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Smokejumper biographies for 1948 rookie class, R-W

National Smokejumper Association

1946 Smokejumper Rookies

Lonnie Curlee Rea (McCall '46)

Lonnie Curlee Rea was born October 14, 1923, in Meridian, Idaho where he graduated from Meridian High School in 1942. He served in the 11th Airborne Infantry during WWII in the Pacific theater. Curlee went to work for the U.S. Forest Service as a smokejumper at McCall from 1946-1949. He worked in the McCall and Idaho City area as a logger for 14 years, then went to work for the Bureau of Land Management from 1963 until 1970. Curlee died from cancer Sept. 29, 1970.

Robert E. Reed (McCall '46)

Bob died July 4, 2000, of a cerebral hemorrhage at the age of 76. He was born in Seattle and moved to Boise as a youth. During WWII, he served in the U.S. Army in Europe and earned the Bronze Star. After the war, he jumped at McCall before earning a degree from the University of Washington.

Bob then worked for the Seattle Post-Intelligencer until 1958 and was a press secretary for Gov. Albert Rosellini from 1958 to 1962. He then joined the Bonneville Power Administration in Portland as a public information officer and held that position until retiring in 1990. He had lived in Woodland, Wash., since 1972 and was a free-lance writer and photographer. His works have been published in various Northwest magazines and newsletters.

Carroll A. Rieck (Missoula '46)

Carroll died December 24, 2016, in Hillsboro, Ore., of cancer. He joined the Marine Corps during WWII at age 17 and took part in the South Pacific Island fighting. Carroll was part of the short-lived Marine Paratrooper unit.

After the war Carroll attended Washington State University majoring in Wildlife Management. He jumped at Missoula during the 1946-47 seasons and broke his back on a fire jump in 1947 that ended his smokejumping career.

Carroll joined the Washington State Dept. of Game in 1953 serving as a biologist and game protector. He worked with sportsman clubs and did public relations work for the department including hosting a TV show called "Wildlife Bulletin." Carroll worked in the wildlife conservation field in Zambia and later, joined the Peace Corps working in Chile as a wildlife expert.

Kenneth W. Roth (McCall '46)

Ken died February 24, 2007, in Missoula. He joined the Navy during WWII, serving as a gunner's mate on the USS Summer. Ken jumped five seasons at McCall and took flying lessons on the G.I. Bill. He went on to log more than 13, 000 hours and flew everything from Stinsons to Travelairs, Ford Trimotors, Lockheed Electras, helicopters to DC-4s. In 1952 he signed on with the Johnson Flying Service as a full-time pilot.

On Aug. 17, 1953, Ken took off from an airstrip in the vicinity of Spotted Bear Ranger Station. He and seven smokejumpers headed toward a fire in the Hungry Horse area. The engines of the Trimotor cut out. He decided to land the best he could, short of the looming hillside, into a stand of timber. The impact literally broke open the Ford's cockpit and all but demolished the plane, with no loss of life. The only injury was a fracture to Ken's right foot.

In early July 1960, Ken flew himself and his DC-3 airplane out of trouble while on a Forest Service flight near Belgrade. Bad air and an altered center of gravity caused the twin engine cargo plane to roll upside down. Banking steeply, he missed the cliff, brushed the plane's tail section, and knocked off the tail wheel. Ken kept the plane in the air and returned to Belgrade.

George Steven Saffian (Missoula '46)

George, 39-year resident of Twin Mountain, New Hampshire, passed away at his home on September 12, 2013, at the age of 87. He was born January 24, 1926, in Detroit Michigan. George was an avid Boy Scout in his youth and teen years achieving the rank of Star Scout. George left school after finishing the 10 grade and enlisted in the Army Air Force and was honorably discharged in 1945. George returned to his home in Detroit, Michigan, where he completed his high school requirements and then received a BS Degree from Michigan State University and an MA Degree in Education from Wayne State University.

George taught for 20 years as an elementary and high school biology teacher, first in Detroit, Michigan and then Storrs, Connecticut, where he lived from 1963 to 1974. His legacy, however, began in 1974 when the Saffian family moved to Twin Mountain, New Hampshire where George purchased the fledgling Ammonoosuc Campground. For the next 22 years, he and his family worked tirelessly to transform a 13-acre wheat field into a beautifully forested 130 site campground. George sold his campground in 1995 and retired but continued to be active in community and Church affairs.

George jumped the 1946 season at Missoula getting seven training and six fire jumps.

Joseph Irl Saltsman (Missoula '46)

Joe was born on October 16, 1924, in Canton, Ohio. He died in Chevy Chase, Maryland, on March 28, 2013, at the age of 88, and is buried in the Arlington National Cemetery. Joe enlisted in the Army in May 1943 and was a student at Ohio University at the time. Records list him as a Private 1st Class and as a POW while serving in Holland. He was in Stalag 2A and released at the end of the war.

Joe is reported to have had a career with the CIA. In April 1957 he married Marion Malloy in Fairfax, Virginia. His residence at that time was listed as Iran and education at Rutgers University. The NSA database has a note that indicates a 42-year career with the CIA serving in Africa, Middle East, and Europe.

Joe jumped at Missoula during the 1946 season and got seven training and three fire jumps.

Neil T. Shier (Cave Junction '46)

Neil, 79, of Grants Pass, Oregon, died Monday, Sept. 25, 2006. During WWII he joined the Navy at age 15 and served two years. After returning from the war in 1946, he trained as a smokejumper and jumped at Cave Junction for the 1946 and 1947 seasons. Neil obtained his commercial pilot's license in 1947 and, in 1948, joined the Air Force. He retired as a decorated Chief Master Sergeant with the rank of E-9 in 1980.

Jerry Turner Sparkman Jr. (McCall '46)

Jerry, 65, died April 12, 1988, in Anchorage, Alaska. He was born June 7, 1922, in Ashton, Idaho, and served in the Army 82nd Airborne (1941-45) during WWII. Jerry moved to Alaska in 1952 and worked at the Jonesville Coal Mine. He then worked for the city of Anchorage public works department until he retired in 1972. Jerry moved to his Kenai River cabin where he lived until December 1987 when he moved back to Anchorage. Jerry jumped at McCall 1946-47.

Willard David Stevenson (McCall '48)

Willard died after being thrown from his horse on April 16, 1986, near Dietrich, Idaho. He was born September 10, 1925, in Wilder, Idaho. Willard graduated from the University of Idaho with a degree in Agri-business. He was the mayor of Dietrich at the time. In 1952, he began working for the

Farm and Home Administration in Shoshone, Idaho, later in Rupert, Twin Falls, Boise, and the Virgin Islands retiring in 1980. He is buried in the Shoshone Cemetery, in Shoshone, Idaho. Willard was in the Navy during WWII 1943-46. He jumped at McCall 1948 and at Idaho City 1949-50.

James B. “Smokey” Stover (McCall '46)

Smokey made his last jump to go home to God and all his other smokejumper buddies on May 20, 2004. Smokey was a wonderful husband, father, grandfather, and great grandfather to all his children and to all his smokejumper sons.

Smokey was born James Bennett Stover on July 26, 1921, in Weiser, Idaho. In his lifetime, he resided in Boise, Guam, New Guinea, Australia, Idaho City, and finally his beloved Waldport, Oregon.

Smokey fought in World War II and was a smokejumper foreman from 1946-1972. In that time span, he worked with many young men and enjoyed all their antics. Smokey retired in 1972 from smokejumping and was able to pursue his love of fishing until his death in Waldport, Oregon.

Everyone will remember this wonderful man for his extreme patience, fairness, and sense of humor that is matched by none. His favorite enjoyment (besides fishing) was to enjoy his great grandchildren playing and taking his daughters and grandchildren fishing and clamming. He was the “recreation director.” He was the man who caught fish when there weren't any.

Smokey has requested that there be no services, just hold onto your favorite memories and think of him with a smile. Hoot!

Stanley Lee Sykes (Missoula '46)

Stanley, 66, died of a heart attack June 4, 1993, in Billings, Montana. He was born January 1, 1927, in Aberdeen, Idaho. Stan served in the Marine Corps during WWII and was honorably discharged in March of 1945 for “physical reasons.” He jumped at Missoula 1946-49 and was a career brakeman for the railroad in later life.

John Willard Tauscher (North Cascades '46)

Johnny, 67, died January 16, 1991, in Mason, Washington. He was born December 2, 1923, in Pacific Beach, Washington. He served in the Army 1943-45 during WWII and was listed as being wounded in action by an artillery shell in 1944. At the time of his enlistment, he was 18 and working in Camp 5 for the Simpson Logging Company. He jumped at North Cascades during the 1946 season.

John O. Thach (Cave Junction '46)

John died August 11, 2009. He joined the Army at age 17 as was assigned to the Schofield Barracks on December 7, 1941, and saw the Japanese planes fly over on their way to Pearl Harbor. He was wounded in the leg by a stray bullet.

John later joined the 101st Airborne and jumped into Holland during Operation Market Garden. He was later involved in the Battle of the Bulge and received the Bronze Star.

After the war he was Chief Accountant for the Colorado State Treasury Department for 14 years.

Garfield N. "Gar" Thorsrud (Missoula '46)

Gar died November 23, 2014. He was living in Tucson, Arizona. Gar was born in Watford City, ND, to Norwegian immigrant parents and moved to Missoula when he was 8 years old. He was a graduate of the University of Montana in 1951.

Gar began working for the USFS at age 16 on blister rust and fire crews and became a smokejumper in 1946. He jumped at Missoula from 1946 through the 1951 seasons. He received his "wings" in 1955 and flew in both the Montana and D.C. Air National Guard Units.

Upon government retirement, Gar founded Mountain West Aviation in 1975, which later became Sierra Pacific Airlines and served as its president until his death.

The major portion of Gar's obit will have to be written in later years in bits and pieces. The 35-year plus Smokejumper/CIA connection has been covered in many articles in Smokejumper. Over 100 smokejumpers have worked overseas for the agency in many operations in Cuba, South America, Tibet, and throughout Southeast Asia. Gar was among the first to be recruited by the agency and headed up many of these operations starting with the Taiwan Project in the early 50s.

He was apparently recruited, along with another jumper, by the CIA in the early 50s when members of that group came to Missoula for parachute training. The agency decided that there was no reason to train their people in cargo dropping and parachuting into remote and mountainous terrain as the USFS already had those trained individuals. The whole story could fill a book. Who knows if this important part of U.S. and smokejumper history will ever be told?

Dell Eldon Tyler (Missoula '46)

Dell, 82, died August 19, 2011, in Missoula, Montana. He was born May 9, 1929, in Pocatello, Idaho. Dell was an accomplished athlete at Missoula County High School where he graduated in 1947. His football team won four state championships. Dell enlisted in the Navy during the Korean War and he earned his bachelor's degree in Business at the University of Montana after his discharged in 1954.

Dell had a career in the nightclub business opening the Cabin Lounge in 1965 and Tyler's Supper Club in 1985. He jumped at Missoula during the 1946-47 seasons and had nine practice and seven fire jumps.

Paul S. Vance (Missoula '46)

Paul jumped a single year at Missoula. He was a veteran of both World War II and the Korean War, serving 23 years in the Army Air Corps and then the Air Force. A native of Grantsdale, Mont., he died December 12, 1997, in Hamilton, Montana, after a 10-month battle with cancer. Paul was born December 25, 1921.

James O. Ward (Missoula '46)

Jim died February 16, 2013, in Oregon. He joined the Marine Corps after completing high school in Portland, Oregon, in 1940. Jim served in the Pacific Theater and was awarded the Bronze Star and two Purple Hearts.

After the war he attended Oregon State and Lewis and Clark Universities. He jumped at Missoula during the 1946-48 seasons. Jim started out as Athletic Director and Varsity Football Coach at Franklin High School and then went on to work as Plant Manager at Mailwell Envelope Co. in Portland, Oregon.

Roger P. Warford (Missoula '46)

Roger, 77, passed away June 13, 1999, at the Montana Veterans Home in Columbia Falls after an extended illness. He was raised on the family homestead near Broadus Montana. During World War II, he served in the U.S. Navy in the South Pacific. Roger graduated from the University of Montana in Forestry. While attending school, he worked summers as a smokejumper (46-49). In 1950 he went to work for the BLM, where he specialized in fire control and range management until his retirement in 1978. He worked in Miles City, Malta, Bridger, and Lewistown before being transferred to Missoula in 1957. Roger and his wife, Esther have been recently living in the Polson area.

Wayne R. Webb (McCall '46)

Wayne passed away Sunday, November 7, 1999, at the VA Center in Boise, after a nine-year, courageous battle with amyloidosis and multiple myeloma. Wayne was born July 21, 1925, at Weiser to Calvin and Golda Roger Webb. He grew up in Weiser and received his education there.

Wayne served with the 517th HQ Co. 2nd Bn. Airborne in World War II and was at the Battle of the Bulge. On November 15, 1945, he married Wilma Jackson, and they raised three sons and one daughter.

Wayne went to work for the U.S. Forest Service in McCall as a smokejumper in May 1946 and became the parachute loft foreman and parachute technician, retiring August 2, 1975, with 300 jumps of which 175 were forest fire jumps. He was extremely honored and deeply overwhelmed when the new smokejumper facility in McCall was designated "The Wayne R Webb Parachute Loft" in August 1990. Wayne and Wilma spent 23 winters in Yuma Arizona.

Charles R. "Chuck" Whitt (McCall '46)

Chuck passed away December 10, 2006, in Reno, Nevada. He served in the Army from 1943-46 and later graduated from the University of Idaho with degrees in forestry and fisheries. Chuck worked for the forest service in Region 4 before transferring to Region 6 where he was a fisheries biologist on the Mt. Hood N.F. from the mid-70s until his retirement.

John Milton "Jack" Wilcock (McCall '46)

Jack, 78, passed away on March 29, 2003, at his home in Desert Springs, Ariz. Jack was born on January 4, 1925, in Cedar City, Utah. He graduated from Panguitch High School in Utah but interrupted his college education at Utah State to join the Navy pilot training in 1944.

When the war ended in 1945, he began his smokejumping career in McCall in 1946. Jack jumped in 1946 and 1947 in McCall, attended forestry summer camp in 1949 and returned to jump out of Idaho City in 1949, 51, and 52. Jack made 65 Forest Service jumps, 46 of them were fire jumps. Later Jack went on to become a District Ranger. Jack and his wife, Eunice, celebrated their 50th anniversary in 1991.

Paul F. Wilde (McCall '46)

Paul was born May 3, 1923, in East Lansing, Mich., and died at the age of 76 on April 17, 2000, of kidney failure. At an early age his family moved to Idaho where his father was a Forest Service ranger at New Meadows. After attending school in New Meadows and McCall, he enlisted in the

Army and served as an infantryman with the 3rd Army in France, Germany, and Czechoslovakia during World War II.

Upon his discharge, he returned to McCall and married Lois Close in 1946. His first job upon his return, and the one of which he was most proud of, was as a smokejumper. Paul jumped through 1947. After working for a lumber company for several years, he returned to the Forest Service in McCall and worked as the road maintenance supervisor until he retired in 1983.

Ralph Edwin Wilde (McCall '46)

Ralph, 86 of McCall, died March 9, 2008. Upon graduation from Cascade High School, Ralph enlisted in the Navy and served in WWII with the Seabees in the South Pacific. After being discharged from the Navy, Ralph was a squadleader in McCall during the 1946 season. He jumped from 1946 until 1949 when a back fracture from landing on a rock ended his career.

Ralph had a 30-year career as a wholesale distributor for Standard Oil. He immensely enjoyed his smokejumping experience and the friends he made while fighting fires, as well as those he has made at Jumper Coffee hours. Ralph's brother Paul (deceased) also rookied at McCall in 1946.

Homer B. Williamson (Missoula '46)

Smiley, 91, died May 19, 2019, in Missoula, Montana. He was born October 20, 1917, in Ronan, Montana. His truck-driving career began hauling dynamite while living in Hamilton. Following his move to Missoula, Smiley drove for Missoula Cartage until his retirement, 32 years and five million accident-free miles later.

Smiley jumped at Missoula during the 1946 season and had seven practice and five fire jumps.

Leo J. Wolfe (Missoula '46)

Leo, 97, died October 28, 2018. He served in the CCC program prior to enlisting in the Army in WWII where he served in the South Pacific. After his discharge he went to the University of Montana graduating with a degree in Forestry in 1950.

Leo worked for the Bureau of Indian affairs for his full career retiring in 1977. He was an avid bicyclist riding over 1400 miles in 1985 to attend his high school reunion. In 2002 he moved to Spokane, WA. Leo jumped the 1946-47 seasons.

Willard Sterling “Bud” Wyatt (McCall '46)

Willard, 84, of Sterling Heights, Michigan, died March 30, 2008, and is buried in the Fort Logan National Cemetery in Denver, Colorado. He was born November 2, 1923, in Tremonton, Colorado. Bud retired as a Colonel from the U.S. Army. His last duty assignment was serving as the operations action officer for the United States Army Material Command for the Emergency Operations. He was a veteran of WWII, the Korean War and Vietnam.

Willard enlisted in the Army in April 1943 and was discharged in January of 1946. He jumped at McCall for the 1946-47 seasons and had nine training and 15 fire jumps. He enlisted in the Army again in 1949 and retired in December 1970.

Herbert J. York (Missoula '46)

Herb, 77, passed away Nov. 4, 2003, after a hard-fought battle with lung cancer. He was born March 16, 1926, in Miles City. During the summer following his junior year in high school, Herb enlisted in the Air Force and served as a crewman on a B-29. After the war, Herb was discharged and returned to Montana to become a smokejumper. He jumped during the 1946 and 1947 fire seasons.

Herb continued to work for the Forest Service during summers while attending the University of Montana and graduated in 1950 with a degree in wildlife technology and began researching for the Fish and Game and the U.S. Forest Service. He then returned to school to finish his teaching degree while working nights at the Bonner mill and weekends at the Anaconda smelter to support his family.

Graduating with a Master of Science degree in 1953, he accepted a teaching position at St. Ignatius High School. Herb completed 33 years as a science teacher and guidance counselor at St. Ignatius. He also taught at the University of Montana after his retirement.

Herb was a gifted teacher and was recognized nationwide for his work. His physics class was honored as one of the top 10 in the United States. He was honored by the state university system for excellence in teaching chemistry and by the National Biology Teachers Association as an outstanding biology teacher. This led to recognition by the National Science Foundation for a Presidential Award as Montana's Science Teacher of the Year in 1983. His most cherished award came in 1984, when the University of Montana declared him Distinguished Alumnus.

Gerald Edward Zebarth (Missoula '46)

Gerald, 78, died June 17, 1994, in the Montana Veterans Home in Columbia Falls, Montana. He was born April 30, 1915, in Scranton, North Dakota. His occupation was listed as "Logger." Gerald served in the Navy during WWII and received a Purple Heart for being wounded in action. He jumped at Missoula during the 1946 season

Ernest Armour Zecha Jr. (Missoula '46)

Ernest was born on April 24, 1928, in North Carolina. He had one brother and two sisters. He died on June 19, 1953, in North Korea (Korean War) at the age of 30, and was buried in Keene, New Hampshire. Ernest was a 2nd Lt. in the Army and a graduate of Keene Teachers College. He jumped at Missoula 1946-48 and 1950.