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Smokejumper biographies for 1940 rookie class

National Smokejumper Association

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1940 Smokejumper Rookies

James A. “Smokey” Alexander (Missoula '40)

The last member of the original 1940 smokejumper crew, Jim Alexander, died June 23, 2014. Smokey was one of the thirteen original smokejumpers trained in 1940. Twelve were smokejumpers, and the other was Dr. Leo Martin who was trained for civilian rescue operations. Smokey was a graduate of the University of Montana and the forest service employee who represented the Cabinet NF in the first smokejumper training group.

From a 2004 interview with *Smokejumper* magazine: “To choose who would be the first smokejumpers, (David) Godwin decided to choose ten men, one to represent each of the ten major forests. He wanted each man to have a minimum of five years experience fighting fires. The supervisor chose me in the spring of '40 to represent the Cabinet National Forest.

“We were at a place called Blanchard Flats, just north of Seeley Lake. Each new jumper made six practice jumps: three jumps at Blanchard Flats and three jumps at the landing strip before any were made in timber. We had two minor injuries during the training. One was a sprained ankle. The other was one guy’s ripcord got caught in the shroud lines, and he pulled his shoulder pulling the ripcord. Another guy didn’t pull his ripcord until 2,000 feet, and Frank Derry sent the guy on his way. The guy didn’t want to continue jumping anyway.”

On July 20, 1940, he and Dick Lynch (MS0-40) jumped the third fire in smokejumper history on the Cox Creek Fire, Bitterroot NF. They found the fire by coordinating azimuth readings from two lookouts and put it out shortly after smoke started appearing above the trees. The fire was so isolated that it took them 19 hours to walk about 40 miles to the nearest ranger station.

Smokey began Intermountain Business Forms in 1960 while living in Boise. After moving to North Carolina in 1989, he and his wife, Dorothy, returned to Boise in 2005.

Earl E. Cooley (Missoula '40)

Earl, 98, died November 9, 2009, at his home in Missoula. He graduated from Corvallis (Montana) High School in 1930 and started Forestry School at the University of Montana in 1937 graduating in 1941. Earl was a member of the first smokejumper group trained in 1940 at Seeley Lake, MT. There were seven trainees selected from Region 1. One failed his physical, the other dropped out, leaving four trainees in at Seeley Lake. Rufus Robinson completed his training earlier at Winthrop. Earl completed his training with seven jumps.

On July 12, 1940, he and Rufus Robinson made the first fire jumps in U.S. history on the Marten Creek Fire on the Nez Perce NF.

Earl started work as a District Ranger on the Nez Perce NF in 1950 and returned to Missoula as Smoke-jumper Base Superintendent in 1958. In 1971 he became a Regional Equipment Specialist retiring in 1975 to pursue a career in real estate. He was one of the founders of the National Smokejumper Association.

Chester N. Derry (Missoula '40)

Chet, 31, died April 20, 1947, when the Johnson Flying Service plane he was piloting collided with another plane over the airport at Hamilton, Montana. He was born April 19, 1916, in Wenatchee, WA.

Chet was one of the four professional parachute jumpers to participate in the USFS 1939 experimental parachute program at Winthrop, Washington. The USFS smokejumper program starting in 1940 was the result of the success of the 1939 experimental program.

Chet made the first smokejumper rescue jump on July 15, 1940, when he parachuted to a downed Johnson Flying Service Travelair on the Bitterroot NF. Pilot Bob Maricich was on a cargo run when a wing clipped a tree. He was killed and cargo kicker Del Claybaugh was seriously injured. Chet had three fire jumps that season and two more during the 1941 season.

Chet went into the Army Air Corps in 1943 and was a pilot with the Air Transport Command in China and Burma flying the "hump." Upon his discharge from the military in 1946, Chet returned to Missoula and joined the Johnson Flying Service as an instructor and pilot. He is buried in the Missoula, Montana, Cemetery.

Frank M. Derry (Missoula '40)

Frank Derry died August 2, 1968, in Kalispell, Montana, five days after his 64th birthday. He was a resident of Bigfork. Frank was born July 27, 1904, in Wenatchee, WA. Frank spent the summer of 1922 as a smokechaser on the Wenatchee NF.

In 1934 Frank moved to California and worked for Northrop Aircraft in the Los Angeles area. Frank established the Derry Parachute Service business in 1936 and became the west coast distributor of Eagle Parachutes.

In 1939 Frank, brothers Chet and Virgil, and Glenn Smith provided the professional expertise for the USFS experimental parachute project in Winthrop, Washington. All four were professional parachutists from the Los Angeles area.

The USFS smokejumper program, born in 1940, was a result of the success of the 1939 experimental program. Frank is responsible for the development of the static line system in 1941 and the steerable parachute in 1942-43. The addition of "Derry slots" and guidelines allowed any standard flat parachute to be converted into one which fit the needs of a person parachuting into rugged terrain. Frank continued on with the smokejumper program until 1945.

Frank's contribution to the smokejumper program cannot be overstated. He was head instructor to an estimated 400 smokejumpers. His development of jump suits, harnesses, and parachute canopies was key to the new smokejumper program.

Virgil W. Derry (Winthrop '40)

Virgil, 86, of Sun City, Arizona, died January 31, 1995, after a brief illness. He was born in November 1908 in Chelan, WA. Along with Glenn Smith and his brothers Frank and Chet, he was one of the four original members of the 1939 USFS experimental parachute program which led to the establishment of the smokejumper program.

"I was driving a laundry truck in Wenatchee, WA, in 1939 when Frank contacted me and asked if I wanted to make some money?" That took him to the experimental program at Winthrop. "The first tree I landed in was about a 100-foot pine. I stayed there for about two hours trying to get up enough nerve to climb down. The ground crew told me to come down by wrapping my arms and legs around the trunk and sliding down. Didn't make sense at first, but I tried it and it worked. After that, they gave us ropes to use."

Virgil only jumped the 1940 season at Winthrop. On August 11, 1940, Virgil and George Honey jumped the second fire in Region 6 history. It was his only fire jump of his short smokejumper career.

He later worked in Spokane as a parachute technician rigging for the Army pilots until the war was over. Virgil went to Belfast, Ireland, in 1944 to instruct Army parachutists and riggers in preparation for the invasion. After the war, he owned and operated a couple motels, owned a couple shrimp boats in Texas, and lost it all in a 1970 hurricane. He moved to Hawaii and started hang gliding at the age of 65 for ten years until the authorities refused to allow him to continue.

Virgil retired to Sun City, AZ, in 1991.

George P. Honey (Winthrop '40)

Smokejumping lost one of its original pioneers with the passing of George Phillip Honey on Dec. 3, 2001, in Entiat, WA, at the age of 95.

George began his career with the Forest Service in 1940, jumping out of Winthrop. He was also a spotter and cargo dropper and patrolled the wilderness for fires. From 1943 to 1946, he lived at 8 Mile Ranch and managed the ranch and the Forest Service horses and mules. During the '40s, George and his partner, Francis Lufkin (NCSB '40), trapped in the Pasayten area and hunted cougars.

In 1948 he went to work for the Road Department and became Construction and Maintenance Foreman for Roads and Trails in the Chelan National Forest, which at that time included the Okanogan National Forest. His first project after becoming foreman was the "Great Flood of 48" and he was deluged with work on washed-out roads and trails. He continued with the Road Department until his retirement in 1967.

George was born on Feb. 10, 1906, at Fort Walla Walla, WA, to Allen and Anna (Enfield) Honey. That same year George moved with his parents and two older brothers by riverboat up the Columbia River to homestead on Tunk Mountain near Conconully, WA. He attended school in Conconully and Pleasant Valley.

George was an avid horseman and worked at that trade for many years, participating in many area rodeos. He enlisted in the Army and served in the Philippine Islands. While in the Army, he became a boxer. Returning from the Army, he boxed professionally under the name "Soldier George Honey." On Sept. 7, 1932, he married Hazel Zackman. They had two sons, George, Jr. and Raymond.

After retiring from the Forest Service, he worked for Wagner Lumber as foreman in the rock crushing operations, as well as for Rollie Schrier's Cement Plant and Archie Walter's feedlot in the Basin. George was an avid hunter, bagging many species of big game. His favorite hunting was in British Columbia with his brother, Leonard, and son, George, Jr.

Francis B. Lufkin (Winthrop '40)

Francis, 83, died on February 12, 1998, in Bellingham, WA. He was born August 1, 1914, in Auburn, WA. Francis graduated from high school in 1933 and went to work seasonally for the USFS. During the winter, he worked as a faller/bucker and ran trap lines in the Methow Valley near Winthrop.

Francis was one of the USFS employees assigned to the 1939 experimental parachute program as a climber to help get parachutes out of the trees. One thing led to another and, after 30 minutes of instruction given by Frank Derry, he made his first parachute jump on November 10, 1939.

In 1940 Francis, George Honey, Dick Tuttle, and Rufus Robinson were trained at Winthrop for the first

smokejumper crew. On August 10, 1940, he and Glenn Smith made the first fire jumps in Region 6. In 1941 he went to Nine Mile RS for refresher training and to learn parachute rigging before returning to Winthrop to be dispatcher for the Chelan NF and manage cargo dropping operations. This pattern continued for the 1942-44 fire seasons.

In 1945 he became the Chelan NF Parachute Project Officer, and the Winthrop Base opened with a crew of conscientious objector jumpers (CPS-103).

Francis went on to manage the North Cascades smokejumper base until 1972 when he retired after 33 years with the USFS. He is buried in the Sullivan Cemetery, Winthrop, WA.

Richard Charles Lynch (Missoula '40)

Dick was born December 8, 1908, in Shakopee, Scott County, Minnesota. By 1930, he moved to Columbia Falls, Montana, working as a laborer in a lumber camp and by October 1940, he was working for the Flathead NF as a Forest Guard. He was one of the seven selected representatives from several forests in Region 1, to start the smokejumper program in 1940. Richard was the representative from the Flathead NF. One of the men in the original group did not pass the physical and the other dropped out during training.

Dick was 32 years old when he rookied in 1940. In his second year, he was the squadleader for the crew at Big Prairie RS and had 13 jumps when he ended his smokejumping career at the end of the 1941 season. He was the spotter for half of the 34 fire jumps made in 1941. Dick married in Minnesota in March of 1941 and returned there after the 1941 fire season. He died June 22, 1944, at the Glen Lake Sanatorium, Hennepin County, Minnesota. The sanatorium was primarily a treatment center for tuberculosis in 1944.

Dr. Leo Paul Martin (Missoula '40)

Leo, 38, died in a plane crash October 25, 1942, at the Army Airfield in Walla Walla, Washington. He graduated from the Creighton University School of Medicine in 1927 and was a Captain in the Army Medical Corps at the time of this death.

Captain Martin was a well-known physician and surgeon from the Anaconda and Philipsburg (MT) areas. He and his pilot instructor were killed when the plane struck a power line.

Dr. Martin was born in the Flathead country of Montana in 1903 and received his license to practice in Montana in 1934. He was practicing in Missoula prior to his enlistment in the Army medical corps.

Dr. Martin took smokejumper training in 1940 in order to be able to parachute for rescue operations. He might have been the first doctor in the United States to do so, and his training marked the initial milestone in rescue jumping. He is buried at St. Mary's Cemetery in Missoula.

Rufus P. Robinson (Missoula' 40)

Pioneer smokejumper Rufus Robinson died May 3, 1987. He was born in 1905 at Wallowa, Oregon, and his family moved to Turlock, California, in 1919. Rufus was the first of the 1940 Missoula crew to receive smokejumper training, going to Winthrop, Washington, to do so. He then returned to Montana to start construction of the parachute loft at Moose Creek.

On July 10, 1940, Earl Cooley, Jim Waite, Jim Alexander, Dick Lynch and Chet Derry joined Robinson at Moose Creek. Merle Lundrigan, not a jumper at that time, was assigned as the squadleader for the group.

On July 12, 1940, Rufus and Earl made the first fire jumps in the United States on the Marten Creek Fire, Nez Perce NF. Jim "Smokey" Alexander (MSO-40) recounts the first fire jump in a 2004 interview with *Smokejumper* magazine: "They went 'eeny-meeny-mieny-mo' and then decided on Rufe and Earl. Rufe, because he was an older man, about 35, and Earl had to be about 22.

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

Robinson only jumped the 1940 and '41 seasons before moving on to pursue work in the roofing business. Rufus had the high number of fire jumps for the 1940 season with five.

He married in 1942 and lived in Santa Cruz, California, and Pasco, Washington. In 1958 he moved to Klamath Falls, Oregon, and in 1966 to Lenore, Idaho, where he worked as a roofer until he retired. He is buried in the Wallowa Cemetery.

Glenn H. Smith (Winthrop '40)

Glenn, 73, died of natural causes in Tucson, Arizona, March 28, 1988. He was born June 1914 in Paden City, West Virginia, and moved to California during the 1920s. Glenn graduated from Gardena High School in 1934. During high school, he suffered an eye injury in a basketball accident and lost the sight in his left eye.

In 1934 he made his first exhibition parachute jump at Gardena Valley Airport in South Los Angeles with Frank Derry as spotter. He joined Frank's group and became a barnstorming parachutist. Glen worked in the local oil fields and also in the Derry Parachute Service Shop. Glenn and Frank jumped airshows from Mexicali to Arizona.

When the contract was awarded for the experimental parachute program in 1939, Glenn went north with Frank. Although he was hired primarily as a parachute rigger for the project, he was injured on his 2nd jump preventing him from further jumping in the project.

In 1940 Glenn was hired by the Chelan NF as a "Smoke Jumper-Rigger." The forest also hired the Derry brothers, George Honey, Francis Lufkin and Dick Tuttle. After training at Winthrop Glenn and the Derry brothers went to Seeley Lake to train the Region 1 jumpers. Glenn and Virgil returned to Region 6 after the training. On August 10, 1940, Glenn and Francis Lufkin made the first fire jump in Region 6.

1941 found him being hired by Region 1. There was a large amount of paperwork and administrative problems dealing with hiring a smokejumper with one eye—but he was hired. From 1942-44 he was a civilian employee of the Army Air Force in AZ and CA. He returned to smokejumping in May 1944.

1946-51 found Glenn working as a Foreman, parachute technician in Region 1. In November 1951 he resigned from the FS and transferred to the CIA as a GS-11, Administrative Assistant. He worked in Japan from 1952-55, and Okinawa 1958-61. Glenn moved to Marana, AZ, in 1963 where he was loft foreman for Intermountain Aviation until about 1967.

Glenn made his last parachute jump in 1964 on his 50th birthday at the Marana Air Park. His two sons, Ben (MSO-64) and Mike (MSO-69), were also smokejumpers.

Richard E. "Dick" Tuttle (Winthrop '40)

Dick, 46, died March 25, 1964, in Hoquiam, Washington. He was born in Fort Thomas, AZ. He was one of the 16 members of the F.S. Smokejumping Experimental group in 1939 and participated as an employee of the Eagle Parachute Corporation.

For several previous summers he, along with Al Honey, were smoke chasers on the Chelan NF. The two of them made their "first-timer" jumps on October 16 from about 3,000 feet in 30-foot Eagle parachutes. Dick made eleven jumps during the experiment. The local media named Dick and Al the "The Original Jumping Smoke Chasers." After the experimental jumps ended, Dick went to Pennsylvania to work for the Eagle Parachute Corporation becoming an "expert jumper," a licensed rigger, licensed to train other jumpers, and making exhibition jumps.

Dick returned to Winthrop in 1940 and trained to become one of the five smokejumpers on the 1940 Winthrop crew. On June 27, Dick was seriously injured when he fell from a tree, adjacent to the Winthrop Ranger Station, while installing an antenna in the top of a tree. The injuries from the fall prevented him from being able to make any more parachute jumps.

Although not able to make parachute jumps, he worked as a parachute rigger for the F.S. the summer of 1940, and later as a parachute rigger instructor for the Civil Aeronautics Administration. In 1958 Dick was living in Spokane, Washington, working as a construction worker.

In 1964 he committed suicide after being in the county jail for one day. Dick's ashes are buried in the Sullivan Cemetery, Winthrop, Washington, with the grave marker inscribed "Pioneer Smoke Jumper."

James Vernon Waite (Missoula '40)

Pioneer smokejumper Jim Waite died June 4, 1999, in Walla Walla, Washington. Jim was born in 1917 in Okanogan, WA, and grew up in Kooskia, Idaho. In 1940, Jim represented the Clearwater National Forest in the initial smokejumper program and continued his jumping career through the 1951 season. He and Rufus Robinson made the 2nd fire jump in US history on July 15, 1940, on the Robin Creek Fire on the Nez Perce NF. Jim made three fire jumps that season.

Soon after, Jim transferred to the US Air Force Air Research and Development Command. His duties included parachute development testing for the Air Force and NASA, including testing of the parachutes for the Mercury, Gemini, and Apollo projects. He retired at the end of 1973. At the time of his death, Jim was living in Walla Walla, WA.

From a 2004 interview with *Smokejumper* magazine, "Smokey" Alexander remembers Jim. "Jim Waite came off the Clearwater NF. He had been a smokechaser and lookout. I don't believe he ever went to college. He came out of high school and went to work for the Forest Service. Jim was a squadleader for the CPS (conscientious objectors) jumpers during WWII.

"I first met Jim when we took our physicals for smokejumping. He was very quiet, very unassuming. In addition to being a nice guy, he was very handsome. Lucky for the rest of us, he had a steady girl back in Idaho. After our physicals, we all went up to the Seeley Lake RS and got ready for our first parachute jump. Jim was the first rookie in our group to make a jump."