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Bruce Ford email interview about United States - Russian smokejumper exchanges

Bruce Ford

National Smokejumper Association

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Email correspondence from Bruce Ford to the National Smokejumper Association, September 2023, in response to background information in preparation for *US–Russian Smokejumper Exchanges: 1976–2004*.

Question: *Smokejumper* mag notes that you and Wayne Williams visited Russia in 1984. What took you there? What were you trying to accomplish? And what was accomplished?

Wayne and I had decided to take the Trans-Siberian railway, coming out via China and trying to contact the Russian jumper organization if possible. Bill Moody gave us some names and phone numbers of people he had worked with in 1976-77 (specifically Nicolai Andreev, the head of Avialesookhrana, the aerial fire service), and I went back to school to polish up some rusty Russian language.

In Moscow, we tried calling, but were told rather brusquely that the people we were asking for were “out of the country.” I suspect the atmosphere at the time was such that unofficial, out-of-the-blue contacts were deemed inadvisable. We completed our trip without having made any contact.

In 1990, the Forest Service Disaster Assistance Program (DASP) under Bob Mutch (GAC-54) coordinated with the UN Food and Agriculture Organization to deliver a parachute simulator apparatus to the fire/smokejumper organization in Mongolia. Dave Pierce (FBX-64) and I went there with Jeff Hogue, a representative of the simulator developer company, to set it up and give instruction in its use.

The Mongolian jumper program had been developed with Russian equipment and expertise, and most of the people there had Russian as a second language. They kept referring to a Russian advisor, “Davidenko,” who had been there the previous year. It turns out this was Eduard Davidenko, with whom Bill Moody had worked on his exchange.

The Mongolians were using the Russian “Lesnik” round parachutes, but also had square, ram-air sport chutes. We took along an FS-12 chute to demonstrate, but on the day of jumping, winds were high, so only the locals jumped on their squares, out of the Russian workhorse An-2 single engine biplane.

Question: In 1990, you ‘tagged along as a translator’ for a Russian Aerial Fire Protection Service delegation. How did that experience motivate your 1991 visit to Russia? What doors did the 1991 trip provide?

In the fall of 1990, a delegation of 3-4, including Nicolai Andreev, came to Utah as guests of Region 4 fire management. We toured FS fire facilities in northern Utah, with no specific emphasis on jumping. That cemented an ongoing connection with Region 4, which later included some jumper exchanges with McCall. Steven Pyne, author of multiple books on wildfire, tied in with us to get some connections to help with researching a book on fire in Russia. He later made several trips there.

In the winter of 1990-91, I went to Ukraine at the invitation of friends I had met while studying in China in 1987-88. This was before the Soviet breakup, and they were looking for a sponsorship to emigrate to the US. For this, we traveled to Moscow to present applications at the US Embassy.

I had been in contact with Nicolai Andreev, and took the opportunity to go out to their Central Base in Pushkino, about 30 miles NE of Moscow. Their organization was eager to cultivate ties in the West, as the economy was collapsing and their State funding was getting more and more erratic and unreliable. I met the famous Eduard Davidenko, and he took me out to Zagorsk, an old monastery north of Pushkino. We discussed some future plans for exchanges, but as a lone operator, I had no mandate to speak officially for our side and just suggested some contacts. They were starting to jump ram-air parachutes and were thus interested in tying in with the BLM in Alaska. As it turned out, I transferred from Missoula to Fairbanks in 1992 and so got in on facilitating the coming exchanges there.

Marv Robertson (FBX-66) was the assistant head of the Alaska Fire Service, and Rodger Vorce (FBX-82) was the base manager, and both were gung-ho to get some exchanges going, seeing as square chutes were involved and Russia was just across the Bering Strait. Alaska had even jumped a fire on Little Diomedede, the island just on our side of the international border and only 2-3 miles from Russian Big Diomedede.

In the fall of 1992, a Russian delegation of Andreev, Davidenko, Boris Khobta, (Magadan base manager), and Alexander Lubyakin (Khabarovsk base manager) came to Alaska. I was enlisted as translator, driver, roommate, and drinking buddy. We toured Fairbanks, Ft Yukon, Eagle, and Anchorage, and met with some State of Alaska fire people as well. Plans were made for a reciprocal 1993 BLM visit to Magadan, Khabarovsk, and Moscow, to be followed the next year with a working exchange of two Russian jumpers to Alaska.

Question: *Smokejumper* mag says you traveled to Russia several more times (post 1991) on official and personal visits. What were the official visits? What were the personal visits?

In 1993, we sent the American group to Russia as planned. It consisted of Marv Robertson and Dave Dash of Alaska Fire Service, smokejumpers Tony Pastro (FBX-77) and me, and Bill Caulkins, the deputy director of Alaska BLM. We were hosted in Magadan by Boris Khobta and in Khabarovsk by Alexander Lyubakin. Marv and the state director continued on to Moscow to hammer out future agreements, while the other three of us returned to Alaska. A main focus of our trip was assessment of Russian smokejumper technology, with an eye to adopting good ideas. Bill Moody's trip had resulted in our using the idea of variable porosity materials in the new FS-12 chute, and a modified drogue for deploying the BLM ram air chutes. The Russians, in turn, had upgraded their helicopter rappelling descent device, on the principle of our variable-friction Sky Genie. Tony, as our equipment development specialist, was key in this evaluation.

The Magadan region is legendary among Russians as the home of the most brutal of all the GULAG forced labor camps, both in terms of the severe climate and harsh policies. The Kolyma River basin is home to rich

gold deposits, which were mined by prison labor starting in the early 1930s. It is a mix of taiga forest and tundra, and one of the main fire fuels is the dwarf Siberian pine, or *stlanik*. It grows in low, dense mats and can burn explosively due to high oil and resin content. In some respects, it is an arctic equivalent of southern California chaparral.

We visited several outlying smokejumper/rappeller bases, traveling mostly by large Mi-8 helicopter, and were given demonstrations of rappelling and use of pumps, water blivets, chainsaws, and other firefighting equipment. These smaller “sub-bases” were mostly manned by locals recruited into the fire organization. The Russian jumpers had about as many questions for us as we had for them. We had brought a complete set of Alaska jump gear and parachutes, so a demo jump was planned. Tony and I jumped with the Russian equipment (ram-air Lesnik-2 main), and Vladimir Tyukalov, the head jumper of the Magadan region, jumped with our gear. After, Boris Khobta presided over a vodka toast to our jump and declared Tony and I to be the “third and fourth” jumpers to crack silk over the Russian forest. To our puzzled looks he said the second was, of course, Bill Moody. The first? Why, Francis Gary Powers (the U-2 spy plane pilot shot down in 1960 while on a high-altitude reconnaissance flight).

The Khabarovsk leg was similar, including stops at local fire dispatch centers. There, along the Amur river bordering China, the vegetation was much lusher, with temperate maritime forest. The whole trip involved a good deal of eating, drinking, and toasting at nearly every stop, as everyone felt obliged to put on the dog for the foreign visitors. And we would proceed to take our hangovers to the next stop and well-laden feast on the table.

For the 1994 season, Alaska hosted two Russian jumpers, Andrei Kievsky from the Amur base and Igor Karmazin from Vladivostok. Tony (who had been taking Russian language courses at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks) paired with Igor, and I with Andrei. We put them through the AK jump training course with our equipment and we all jumped and helitacked several fires together. Andrei was fond of mowing the lawn at the shack in his bare feet, and the safety hawks finally let him continue with a promise to be careful, as I recall. Rod Dow, of course, took on the role of social/cultural director, and introduced them to Fairbanks night life. Early one

morning they were coming back on base, with Andrei driving, and were stopped by the MPs. Confronted with two Russians and one American, none of them any too sober, the MP avoided the path of international incident and bade Rod drive, since he was at least an American with a driver's license.

Also in 1994, two Russian jumpers, one of them Valery Korotkov, spent the season on the Redmond Hotshots. Later in the summer, I was on a booster there and met them. Valery and I crossed paths several times in the next few years.

In the summer of 1995, Tony and I were slated to do a reciprocal hitch in Magadan and Khabarovsk, but Marv Robertson had died of cancer in January, and the other higher-ups (except Rodger Vorce) seemed to have lost interest in the project. We were told that budget concerns had nixed our trip. Consequently, we decided to go rogue, take leave, and make our own way to Magadan, since all was set up on the Russian end and they were expecting us. This was the first inkling of a recurring pattern over several years, wherein the first junket of managers seemed a prelude to indifference when it came to actual work exchanges.

In Magadan, we received a small salary from Boris, became instant millionaires in inflated rubles, and trained in both jumping from the An-2 and rappelling from the Mi-8. Unfortunately, it was about the rainiest season in recent memory, and we sat for a few weeks at the base in Seymchan, drinking vodka and swatting the Alaska-grade mosquitoes. We heard there were fires in Yakutia and tried to finagle a booster there, but it was 2000 km of bad road to get there, and we were encouraged to hope for better in Khabarovsk.

Early on, we had taken the Mi-8 out to demobe some jumpers off a fire, from a gravel bar on a small river. By the time we loaded up all the jumpers, their equipment, fish they had caught, and numerous dogs, we were lying on the pile with our noses against the ceiling. After a couple of experimental lifts to estimate the load, the pilots took off following the river for what seemed like miles before we could get enough altitude to clear the surrounding hills.

In Khabarovsk, the weather was better, but hardly a booming fire season. We got more jumps, on both the square Lesnik-2 and the round Lesnik-1. One jump was a 10-man stick from the An-2, with everyone vying to hit the panel. Many Russian jumpers do a lot of skydiving jumps and can be quite competitive. Not being a lover of aerial crowds, I peeled off and did my PLF on the sidelines, eschewing the manly stand-up landing with both feet on the panel. We Americans are such wimps, I guess.

We did finally spot a little fire on a helicopter journey, went in for supplies, and came back in helitack mode. First order of business was to set up a nice camp (the couple acre fire was just skunking around in tussocks), and send the camp cook out to catch some fish. The standard tool for such fires was the leaf blower, used to get in under the tussocks and literally blow the flames out. Achieving control in less than an hour or so, we repaired back to camp, where a hot meal of *ukha*, fish soup, was waiting, with lots of good Russian bread to sop it up.

That evening, we were introduced to the venerable tradition of guitar-accompanied singing of smokejumper ballads, many of them with tragic endings. There is a long repertoire of such songs, and somewhere I have a transcribed copy of several. We had an Super 8 video camera, and I just set it on the crackling campfire and recorded the talk and singing for at least an hour. On another occasion we took the Mi-8 out for night fishing, where the technique is to sneak up to a cut bank and plop a mouse-like lure into the water, simulating a hapless rodent. The big lunkers go for mice. This heli-fishing was a recurring theme, and helicopters on fire runs seemed to seldom waste a dead-head without putting on friends and off duty jumpers to drop off at a good spot, for pick-up in a couple of days. The party would then be waiting with several milk cans full of fish. The economy had pretty much crashed at the time and salaries could be held up for months. Consequently, Siberian subsistence was the order of the day. The jumpers in Seymchan had a small herd of pigs and each family a large kitchen garden.

There was also a shortage of aviation gasoline for the An-2 jump fleet, so more fires came to be manned by helicopter than by jumping. The Soviet air fleet never had a lot of small, civilian type planes, and tended more to

larger military craft using jet fuel. Av gas was always a minor industrial product.

In 1996, Alaska did no exchanges, but I believe there were some McCall exchanges around this time, With Dan Felt (MYC-77) going to Russia, and later Dan and Hector Madrid (MYC-89). Some Russians, including Vladimir Drobakhin, jumped out of McCall.

The 1997 season saw an all-Russian hotshot crew, composed of Russian jumpers, working out of the Salmon-Challis Forest in Salmon, ID, and the Moyer work center (on the district where I started as a smokechaser in 1970). The foreman and assistant foreman were local SCNF fire people, and the Russian honcho was Alexander Selin, head of Avialesookhrana for the Krasnoyarsk region in Siberia west of Lake Baikal. I took on my now-accustomed role as translator, driver, and, now, crew member. That was a slow season, and we just had one medium-sized fire while I was there, on the Boise Forest near Lowman. We did manage to build a nice log jack fence protecting the riparian headwaters of Panther Creek (dubbed the “Great Russian Wall”), and I vastly improved my vocabulary of “earthy” Russian words and expressions.

Les Rosenkrance (MYC-61), head of BLM fire out of Boise, had heard about the demise of BLM participation and set about to revive it. Late in the summer, he led a delegation including Larry Mahaffey of BIFC and me. First stop was Freiburg, Germany, to visit with prominent fire researcher Johann Goldhammer, who was doing extensive fire research in Russia, in collaboration with Avialesookhrana. We stopped in Moscow for some meetings, then spent most of the rest of the stay there traveling around the Krasnoyarsk region. We also met there with Susan Connard, a good friend of Deanne Schulman (MYC-81), who was there working with Johann Goldhammer on a long-term experimental burn at Bor, along the Yenisey River. Back in Moscow, several agreements were signed to continue with further working jumper exchanges. One of BLM’s interests in Russia involved cheat grass, which is native there but not the pest it is over much BLM land in the States. Agreements were also signed to exchange experts and information on cheat grass ecology. On the way home, we stopped in Oslo, Norway, to check out Norwegian fire policy and practices, and to cement some future cooperation with BLM.

Back on the Salmon-Challis, the hotshot crew had managed to get a second fire in California, for an extended stay.

For 1998, a second Russian hotshot crew worked out of Moyer and got to several fires, including one in Florida. BLM had set up two groups for Krasnoyarsk. One was to set up a small mobile retardant base in Yeniseysk, and the other was a 4-person jumper group. I was to go early and work with Jeff Bass (MYC-77) on the retardant base, and then join the other BLM jumpers, Tony Pastro, Wally Wasser (MYC-79), and Mike Burin (MYC-88).

Jeff and I languished in Krasnoyarsk waiting for the retardant pump that was being shipped by BLM and which had gotten tied up in customs. When it finally came, we went to Yeniseysk and found a huge pile of bagged retardant that had sat in the rain for some time and pretty much set up into solid lumps. Jeff finally managed to get the pump set up, and by that time the other jumpers had arrived and done their jump training. (I had come before Jeff, and trained early in the spring with the local Russian “refresher.”)

While I was still in Krasnoyarsk, those three had already jumped a small fire. Once we tied in together, we did a fair bit of patrolling in the An-2. Standard practice is to patrol with a jumper squad (up to 8) on board and jump them on whatever fires are found. We didn't jump any more fires, but helitacked a fairly large one on a reservoir south of Krasnoyarsk. We camped several days there, and managed to cut it off at one point by digging line across an isthmus. However, total control was beyond our capabilities, so it turned into more of a monitoring operation. Our Russian squad leader referred to this as suppression by “hypnosis” of the fire. We did rappel another fire from the Mi-8, but that was mostly a mop-up show.

For the next leg, we took the Trans-Siberian from Krasnoyarsk to Irkutsk at Lake Baikal and were hosted there by the head jumper, Anatoly Kamerlokh, and Misha Tretyakov, who had worked with McCall jumpers Fred Pavlovic (MYC-89) and Steve Daigh (MYC-93). This turned mostly into a tour with occasional practice jumps, as we went to jump bases in

Zheleznogorsk and Bratsk, where we were met by Kirill Vilchinsky, who had been on the 1997 hotshot crew at Moyer.

By now, it was becoming apparent to me that general policy was to keep us entertained and safe (except from possible alcohol poisoning) and that actual jumping-on going fires was not encouraged by the very higher-ups, and this was probably communicated to our “handlers.” Part of this undoubtedly stems from the Russian system of managerial responsibility and culpability that is a legacy of Soviet and even Tsarist times. There is a Russian joke that, when something goes wrong, the first question is not “What happened here?” but “Who is to be blamed?” No one wants an international incident on his own turf.

The base manager in Seymchan when we were there was a very fine guy who spent 3 years in prison because some jumpers had died in a fireline explosives accident on a fire in his jurisdiction. This culture of culpability was especially rampant in Stalin’s time, when “saboteurs” were always sought as scapegoats for any failure of central planning. Bureaucratic buck passing exists everywhere, but has been a finely honed Russian art since at least Gogol’s time.

In 1999, three Russian jumpers came to Boise, trained, and jumped the season in the Great Basin. They were Giorgi “Gosha” Kuzmynikh, the head jumper at Vladivostok, Anatoly Burmakhin, and Sergei Davidovsky. Tony Pastro, Wally Wasser, Mike Burin, and I accompanied and jumped with them out of Battle Mountain, NV and Grand Junction, CO.

In the late nineties and early 2000s there several groups of Russians who jumped at McCall or worked on the Boise Hotshots and at Moyer (SCNF) as heli-rappellers. They built a nice wooden *banya*, or Russian sauna, at Moyer, which I believe is still there. Scott Bushman of the Logan Hotshots hosted Russian crew members (including Andrei Eritsov and Misha Tretyakov) for several seasons and led an experimental Russian hotshot crew in Krasnoyarsk. Virtually all of these were Russian smokejumpers, who all cross-train as heli-rappellers. Alaska BLMers Marty Meierotto (FBX 94), of reality TV fame, and Matt Allen (FBX-95) did a gig in Magadan, where Marty discovered that he must have been Russian in a previous life. Many Siberian and Far East jumpers spend a good part of their winters

trapping furry critters deep in the taiga at their *zimovei*, or trapping/hunting cabins.

In the early 2000s, there was renewed BLM interest in Russian parachute technology. Specifically in the KAP-3 automatic opener used on all Russian smokejumper main parachutes. It can be set to fire either at a specific altitude or after a specified delay, usually 4-5 seconds. It releases the drogue chute to deploy the main, in the event the jumper fails to pull the main release handle in a timely way. George Steele (NCSB-72) of Boise had called and asked if I could bring a couple back. The Russians were also experimenting with new ram-air chute designs, working with Sergei Kalabukhov, a parachute manufacturer and extreme jumper (his mother worked at the main Soviet parachute factory in Ivanovo, and he grew up around parachutes). He has jumped at both North and South poles, on high mountain peaks, and from all sorts of base jump locations, including a mass jump off the Ostankino TV tower in central Moscow.

Sergei demonstrated his Arbalet (“crossbow”) chute for Andrei Eritsov, Anatoly Perminov (Avialesookhrana’s head of jumpers) and me. The Arbalet replaced the Lesnik-2 as the main smokejumper chute, and Sergei seemed interested in marketing it in the US, but there were a lot of export complications and our ram-air program seemed to be going its own way with American manufacturers. The Arbalet went through several more versions with the Russian jump program.

Sergei also introduced us to a little underground bar/restaurant frequented by practitioners of “Russky extreme,” or all sorts of daredevil sports like skydiving, mountain climbing, extreme skiing and diving, motorcycle racing, etc. It was accessed in a dim back alley a couple of blocks from the KGB’s infamous Lubyanka headquarters/prison, and marked only by a glowing thumbprint reader. The main draw for us was an original parachute of Gleb Kotelnikov hanging from the ceiling. Kotelnikov is credited as the inventor of the first backpack parachute, in 1911, though the club’s chute was one of his later designs.

I had worked up a Russian-English, English-Russian dictionary of several hundred fire, jumping, and technical terms that both sides were using to train exchange participants in some basic language skills. The Russian

side usually tried to get at least a few in each group who had at least fair English. English is certainly more extensively taught in Russian schools than Russian is in the US. I did spend one winter at Pushkino, giving English classes to anyone at the Central Base who wanted to participate. Payment was free lodging at the nearby forestry institute.

In the early 2000s, I also had several opportunities to participate in their “senior instructor refreshers.” These were held, in late winter, alternately east of Moscow in Vladimir, and south of Krasnoyarsk in Shushenskoye. The latter is a small place with a good airport, as it was a tourist destination in Soviet times. Lenin spent a Siberian exile there in the early 1900s, so it became a bit of a shrine, with a reconstructed village featuring his little cabin.

Participants were the head jumpers of all the 15-20 jump bases across the country, and sometimes their deputies. Each would bring their local edible (and drinkable) specialties, like smoked salmon from the Pacific or other fish, caviar, pine nuts, etc. and these would feature at lunches and dinners. There was a standard program of 10 or so jumps and a number of rappels. The standard jump ship was the An-26, a twin turboprop with rear ramp exit, that carries up to about 30 for practice jumps. We usually jumped in sticks of 5-6, just falling off the ramp with bent knees and tracking away under the drogue in a skydiver-style spread eagle. Release the main in 4-5 seconds or just wait for the KAP-3 to fire. These were winter jumps, especially in Shushenskoye, so chutes were packed in the airport terminal just before jumps. There was a rule that a chute could not sit outside in the cold for more than about an hour. This was because the top skin of the Lesnik-2 was made of thick, stiff kapron (like nylon) and when cold could give you a delayed opening. I did get one of these once, and had about a 7-10 second ride – standard procedure is to quickly pump the toggles to shake out the canopy.

Rappelling was from the Mi-8 helicopter, which was a workhorse in the Afghan war and a ubiquitous mode of transport in Siberia and other remote areas. It could carry 15-20 rappellers, in “sticks” of three. Each group of three would attach their friction descent devices to a single coiled rope. The first person hands the rope to the spotter in the door, and it is hooked to a hard point. The spotter then hooks the bottom device to the harness of

the first person, who then swings out and descends. The following two rappers then do the same procedure. When all are out, the spotter unhooks the rope and throws it down.

This friction device was developed after Bill Moody's exchange, rather on the principle of the Sky Genie. Previously, the Russians had used a flat tape wound on a drum to provide controlled descent. What they came up with is a flat, rectangular metal block with posts on one side. The rope is wound around the posts in a pattern that varies with the weight of the rappeller. A metal sheath slides over the block to cover the posts and rope. A major advantage over the Genie is that the harness hook goes through both the cover and body of the device, locking the cover on. This safety feature prevents the cover from coming off during descent and resulting in a free fall. It also provides very variable friction, depending on the rope winding pattern. I always thought this would be a good model for a successor to our Sky Genie, but had a hard time ginning up interest in it here.

Jumping in the Siberian winter has its unique challenges. The rule was to hold off a jump if the temperature got below minus 20 C. On one occasion, the wheels of the An-26 got frozen to the ramp, and it took the whole lot of us to push it free. Many jumpers would jump in fur boots and hats, and cover their noses with something like vaseline as protection against the cold of a 3-5 minute descent.

I also spent a couple of winters living at a friend's empty apartment in Krasnoyarsk, and a winter in Vladikavkaz on the north edge of the Caucasus Mountains. All these trips in the early 2000s could be considered personal, as no travel funding was forthcoming from our side. Avialesookhrana did sponsor me for visas, and generally provided me a place to stay and some free rides on their aircraft.

In the late nineties and early 2000s, there were several delegations of Russian fire managers who came to the US, and I was often tapped to travel with them. Several came to the Fire Center in Boise, and one or two to Washington D.C. Avialesookhrana, the aerial fire service, had long been under the Russian Ministry of Forestry, but the 90s saw a lot of reshuffling of departments and jurisdictions. For a while, they were under the Ministry

of Natural Resources, which had an extractive mentality that emphasized logging. There was much corruption in Russia, and a lot of struggle among factions and oligarchs to seize control of industries and natural resources. As a consequence, fire suppression was a lower priority, and this bled into the delegations coming here. One delegation member disappeared right after arrival, went to Los Angeles, and was apparently setting up business deals there; he reappeared in time to catch his (US Forest Service sponsored) flight home. Another spent much of his time in meetings and presentation in DC talking on his cell phone, also conducting business. Such characters had apparently used their pull in Russia to get on these junkets and obtain visas.

Later, the aerial fire service came under the Ministry of Emergencies (MChS), somewhat akin to our FEMA. It was headed by Sergei Shoigu, then the leader of the United Russia Party, of which Vladimir Putin was the “shadow,” de facto leader. Shoigu is, of course, the current Defense Minister overseeing the war in Ukraine (and much maligned by Wagner’s Evgeny Prigozhin). A jumper complaint about MchS was that they often did not coordinate with actual firefighters and seemed inclined to showboating and hogging the limelight. As an example, MchS had a big jet water scooper, the Be-200. It would fly in to a fire unannounced and drop huge loads of water with little coordination with ground forces. If a fire was burning in peat, this would tend to blast burning peat embers everywhere and start numerous spot fires. Thus, Avialesookhrana was forced to play the current political influence game to get and maintain funding. Eventually, the federal government largely quit funding the Central Base and told the organization that each regional base would henceforth have to seek funding from their regional authorities. This would be analogous to the Forest Service and BLM telling each jump base to look to their respective states for funding. In 2008, I toured California with Andrei Eritsov and a group of Russian financial administrators. The unstated goal of the trip was to butter up the people who held the purse strings.

Through all this, Avialesookhrana seemed to maintain a task-oriented professionalism, and keeps on fighting fires. Recent years have seen unprecedented fire activity, especially in Siberia and the far north where average temperatures are rising dramatically. I just got a reply email (July

27) from Andrei Eritsov, and he has been in the Magadan region for a month, in a “fire storm.”

Question: What sparked your trip in 2005 with Bob Schober? Official or personal?

It was mostly personal, but also an opportunity to check in with a lot of smokejumpers, from Karelia, near the Finnish border, to Vladivostok on the Pacific. We took the Trans-Siberian and stopped at several places with jump bases: Petrozavodsk, Tyumen, Krasnoyarsk, and Vladivostok. We also did a couple of winter jumps and saw some rookie training. I imagine Bob gave you a good account of that.

Question: During this time (1990–2005) what exchanges are you aware of vis-a-vis Smokejumpers? Have exchanges occurred post-2005?

Most of this I already covered, but am vague on the detail of exchanges with McCall and the Boise, Logan, and Redmond Hotshots.

Question: Are exchanges still possible, or have times excluded cooperation?

I'd say that, under present conditions, the possibility of exchanges is virtually nil. That is not for lack of desire on the part of Russian jumpers and fire people, but nothing happens there without the blessing of higher-ups. Propaganda paints America as a dire enemy bent on the destruction of Russia, and that will probably prevail at least as long as Putin is in power.

Question: Bob took a few pics of the 2005 visit and sent them to Chuck Sheley, who has forwarded them on to me. Do you have any pics that you might share that represent Russian Smokejumping? (We also have a number of pics from Valery Korotkov.)

I have plenty of pictures back in Montana, on my computer and also old print photos from the 90s, but no access to them here.

I'm sorry to report that Valery Korotkov passed away a couple of years ago. He was a great guy, videographer, and musician. One time he and I were on the electric train from Moscow to Pushkino, and various vendors and musicians were going from car to car, selling trinkets and playing for tips. He tipped all the musicians and told me, "You gotta pay for music." I never forgot that, and still tip street musicians here, in his memory.