, and the person who helped… The two main pushes was myself yyand this woman named Tracy Nimlos. She worked for the Administrative Officer, Jane Haker, and she was kind of on loan to me. But Tracy was invaluable because I was a terrible typer. I was a terrible… I couldn't do a lot of… I didn't have, like, skills, like computer skills. And Tracy had all that stuff.

02:02:15 Wayne Williams:
Plus, she was a really good writer. She was very articulate. And so, the two of us just set out on trying to get this thing going. And so, the first thing—and I don't remember how it all came about—but the first thing we ended up doing is that we’ve got to raise money for this memorial we’ve got to build.

02:02:35 Wayne Williams:
So, we got a hold of the Smokejumper Reunion's first list of people that they contacted for the first Smokejumper Reunion. And then we did a mass mailing to all of them, scrounging money for the memorial, and we brokered that through the Lolo [National Forest] budget people. They helped us. They helped us a great deal, in fact. Oh, what was that woman's name who helped us out?

02:03:07 Wayne Williams:
God, I feel so bad because she was incredibly helpful. But they helped us, the Lolo helped us out quite a bit with that fiscal side. And they were concerned that we weren't going to get the money in time to get a contractor and get the thing built before the before the centennial celebrations would take place. And literally within ten days of sending out those, we had raised almost half the money from ex-jumpers.

02:03:34 Wayne Williams:
In the meantime, Tracy and myself were getting hold of surviving family members. And remember, there was no internet to speak of. So, we were having to call information and find out from information where these Mann Gulch surviving family members were. And the very first person I got ahold of was a woman named Joanne Newcomb, who was Silas R. Thompson's sister. And we talked a little bit earlier about this. She was my very first person I got ahold of, and she was very apprehensive about this guy calling her up and talking about her dead brother. But luckily, she had called her daughter, who was a lawyer in Southern California, and the daughter says, “Look, mom, I think that's cool. You should go out to Missoula. I'll come with you. I've always wanted to go to Missoula.” So, Mary Newcomb is her name, and we're still friends. Joanne passed away a few years

back, and so that's what happened. So, Mary talked Joanne into going, and then it was a snowball after that. Tracy and myself started getting ahold of more and more people, finding them all over the place, coast to coast, everywhere.

02:04:43 Wayne Williams:
And eventually we got ahold of everybody, and we got representation of everybody except for two people. One was I'd have to look at he was also named Thompson. His last name was Thompson: he was from Southern California. And the other was from someplace in New York. And I even contacted the church that his memorial service was at, and no one at the church remembered the family.

02:05:25 Wayne Williams:
So, it's interesting. We did all sorts of crazy shit to try to get ahold of these people. Like at one point I was trying to get a hold of [David] Navon, and I got a clue that his family had settled in Stockton, California. He was a UC Berkeley graduate, and so I contacted the newspaper in Stockton, California. I don't even know what the newspaper was called.

02:05:48 Wayne Williams:
And I got ahold of one of their columnists. Back then, newspapers were the thing, and I told them the story, what we were trying to do. And he said, "Well, you know what, Wayne? It's a long shot, but what the hell? I'll write about it. I'll write about that you're trying to find surviving family members for the Navon family.

02:06:09 Wayne Williams:
And he died at Mann Gulch in 1949. And he runs the story. He calls me one day so excited, that he could barely slow down to explain. He had found Navon's sister. He'd found all this history about the family in Stockton, about how the father had worked for an agricultural equipment manufacturer that made tractors, and that David was born on a steamship from Argentina to the United States because the father had worked down there in agriculture for a while for this company.

02:06:53 Wayne Williams:
All this stuff started coming out. That he was Jewish and that there was a cross over his... I got a call from a synagogue in Stockton where the... I can't remember what they're called in the Jewish faith. A rabbi called me, and he said, "So, Wayne, what about David? Now, why is there a cross over where he died at Mann Gulch? Shouldn't we have a star?" That's what he said. He was very polite and nice. And eventually we did get that star over the site where David was found. That eventually did happen. It's up at Mann Gulch now, but that was another project that I'd worked on. But anyhow, to move this up, because I know this is taking long, eventually we got ahold of all these folks, they all showed up, we got them in a conference room and we kind of explained what the day was going to entail, and that we were going to have a happy hour at the end of the day at one of the restaurants in Missoula. And that we got Robert Sallee to speak, being one of the head speakers. And the Associate Chief of the Forest Service was also going to speak, and George Leonard was the Associate Chief at that time. And George Leonard was

great. Here he is, the Associate Chief in the Forest Service, and he was a field-going guy still.

02:08:37 Wayne Williams:
He still felt a kinship to the field. And I was really glad George was there, it was great. But the Sallee story was sort of interesting, too, because we had no clues about Sallee. You're going to find this hilarious. I found Sallee on a complete whim. I knew he lived in Spokane, Washington, but I had no clue.

02:08:59 Wayne Williams:
So, I just start looking, call up information, and I said, "I'm looking for this guy named Robert Sallee, blah, blah, blah." And the information lady goes, "Well, there's a Sallee here, a Sallee here, and a Sallee here." So, I called all three numbers. Well, I eventually get this one woman and she goes, "No, I don't know Robert Sallee, but I do know he takes his car to the same mechanic I go to." I said, "Really?" She goes, "Yeah, yeah, yeah. Because I go to this one mechanic. I went in there and I dropped my car off, and they said, 'Oh, your name is the same as this guy.' And I remember they said it was Robert Sallee."

02:09:41 Wayne Williams:
And I said, "Huh." I go, "Could you give me the number?" So, they gave me the number of the mechanic, or the auto shop. I call it up and the lady answers and she's at first very suspicious of me. And I said, "My name's Wayne Williams: . I'm trying to locate Robert Sallee, the survivor of Mann Gulch.

02:10:06 Wayne Williams:
We're having a memorial in the spring. And is he one of your customers?" And she says, "Run that by me again." So, I explained the whole thing and she goes, "I'll tell you what, I'm not going to give you his number. I'm going to call him, and if he happens to call you back, fine." I said, Okay." It's my best shot.

02:10:31 Wayne Williams:
I get a phone call back the next day from Robert Sallee, and I explain to him that we're doing this memorial. And I just said, "I wanted somebody who was there." I said, "There's going to be bureaucrats speaking, but I want a guy there who's a firefighter," because he didn't initially want to do it, but he did it.

02:10:50 Wayne Williams:
And it was a great speech. And I still have that speech. And he did the same speech with a little bit of rearranging on the 1999 fiftieth anniversary of Mann Gulch as well. And I remember what Sallee said to me at the fiftieth anniversary. I was driving him and his wife back to his hotel. He says, "Wayne, so what are you going to do for the hundredth? Because I'm going to be dead." And I said, "Yep, I don't know who's going to talk at the hundredth."

02:11:18 James Wall:
Maybe his kid or something.

02:11:19 Wayne Williams:
Yeah, no, he had a really good sense of humor. Later on his sister would contact me when I worked for the State of Montana and asked me if I could bring her up to Mann Gulch and I got her on a staff ride up to Mann Gulch, Sallee's sister. And she may still be alive. Sallee passed away a few years back. He was really a good guy. I really liked him. I liked him a lot, and I had long conversations with him. But that whole experience, meeting all those family members…

02:11:54 James Wall:
Did he tell you anything you didn't know? Or put you in the moment of the fire?

02:11:58 Wayne Williams:
Yeah, we talked about this earlier, but I think Joanne's story, and then there's another story, and I've got to be careful about that because I'm not sure if that individual would want this information to come out. But I'll say it from more of an anonymous… But Joanne Newcomb, who was Silas R. Thompson's sister, described to me the day in Charlotte, North Carolina, that they got word that Silas had died on Mann Gulch, and she was at the top of a stairwell.

02:12:41 Wayne Williams:
Her father was a doctor, it was a large house, and it was Sunday morning. And they get a knock and there's a sheriff at the door, or someone in law enforcement. All of a sudden, the words of the sheriff come out and Joanne doesn't necessarily understand it, but her mother drops to her knees, her father starts moaning, sort of like, "Oh, my! Oh, my!"

02:13:05 Wayne Williams:
Or something to that effect. And she told me that she'll never forget that day, that it was just burned in her memory. And to me, that really brought it home for me. And then the other person, and I want to keep this anonymous because I'm not so sure she'd want this, but it was one of the survivors' wife, and she had a one-two gut punch to her.

02:13:41 Wayne Williams:
Not only did she lose her husband, but she would later on have a miscarriage. Well, what was interesting—why I'm just trying to keep it private—because I had the feeling that she told me this information and she wanted it to be protected. She may not even be alive anymore.

02:14:12 Wayne Williams:
I don't know. But at the end of the day, she said something after that that really meant a great deal to me. And I told Tracy, too, because Tracy was such a help on this whole thing. But she told me, she says, "You know, Wayne, I didn't want to come to this because I didn't want to conjure up these bad feelings about my dead husband and my dead child, I didn't want this to all come back."

02:14:39 Wayne Williams:
But she goes, “I came here anyway. I'm really glad you talked me into it. And talking to all the other family surviving members, this has been one of the best days of my life. And I wanted you to know that.” And yeah, it was heartbreaking. But at the same time, I kind of felt that I was happy that she... I'm sure it wasn't great for her either, but for some reason, something happened. And then I went back, and I told Tracy the story. And of course, both of us were... Yeah, it was... To think that something happened so long ago, and we were bringing it all back in the nineties. You know, 1991. But I think more good came out of that day than bad.

02:15:32 Wayne Williams:
In fact, a lot more good came out. Because to see all those people together, and when we got them all down at the restaurant, where people were getting a few beers and some wine in them, and I remember George Leonard, Associate Chief, was just being kind of moved around by all the PR people of the region.

02:15:58 Wayne Williams:
And he was getting sick and tired of being dragged around. He wanted to hang out and talk to the surviving family members of Mann Gulch. And eventually he was kind of shooing them like they were flies. “Leave me alone. I want to talk to these people.” And the evening icebreaker was great. All of us were just chatting away, and there was a lot of positive laughter from this fatality.

02:16:34 Wayne Williams:
I don't know how to describe that, but it was sort of like enough time had moved on that these people could talk about these loved ones who were lost at Mann Gulch and laugh about things that had happened in their lives. And yeah, that was interesting to do a project like that and... And the fiftieth was... A lot of the same characters came back, but it wasn't as emotional as that first, because at that time I had a list of all the surviving members and I was able to help with the fiftieth anniversary with this already arsenal of paperwork to get this stuff done.

02:17:25 Wayne Williams:
And we did some cool things. We fixed up, we put new markers in at Mann Gulch. Got the Navon’s star up there. Put in some new memorials along the Missouri River, just did a lot of really cool stuff. And we had a nice icebreaker out in the woods near Mann Gulch, and that was a fun thing, too.

02:17:54 Wayne Williams:
And we had a celebration on the lawn of the Capitol, the State Capitol, and the Governor, [Marc] Racicot, the Governor was there. He spoke, and then the Chief of the Forest Service, which was, oh, God, he spoke. He was a really good chief, too.

02:18:15 James Wall:
1991?

02:18:16 Wayne Williams:
Yeah. It was before…

02:18:23 James Wall:
Jack Ward Thomas?

02:18:25 Wayne Williams:
It was after Ward Thomas. God, it's just terrible that I can't… No, Robertson, I think, was before. And then there was, was it [Michael] Dombeck who was in there? Dale. Dale Bosworth?

02:18:46 James Wall:
Oh, yeah.

02:18:47 Wayne Williams:
It was Dale Bosworth. God, my memory, so bad.

02:18:51 James Wall:
Wait, for 1999? Or 1991?

02:18:52 Wayne Williams:
1999.

02:18:53 James Wall:
Yeah, he's a local.

02:18:54 Wayne Williams:
It was Dale Bosworth. Yeah, he is a local. And Dale… Have you interviewed him yet?

02:19:00 James Wall:
No, we interviewed his wife. Oh, okay. Yeah, And he's on a lot of board… Yeah. Yeah. Things for the museum. So, he's around for sure, but really nice guy.

02:19:10 Wayne Williams:
Yeah. Dale had a really… Between Dale and Sallee, their speeches were the best at that 1999 celebration, or I should say, fiftieth anniversary of Mann Gulch. There's one other thing I want to mention that doesn't have anything to do with Mann Gulch, but I want to mention the 555th. Yeah. So, this was another project that I worked on that…

02:19:36 James Wall:
The parachute regiment.

02:19:37 Wayne Williams:
Right. And when South Canyon happened, South Canyon happened the same year as the fiftieth anniversary of Smokey Bear. And I was on a group already working out of the Washington Office during the winter months before the fire season started in 1994,

working on this Smokey Bear 50th Anniversary. And so, when South Canyon happened, after South Canyon, I flew back to Washington, DC.

02:20:19 Wayne Williams:
Yeah, it was kind of a strange thing to do, but I flew to Washington DC because I was part of the group that was helping with this fiftieth anniversary. And the thing that I'd organized was to get recognition for the 555th, this all-black paratrooping battalion.

02:20:39 Wayne Williams:
Because they had helped us during the balloon bombs that were launched by the Japanese towards the end of the Second World War to basically start fires. And they were sent out west to help with that cause. A lot of people don't even know these balloon bombs ever happened, but they did happen, and there were several thousands of them, and some made it as far east as places like Iowa and Michigan.

02:21:09 Wayne Williams:
But in general, the idea was the Japanese would get these balloons up into the jet stream, get them across the Pacific, and then they would start dropping incendiary devices. They made one huge mistake. And the huge mistake was that it was the wrong time of year. It was a little bit too early. But anyhow, they decided that they would mobilize this 555th Parachute Battalion to come out and help with these balloon bombs.

02:21:39 Wayne Williams:
They would end up just helping out, jumping fires and suppressing fires for the Forest Service because the balloon bombs didn't really materialize and they didn't really work that well. They did cause a few fires and they did actually cause a couple of fatalities in Bly, Oregon. But in general, they did not turn out to be the threat that everybody thought they would be.

02:22:03 Wayne Williams:
But the 555th came out and they helped during that fire season of 1945. And basically, we wanted to give them recognition at Smokey Bear's 50th Anniversary. And that was kind of the area that I was working in. And we did. And we got them recognition. And then later on, the military, the next year would give them recognition at Arlington Cemetery, which I was invited to, and I helped out a little bit with that too.

02:22:31 Wayne Williams:
But to this day, I'm still in contact with some of the 555th. I'm a member of their organization. I joined their organization. I'll show you. I know I'm moving a little bit. I'll be cautious of your microphone here, if I can. They gave this to me in Arlington Cemetery. And note, I don't know if it's hard to see, but note their logo is a black panther.

02:23:14 Wayne Williams:
Oh, wow. Right there. They gave you some patches, and I've never worn it, just because I'm so proud of it.

02:23:27 James Wall:
Wow. Okay, I got it. Yeah.

02:23:31 Wayne Williams:
And the other thing, too, is that I don't… I would end up jumping and carrying a camera my whole career, my whole Forest Service career, most of my wildland firefighting career. And I ended up scanning 8000 slides and they're all digitized now. Some of the slides are over there, some of them are over here, but it took me… When I retired in 2016, I completed the project in 2021.

02:24:15 Wayne Williams:
Wow. And there's 8000 slides. I have them organized in fire seasons. And I also have some of the Mann Gulch Memorial, the Mann Gulch 50th, both of the 555th celebrations. So, every once in a while, I can kind of look back in my career and I can just look at the photos. Yeah. And it's just kind of cool. And I also kept records of all the fires I was on, too.

02:24:45 James Wall:
Wow. Well, someday you should donate those to an archive. It doesn't matter which one.

02:24:49 Wayne Williams:
Yeah, well, they're all digital, so I can donate them anytime. Yeah. Yeah. I've already donated all the photographs to the National Smokejumper Association. But I'm happy to donate them to the Forest Service Museum, being they're digital. Yeah. I just have to make access to the file and…

02:25:09 James Wall:
Yeah, well, we'll put you in touch with Dave [Stack]. He'll be thrilled to at least look at all those.

02:25:15 Wayne Williams:
It's a lot.

02:25:16 James Wall:
Yeah. It's a good way of reliving it, though. So, I always have a few questions at the end. Sure. Was there a favorite time in your career? Not a most accomplished time, but where you were having the most fun?

02:25:32 Wayne Williams:
I think it would be midway through my jumping career, probably from around 1989 to about 1999, somewhere in there, that ten-year span. A lot of really cool things happened. A lot of neat projects that I worked on, and then a lot of really interesting fire assignments. And then, one thing I didn't mention: I've been on also flood and hurricane assignments, too.

02:26:12 Wayne Williams:
I was at Katrina, and I was also at of the first hurricanes that a lot of Forest Service people were sent to: Hugo, which a lot of people don't remember. That happened on the Croatan [National Forest]. Yeah. Just in South Carolina there, not far from... I'm trying to think of the name of that... Charleston, just north of Charleston.

02:26:41 Wayne Williams:
But those times were in there, too. Being on those hurricane assignments were really interesting times. You really just did things that you weren't so much used to: maybe every once while you were using a chainsaw, but in general, I did a lot of public affairs stuff and safety stuff.

02:27:07 Wayne Williams:
And I really enjoyed that.

02:27:09 James Wall:
Yeah. Is there one mentor that you would single out who put you on the right path?

02:27:21 Wayne Williams:
I'm very fortunate to say I had so many good mentors. I'm not going to say there was one mentor particularly, but I will say there was one mentor who put me on the right path, that is. My very first foreman when I worked for Cal Fire, then the California Department of Forestry. There was a guy named Mel Butler, and he happened to be from Thompson Falls, Montana.

02:27:57 Wayne Williams:
And I really appreciated him because I told him I wanted to be a smokejumper. I was only seventeen or eighteen years old. And he says, "Well, we'll try to get you that," but he goes, "That's a tough outfit to get into," he told me. And he says, "I'm from Montana and yeah, like I said, it's a tough outfit to get into, but we'll see what we can do."

02:28:20 Wayne Williams:
And he wrote me this... He was a real field-going guy and he was like me, not the greatest speller and not the greatest writer, but he wrote me one of the most misspelled, greatest job recommendations I ever got. And if it wasn't for him, I don't think that a lot of things would have happened to where I would've been exposed to those other mentors.

02:28:45 Wayne Williams:
So, he was sort of like the guy who opened the door. I would see Mel on a fire assignment in 1987, right before he retired, in California. And it was really good to see him, and he was happy that I'd become a smokejumper. He ended up retiring and moving back to Thompson Falls, and he died pretty young.

02:29:08 Wayne Williams:
He smoked cigs, and he's from that generation. But yeah, he definitely was someone who... I guess what was important about him is that he made me feel like I could do it, I

think. Because one thing I didn't mention is that when I was in high school and I was getting ready to graduate, I went in to see my counselor.

02:29:41 Wayne Williams:
I never saw my counselor. I've just never felt I needed him. But I went in there and I said I wanted to become a smokejumper. And do you know what guy said to me? He told me they don't use smokejumpers anymore. This is in 1974, January of '74. "They don't use smokejumpers anymore, they're using helicopters. You should pick something else."

02:29:59 Wayne Williams:
I'm really glad I never listened to him, and I'm really glad I had a guy like Mel Butler say that I could probably do it.

02:30:07 James Wall:
Yeah. Who was the best smokejumper you ever worked with?

02:30:16 Wayne Williams:
That's a tough one, too.

02:30:17 James Wall:
But just purely in terms of the skill aspect of it?

02:30:23 Wayne Williams:
Skill?

02:30:24 James Wall:
Yeah, just...

02:30:26 Wayne Williams:
I would probably say Jeff Kinderman, he was an insanely skilled guy. He was really good in the loft. He was a really good foreman. He was a really good mentor. He was a good firefighter and a good friend.

02:30:41 James Wall:
Yeah, well, last question is always: when you think of the Forest Service now, or smokejumping in general, and smokejumping and the Forest Service aren't necessarily synonymous in terms of the culture.

02:30:55 Wayne Williams:
Yeah. Yeah. That is interesting that you put it that way because I feel that exactly. Yeah. So, I'll start with smokejumping first. I think smokejumping is the one of the last refuges of sanity in the Forest Service. It still has a lot of self-sufficiency. It still has a lot of self-governing, a lot of leadership, a lot of raw skills that are being taught from firefighting to falling trees to prescribed fire to many things that can help someone even when they're no longer smokejumpers.

02:31:39 Wayne Williams:
So, to me, it's that island of sanity in the Forest Service. Now, as far as the Forest Service is concerned, it was one of the greatest things that ever happened to me as a place to work. I have no regret one bit working for the Forest Service, but it's sort of like... I'm very sad by what has happened to the organization.

02:32:08 Wayne Williams:
And I think a guy who worked for the Forest Service for over thirty-five years has a right to be a little critical. I think I do. And I worked in the Washington Office. I worked in this Regional Office here in Missoula. I wasn't just a field-going guy. So, I dabbled in these other worlds in the Forest Service.

02:32:30 Wayne Williams:
I worked in timber a little bit, I worked in wildlife, I worked in fisheries, I did all this stuff. And it was so, so all-welcoming to me, where now, I look at the Forest Service and people don't do that anymore. They're not interconnected. They're fragmented, and they don't talk to each other. And here's a really big difference: people are scared to talk to the media about the Forest Service. They're afraid they're going to lose their job. There were times where I talked to the media and I was critical about the Forest Service, and I was never scared about losing my job. I knew that I might have some bureaucrat call me on the phone and rip me a new one.

02:33:20 Wayne Williams:
I knew that it might restrict my career a little bit. Maybe not, but maybe it could. But I was never in fear. And sometimes I would have these heated discussions with... I remember one time I had a heated discussion with the.. her name was Beth Horn, she was the Regional... I'm trying to remember... I think it was called, “Information and Government Affairs,” or, “Information and Public Affairs.”

02:33:51 Wayne Williams:
I can't remember. But she was the director of that. And Beth Horn and myself, we didn’t see eye-to-eye on a lot of information things. In fact, we weren't always so cordial. But in general, we did work together on a lot of projects. And there was one time that Beth and myself were out on the sidewalk of the old regional office

02:34:16 Wayne Williams:
that was at the federal building, and we were talking about this fire that I had jumped over in the Salmon [-Challis National Forest] and that the fire got away from us, and it would be taken over by a Type 1 team. And our little jump crew got absorbed by that Type 1 team and we became overhead on that team.

02:34:46 Wayne Williams:
But what happened was, the one thing that we did right away is that once the fire overtook us and we knew the main thing that we had to do was find a place for us to safely hang out, was the first thing. So, there was this house that was surrounded by Forest Service property.

02:35:06 Wayne Williams:
And we went down there because we wanted to make sure whoever lived there that they were safe. This fire was going berserk. It was in 1992 or 1993, somewhere in there. And as soon as we got down to the house, the guy was driving, the owner was driving his truck frantically out of there because the fire was bubbling all over the place.

02:35:29 Wayne Williams:
And he had a bunch of guns and food in the back of his truck. And he said something to the effect to us—there were like six of us, I think—and he said, "Save yourselves! I'm going out!" And I said, "Well, what we're going to do, we're going to burn out your meadow right now.

02:35:48 Wayne Williams:
Is that okay with you?" He says, "Yeah, yeah, do whatever you got!" And I go, "We'll try to save your camp, but the main thing, we want to burn out this meadow so we have a place to hang." Back to the fundamentals of wildland firefighting: a nice flat meadow on super-steep ground was the perfect place. He goes, "Yeah, do whatever you want!" Voom! Off he went, cloud of dust. And so, we burned off that meadow and it was close. We probably burned close to a hundred acres. We did it in pieces. Finally got this nice, huge safe zone, and the fire burned around us. And then we burned away from the cabin because we figured we didn't really care about saving the cabin.

02:36:27 Wayne Williams:
And he told us not to try to save it, but because of the way the fire was, once it hit the meadow, it sort of started butt-hooking around, going towards the cabin. So, we just started bringing fire from the meadow and following the fire, and basically burning out, sort of backfiring at the same time. Because as we burned out, those fires pushed into the main fire and we ended up saving the cabin.

02:36:55 Wayne Williams:
So, what happened was, is that this guy, the owner, was so thankful for us saving this cabin that he was interviewed by someone in one of the bigger Idaho newspapers. And of course, Beth had read the article and she was a little upset about this article. And that was what the discussion was on the sidewalk. And I said, "Well, what's the problem, Beth?"

02:37:22 Wayne Williams:
And she just said, "Well, I don't know if it was the greatest thing for you guys to try to save that cabin, and those types of people that are living within the forest now, I just don't know if that's the best thing." And I said, "Well, that's what we did.

02:37:41 Wayne Williams:
You may not like it, that's fine. That's what we did. It made sense to us." And it was just kind of... But I didn't hold that against Beth, and I didn't think that Beth was wrong in her attitude or wrong in her opinion. It was just simply her opinion. And I always respected Beth. And we antagonized each other quite often, but I was never in fear that this director was going to try to fire me.

02:38:10 Wayne Williams:
You know what I mean? And that's the sad state of affairs now. And it's just super sad. I have no idea when I see Forest Service people out in the woods now and I talk to them, I understand that a lot of them... I talk to them. I talk to them about... I spend a great deal of time down in Arizona during the winter months, like a lot of people do.

02:38:36 Wayne Williams:
We have a little place there in Tucson, and I'm very close to the Santa Catalinas on the Coronado, which was a forest that I had a couple of times done details on, and I had hiked all throughout the Santa Catalinas. And a lot of times I would find these signs that the Forest Service had put up: “The trail is closed six miles up because of fire.”

02:39:02 Wayne Williams:
Now, the fire had burned through months ago, and I just kind of thought, "What the hell are they talking about? So, I just, “The hell with that shit, I’m hiking it.” So, I thought, “You know, I’m a firefighter, I can do this.” So, I hike in there and I don't understand. Not only did the fire do a lot of good, but it made the trail easier to follow.

02:39:19 Wayne Williams:
And I kind of thought, aren't they even sending people up here physically to see what the trail’s all about? Are they just so paranoid about someone getting hurt that they don't even assess what they actually have, and hike up here and see that it's perfectly safe for people to hike? And to me, it's just sort of like they're so removed from the field, and the field is what they're managing. And I talked to these trail crew guys and I kind of said, “Hey, so have you guys been up Esperero Trail, all the way up towards Window Rock?” And they said, “Oh, no, no, they won't let us go that far up because of the fire burning up there.”

02:40:00 Wayne Williams:
And I said, “Well, why? It's pretty clear.” “Well, they say it's not clear.” And I'm just kind of going, “Someone needs to walk up there.” I go, “You guys need to get up there and see what it is.” And that's the thing. It's this detachment from the field. It's literal. It's literally they're detached from the field.

02:40:20 Wayne Williams:
Here I am, pushing seventy years old, and I know more about the trail system in the Santa Catalinas than the forest does. That shouldn't be the case. I should be asking them the questions.

02:40:33 James Wall:
Well, hopefully they'll get back out on the dirt at some point.

02:40:36 Wayne Williams:
I hope so.