

Transcription: Grand Canyon Historical Society

Interviewee: Charles “Butch” Farabee (BF)

Interviewer: Tom Martin (TM)

Subject: Part 15 1983 GRCA Highwater, 1986 helicopter/fixed-wing mid-air collision

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TM: Today is Thursday, July 2, 2020. This is Part 15 of a Grand Canyon oral history interview with Charles “Butch” Farabee. My name is Tom Martin. Good afternoon, Butch. How are you today?

BF: Well, good, Tom, and you’ve got my permission. And I can’t— I’m amazed that we’ve got 15 of these things.

TM: Isn't that something? You know, I'm just thrilled. I think these are great. We get a chance to really look at oral history in detail, and it's a lot of fun. I will, just for the record here, may we have your permission to record this oral history over the telephone?

BF: Oh, yeah. I thought I just gave that.

TM: You did, but I just, you know, put in all the dots and cross the T's and all that stuff.

BF: That’s fine.

TM: So you came to Grand Canyon in— Is it 1980-1981?

BF: March of '81.

TM: March of '81. And upstream of the Colorado River as it goes through Grand Canyon National Park is Glen Canyon National Recreation Area, which is basically a recreation area that encompasses a dam that is Glen Canyon Dam and the huge reservoir upstream of the dam called Lake Powell. The Bureau of Reclamation ran the dam and had a desire to keep that reservoir near full for the 4th of July. And I can't remember the exact details, but it sounds like they didn't release as much water as they thought they would over the winter of 1982, 1983. And the snowpack in 1982-1983 was pretty good. And so, there was a lot of water in the reservoir already when the snowpack decided to cut loose and come on down. And the reservoir filled, and the spillways started going. And then the spillways started failing.

BF: And that was also true for Lake Mead, as well. Not so much the spillways failing but, you know, super high water, anyway.

TM: Right. Because I think they could only open the dam— Without using the spillways, they could only release 40,000 to 45,000 cubic feet a second, and the inflow was 80,000 to 85,000. It wasn't a never-before-seen winter. It was just a lot of water, and they weren't ready for it because everything was pretty full already. Well, let me back up. You showed up in in 1981. How did you first become aware that there was a problem with your upstream neighbor?

BF: Well, I don't know when I was first aware. But a couple things happened. And I guess I don't know the exact chronology. It's just that one thing that I was asked to do and in an urgent fashion by the Superintendent, and I think I knew that this was coming to be, was to write an emergency evacuation plan for Phantom Ranch and perhaps at least notifying the boat people that the dam was being compromised. And I didn't realize just how badly this was until I read *The Emerald Mile*, which, you know, for anybody that might listen to this, it's very well-written but it really does document that particular history and all the damage to the various tunnels and the dam itself and what was taking place. I wasn't particularly aware of all that. I knew that the water was essentially going over the top of the dam, and they were putting up these plywood barriers to help raise the level so the level could even go a little bit higher, because they were having a hard time, as you said, keeping track of all the water, you know, accounting for it or letting it go through. They couldn't let it go through fast enough and that sort of thing. But anyway, I was asked to write an emergency evacuation plan for Phantom Ranch if that dam were to fail.

TM: How did you do that?

BF: Well, I sat down with a couple of other people, and I think Ernie was probably involved, and we did a scattershot what happens, who's involved, and what could happen, and what kind of time are we talking about and if it takes place at night, it's different than daytime. You know, all the scenarios as much as we could conjure up. And this was all done within just a couple of days, probably even two days' worth. And it wasn't necessarily to be the most sophisticated, refined product. It really was just a, you know, this is what we're going to do right now. Plan A is to do this and that and whatever. So, that was part of my marching orders and that since I was in charge of search and rescue and, basically, emergency operations at the park, that fell into my domain, and I was happy to do it. I felt pretty comfortable in working on it. Not necessarily having all the answers, for sure.

TM: What were some of the things that you thought about? [Butch laughs.] Well, let's see, it was only 20, 30, 35 years ago, a little more. Just thinking what you remember about some of that plan.

BF: Well, it's one of those things, you know, like a lot of other things down through the years. Professionally, I should have kept a copy of all this stuff, but of course, I didn't. Well, one thing I mentioned is daytime versus nighttime. The response is going to be a heck of a lot different and pretty much at nighttime, other than alerting— And, of course, the people at Phantom Ranch, the Rangers and the maintenance staff and others who might have access to telephones and radios down there, were all alert to this potential. It was, you know, we're going to notify them, and it's pretty much, and this is pretty simplistic, but it's everybody for themselves going up the side of the hills.

During the daytime it was a little more refined than that. There was some consideration for a helicopter evacuation, multiple helicopters from Grand Canyon Helicopters to move people around and get people up and down and whatever. The idea was not to take them from Phantom back up to the South Rim and then return, because that would take so much time. It really was to pick up however many people each ship would take probably, say, three, and I'm trying to remember. Just on the upriver side, just barely, there's a pretty high ridge that the helicopters, based on the guys that we talked to, our pilots, you know, they pretty much could just power up and down. So, it was pretty quick turn-around time. Really not many, too many minutes anyway.

TM: To basically take people to the top of the Tonto. Would that—

BF: No, it wasn't even quite that high. I'd have to get a topo out and look at it for sure, but it was up, it was up stream, just right there. You know, it was the upstream edge of Phantom Creek right there. So, that was a consideration and then once— This is assuming that we're all successful in doing this, you know, once we did this helicopter shuttle, getting people up and down, or getting up anyway.

TM: Right

BF: Then the second stage is how do you take care of those people at that particular spot for a certain length of time, and I'm sure that we included the necessity for shade and water to have available to

transport with these parties and collectively, you know, depending on if there both parties and how many, which weekend we're talking about and that sort of thing. I mean, there could easily be 200 people or more at Phantom. If you put reasonably, say, four helicopters that are going back and forth, you might make a pretty good stab at getting everybody up to safety, at least. But in the meantime, you know that full well that there are going to be people basically scrambling up either the side of the mountains or going up to trails to get to high ground.

TM: And there's a whole river full of river parties.

BF: Yeah, so then that's another part of the whole scenario was how to notify them. And when these parties were launching from Lees Ferry during this period of time, they were advised about all of this taking place in the background. And, of course, the river runners knew about the high water, for sure, but they—I don't know that they necessarily were appreciative of this risk up to the dam. So, they were clued in, and most of the river runners, the guys that were manning the boats, are pretty smart, pretty self-contained, and a lot of common sense. So, I guess we were sort of hoping that that would, you know, prevail as well. But, you know, the document ended up being probably 15 pages long and it had different little addendums and lists of equipment and that sort of thing. Phone numbers and whatever. So, that was the plan that we came up with, and it was very rudimentary, but it was fairly complete. Whether it would have worked, I mean, fortunately, we weren't tested with that. And so that was one aspect of the high water. The other aspect that is pretty clear in my mind, it may be equally, if not more so. And I can't remember which came first, the chicken or the egg on this one, whether it's a plan or whether— You know, with the high water, particularly with Crystal Rapids, which I think was sort of newly formed almost at that point, that for a while, for several weeks, we would not let the runners, the companies, take their clients through Crystal. This was after several J-Rigs, big, twenty-person, 40-foot or whatever the size is, big, monster pontoon boats flipped.

TM: Hey, Butch, I want to go back a bit before we get into some more of the details of what was happening, specifically on the river with the high water. It occurred to me that the Superintendent must have come to you, having been notified, I'm assuming, by the Bureau of Reclamation that Reclamation was concerned about the state of the dam and told, just as a courtesy call to the Superintendent. I'm just assuming it. Is that how that would have happened?

BF: Well, I don't know the scenario there particularly, Tom. I'm sure that—I'm trying to remember who the Superintendent was at Glen Canyon at the time. It might have been Joe Alston. But whoever it was, I'm sure that that group talked to Dick and the Assistant Superintendent. For much of the time I was in the Grand Canyon, it was a guy by the name of John Guthrie. And I'm sure that they all talk back and forth, and whether the Bureau of Reclamation gave anybody any kinds of heads up, that I don't know about.

TM: Okay, that would have made sense because Glen Canyon National Recreation Area Superintendent stationed out of Page, Arizona, would have would have seen and heard that there was trouble at the dam.

BF: Oh, sure. Oh, my gosh, yes.

TM: And would have made a simple call to his downstream neighbors, saying, "Hey, this is looking serious up here. You better have a plan of attack."

BF: Well, you know, the Bureau of Reclamation, is a pretty professional outfit, and they're not just at Page.

TM: Right.

BF: You know, they have a whole water control section that maintains, I don't know, seven or ten dams all along the Colorado. And I used to know where they worked out of. I've forgotten exactly where they worked out of. But they have a whole control outfit. I mean, they know sort of to the, I was going to say gnat's eyebrow, but pretty finitely how much water is coming in and how much water is going out. That sort of thing. So, you know, it wasn't all seat of the pants. Now, my job was sort of seat of the pants because it was, you know, hurry up. We need to have this yesterday kind of a plan.

And whenever the Superintendent, in this case, gets in a hurry or excited, then that trickles downstream, which in my case, was “Okay, we’ve got to bring a number of people together and sit down and do a real quick game plan.” That sort of answers your question maybe.

TM: It does. That makes a lot more sense than my assumption. So as the dam was releasing constant 45,000 cubic feet a second, and then as the spillways started to do their job, it became a sort of uncontrolled release over the spillways out of the dam. And that seemed to work okay for a little while, but those spillways go into these big tunnels that very steeply go down to the old diversion tubes when the dam was constructed in the ‘50s, early ‘60s, and that elbow where this steeply descending tunnel meets the horizontal tunnel, that elbow started to fail with all the water that was pounding down on it. And the color of the water leaving the spillway tunnels turned to red. Went in clear and came out red. Meanwhile downstream, the river runners are seeing an ever-increasing amount of water to boat on. As you say, Crystal was a new rapid in, I believe, 1967, due to a big side-canyon flood that put a lot of rocks and material into the river that made that rapid, that high water, unique and something that the river people hadn’t seen before. And the ones that were running it in their normal way found themselves flipping their boats. Did you get called in on that?

BF: Yeah.

TM: Okay. What do you remember about that?

BF: Well, we had several of the big rigs, the J-Rigs, I guess they’re called, flip. And we, meaning the park, shut down them taking clients through Crystal.

TM: Okay. That very day? Did you have to station somebody there?

BF: Well, yeah. People from Phantom started off, but then we flew one or two of the river Ranger-type people in, and they were there. And by this time, of course, we had dropped a couple of notes to some of the river runners upstream, telling them that they’re going to have to pull over above Crystal—which they would have done anyway to scout it—to pull over and stay, and they’re going to have to have their clients walk around. And I don’t know that, you know, maybe there was some grumbling that I don’t know about, but basically everybody accepted that fact, because, as you say, it was all brand-new high water. Pretty much none of these guys had ever seen anything like this. And a lot of these rapids change with high water, low water. They’re not always the same rapid, and I think that was a case for Crystal. And I’m not any kind of a river person so I could be a little bit off on some of my statements here, but basically—

TM: The river hadn’t been up that high— Actually, it only got up to about 97,000 cubic feet a second, and it hadn’t been up that high since 1958. In ’57, it was up to 124,000 cubic feet a second, and there were people out there running it then. But since the dam— Low water years in the late ‘50s, early ‘60s, and then the dam took control. No one had seen that water for 20 to 30 years, and so all the river guides didn’t know how to run it, that kind of water.

BF: Right. Well, I think that’s a good summary. That’s how I recall it as well. So, we’ve got these people walking around but when a couple of these J-Rigs flipped, there were people scattered all the way down the river for miles. Now, I can’t tell you exactly how far but, you know, quite a ways.

TM: And they were just floating with their life jackets—

BF: They were floating.

TM: —until they were able, an eddy or something would get them to shore, and they could crawl out of the river. Okay.

BF: Yep. But not all of them could do that. And on two occasions, not two occasions, twice in the same occasion, JT Reynolds and I flew in by helicopter in our wet suits and jumped into the river to bring, take people to shore that somehow had been trapped perhaps— Well, in one case, I had about an 8- or 9-year-

old boy that had a lower leg break. I don't think there was all that aggravated, but, I mean, it wasn't like it was a compound fracture or anything, but it was broken. And yet he was stuck on this rock, or not rock but ledge that went into the river. And in this, case I jumped in upstream and floated down to him, took him and floated further down the river another quarter of a mile till we could get to a beach big enough that we could land the ship on, the helicopter, and put this kid in the helicopter. And things were going so quickly, and there was such an emergency and urgency about all this, we didn't do anything about splinting this kid's leg or anything. I just helped him hobble over to sit in, to get into the helicopter and strapped him in. And they flew him off to the South Rim. And JT did somewhat the same thing. I don't know that he had anybody injured. I do remember that it perhaps was somebody trapped. It was a woman, if I'm not mistaken. And fortunately, a lot of these people that were in these big rigs, you know, and this happened a couple times, were able to get themselves close enough to shore or were able to get out. Then we, I say we, again, the park, brought in people to help flip the boats back over and get them re-launched and get things organized and essentially were on their way. Now, you know, everybody wasn't flowing out. Some people chose to continue. Some people chose— They wanted to come out. We kept track of that, too.

Probably not real accurately, but we didn't feel like we, meaning the federal government, the Park Service should be paying for all of this helicopter time also. So, you know, that we would be able to charge the companies that were involved. So, it was quite a mess, quite a zoo, quite interesting. In my case, I thought it was a lot of fun, personally. I really enjoyed, both in Yosemite and Grand Canyon, jumping out of the helicopter into the rivers. So, that was the flood of '83, or the high water of '83.

TM: So, I'm going to ask you a couple of details about that. I would assume that the park's one and only helicopter would have been very busy. Did you bring in a couple extra helicopters for that?

BF: For one thing, the contract gave us allowance to, on the same contract, at the same rate per hour kind of thing, a second helicopter from Grand Canyon Helicopters. So, yeah, there was a helicopter shuttle. I can't remember if we had three or more helicopters. We've perhaps did. That would not have been a real unusual situation, I guess. I mean, I don't know that we did that very often. But we often would use the second helicopter. So, I don't know if that answers your question or not.

TM: Yeah, I'm assuming at least there were two. You know, basically, if you jump out, and you try to get somebody to shore and then get them out of there, when you're successful, that ship's going to be gone quite a while to go up to the rim and come back. Meanwhile there's other people that are in need and, you know, JT's in the water someplace else. So, I would assume that that would be a time for a number of ships in operation.

BF: Yeah, I think that the little boy, if I remember right, I went in, floated to him, convinced him that it was all going to be okay. we're just going to float down. And it wasn't— There weren't rapids. It was really pretty quiet water. I mean, it was moving, but it wasn't bad water. And I think, in this case, the ship actually was waiting for us when we got to the sandbar or to the beach, rather.

So, we tried to be as efficient as we could. Whether we were 100% successful, who knows? Probably not, given the circumstances and the urgency and everything being, for the time being, distorted by all the activity that's taking place and trying to search for people and account for them up and down the river. You know, was an interesting exercise. It wasn't just JT and I, although I think JT and I are the only two that actually went into the river. But there were several other people. Curt Sauer comes to mind because of his knowledge. One, he was the charge of the river operation, but he was a river runner himself and had a good experience, very level-headed. I'm sure that he was in there orchestrating stuff, too.

TM: Okay, and you mentioned *The Emerald Mile*. There is mention of an Arizona Congressman named Dennis DeConcini. How did he get into this?

BF: Well, I don't know. I've met Senator DeConcini, but I don't know anything about his relationship on this particular incident, anyway. I didn't even know he was involved, come to think of it, I guess. Is that something in *The Emerald Mile* that I just forgot, maybe?

TM: Someone else mentioned that they ran into him at Crystal. He had flown in, and he was shaking hands and, you know, saying, well, he's on top of it, but—

BF: Oh, is that right? Well, I don't remember that. I guess I was too busy jumping out of helicopters into the rivers.

TM: Right. And it could have been some days later when things had kind of quieted down a little bit.

BF: I bet you it wasn't during that emergency. That would have been— You know, Marks is pretty politically savvy. Perhaps Marks would have done that, but Marks was also a kind of a practical man, and he might not have really enjoyed having the senator show up and try to make some sort of a political concession to fly him in and out while we were working. So, maybe that's the reason I don't remember him down there shaking hands. He did not shake my hand. I remember that.

TM: I'd have to go back in my notes and see who had said that. Anyway, they showed up at Crystal, and he was there. And, you know, they made their run and carried on their way, so everything was good.

BF: Yeah. Well, that's probably true. I mean, I certainly don't doubt that, but— I doubt that it was during the actual emergency though.

TM: So, you mentioned James “JT” Reynolds. When did you first meet JT?

BF: Well, JT came to work in Yosemite Valley when I was the Assistant Valley District Ranger.

TM: Do you remember the year?

BF: That would have been— Well, it would have been somewhere around 1975. And he would have been fairly brand new to the Park Service, I think. He worked in the valley as a patrolman. And JT is, you know, he was in the Cotton Bowl. He went to Texas A&M. His wife is named Dot or Dorothy, and she was an elementary school teacher, and their son is named Jamal. You know, solid family. I believe JT did not live in the valley but worked in the valley. And I think he was housed out in Wawona, which is another major part of Yosemite National Park but it's not nearly as big and complicated as Yosemite Valley. So, I think he lived out there and would travel back and forth and, you know, it was easy to justify him patrolling the road, which is roughly an hour, like, 45 minutes at least from Wawona to the valley. I don't know exactly how far it is, maybe 25 miles. He would be in a marked patrol car, would come into the park, into the valley and go back and forth to home. So, it worked out for him. It worked out for us. That was pretty good. But he was a patrolman in the valley for several years. And then he ended up going out to Wawona where he, I believe, was the No. 2 person in that unit out there. I don't think he was the District Ranger. I think he was, like, the No. 2 guy.

TM: Okay. And he would have been involved in all of the big-wall rescues and the normal, you know, search and rescue events that Yosemite had to deal with.

BF: Yeah. He would have been doing exactly the same thing everybody else did. Now, you know, just like all of us, we all have certain specialties and things were more interested in it than others. In JT's case, I can't tell you exactly. He was a good patrolman. When I mentioned that he played in the Cotton Bowl at Texas A&M, I should have finished the thought, which was that he's a pretty good, strong guy. I mean, he's somebody you'd want on your side if you got into a tussle. And that was always nice to have, particularly during those days in Yosemite.

And then I left and went to the Grand Canyon as Assistant Chief Ranger in March of '81, and JT was still in Yosemite at the time. I don't believe there was any space between Yosemite and the Grand Canyon for JT. I think he went straight from Yosemite to Grand Canyon. But he ended up, while I was at the Grand Canyon, at the Albright Training Center. JT, at that time, was one of the only couple, two, or three, or four African American men, or people, for that matter, man or woman in the Park Service, certainly in the West. I'm sure that there are some back East and some of the more historic areas. But in terms of the big western

parcs, there really were only a handful. Jimmy Lee, or James Lee, would have been one that worked in the valley with me as well. But JT ends up going to the Albright Training Center as a— His focus would have been on sort of ranger skills as opposed to management or resources or interp or something. I mean, his would have been more fire, law enforcement, search and rescue, EMS kinds of things.

So that was, that would have been his focus at the training center. But in Grand Canyon, JT was very good about helping out, participating in the park's emergency or, well, basically, emergency kinds of things. He was on the Volunteer Fire Department, and I never have understood how I should quantify whether it's a volunteer, because when you showed up, you got paid. And it wasn't a full-time thing on your part. But you trained, which— That was part of my job was to get people trained up so that we didn't kill somebody. And, you know, we could put out a fire. He volunteered, was on that. When the fire alarm would go off at 2 o'clock in the morning, I could pretty much count on JT showing up. And it was always good having him out there.

And the same thing was true for a search and rescue where I sort of needed *The A Team*, which, of course, was a popular TV show during that era. *The A Team*, where you wanted people that were qualified in search and rescue or rescues or whatever. So, he did that. He's the one that I went to right off the bat when that mid-air collision took place in 1986, I think. You know, I went straight to him because he— Well, for one thing, the training center had a video camera, which the park did not have. I asked JT, I said, "Can you go? Are you available?" "Yes." "Okay. Well, then, be at the helicopter in 15 minutes. Get that video camera because you're going to go up and film what's going on there before this place turns into a zoo," because we knew that it was a 19-person airplane.

TM: You know, before we get to the 1986 air crash—

BF: Yeah, I wasn't going to talk about it just at this point anyway.

TM: Okay. That's good. I kind of wanted some clarification. The Albright Training Center, if I get this right, is a National Park within a National Park. It's a training center that happens to be within Grand Canyon National Park.

BF: Well, no. It's not training— It's not a National Park within a National Park. It's a training facility. Geographically, it's within Grand Canyon at the South Rim. It was established— It was built specifically for training Park Rangers in 1963. I think that was their very first class there. Classes before that had been taking place in Yosemite from 1958.

TM: I guess I was thinking it has its own budget.

BF: Yeah.

TM: It doesn't rely on the Grand Canyon National Park budget.

BF: That's correct.

TM: So, I sort of think of it as— It has its own superintendent.

BF: Correct.

TM: So, it's really sort of a standalone training center with its own people. And yet there's this wonderful relationship where it's like, hey, there's employees there that are good at what they do. Let's use them. And JT was, of course, the perfect example of that.

BF: Yeah. That relationship would ebb and flow, depending on the personalities, as well. But that's sort of universal with everything. So, in this case, there are maybe including, you know, some custodial people and a maintenance person or two and then the staff, the instructional staff. There probably were 10 people total there at the, it's called the Horace M. Albright Training Center. And Horace Albright was the No. 2

director for the National Park Service, and it was named after him. Do you need me to dissect the training center a little bit for you or not?

TM: Yeah. Because we're there and we're talking about it. I think would be helpful, if you're willing.

BF: So, the training center, when I went through it in 1965, I was totally impressed. It was very, very well thought out. It was specifically designed for groups such as myself when I went through as a three-month long school. And there are— I think there still are either four or five, certainly four, maybe even five sets of apartments that would house these students. When I went through in '65, each apartment had a little kitchen, one bedroom, which in my case I shared with another single guy. I think there were one or two apartments that were two-bedroom, but mostly pretty small. You know, a little front room. Basically furnished. Nothing real fancy, you know. No TV's or anything like that. And that's where we would stay for three months. Over time, that three months was whittled down to maybe 10 weeks, and then nine weeks, and then, I think, six weeks.

You know, mostly because of budgets. So, the facility itself, at the instructional facility, were two large classrooms, pretty well equipped for their time with the AV equipment, which was also part of the stuff that we learned. How to operate some of that. You know, I'd never been around some of that slide projector kinds of stuff before. The classrooms were equipped with that. Each classroom would house, sort of, when I went through there, with the permanent tables that might have been probably capable of holding 30 people. And then the instructors' offices were there as well. Then there was a little meeting room and a kitchenette and a garage attached. So that was pretty much the real facility. Some of the maintenance stuff, if something happened to the plumbing or electricity or something, the park would provide the skill and the person to take care of that. I think that there was some sort of a reciprocal, not reciprocal, but some sort of an agreement where if one of our electricians were to go over there and work for a day that the park would be reimbursed. I don't believe that we nicked and dined it. If somebody was just there for an hour or two, I suspect— You know, the paperwork was more work than it was worth. And then in addition to these long-term, three-months schools, there were lots of other week, two-week, three-week kinds of schools and classes and trainings that would come in.

And all the dormitory lodging apartment kinds of stuff was already there. And it worked out pretty well, and it was really a great benefit to the park for any number of reasons. One that comes to mind on a personal level is when I got divorced, or when I separated, I ended up living there for several months anyway. And I paid rent. But, you know, I moved out so my wife and kids could have the home that I lived in. So, there are lots of benefits to the training center for us. I don't know too much about what goes on there currently. I do know that they still have classes that do come in. Originally one of the downsides was that most people would have to fly into Phoenix to get to the Grand Canyon. But with the airport, over time, all that sort of got worked out as well. Airlines would start flying into the Grand Canyon Airport.

One other minor thing that I used quite a bit at the training center was they had a pretty good stash of search and rescue, not so much search, but rescue equipment. Stretchers, ropes, karabiners, and that sort of thing, that I very often generally might have even been the lead instructor for rescue training for these young people that would come through. But I would often use their equipment at the training center. And I would get permission. But I'd use their equipment when I would go out and teach with Sheriff Joe Richards' high-altitude rescue team. Or when I went down to Sedona, I would use some of that equipment as well. So, what else do you need to know about the training center?

TM: Well, that's a pretty good coverage. Let's go then back to JT. He was in the thick of it in Yosemite. He was a law-enforcement Ranger. He was doing search and rescue. He was big-wall climbing. Family man. For him to shift to the Albright Training Center, was that a career move for him to start climbing an administrative ladder?

BF: Yeah, I'm sure it was.

TM: Okay, cool. I mean, I just kind of wonder how these things happen. And I was thinking, you know, I think if JT came to Grand Canyon, he would want to come as a Ranger with the incredible skill set that he had and clearly enjoyed.

BF: Well, before him, one of the— The quality of the men and women that were graduates of Yosemite Valley, in particular, in terms of protection, was pretty high. And there were a number of Rangers who went from Yosemite to the Grand Canyon training center. That's really a misnomer. It's not the Grand Canyon training center. I shouldn't have phrased it that way. To the training center at the Grand Canyon.

TM: To the Albright. Yeah.

BF: The Albright Training Center. And it was a great steppingstone for them. And JT would have been among them, as well. I suspect— I'm trying to think. I'm pretty sure it was promotion for JT from probably a GS-11 in Yosemite to a GS-12 at the training center.

TM: And then from there one might assume to be a Deputy Superintendent or even a Superintendent for that, kind of—

BF: Well, that's one scenario. There's other scenarios. He could have gone out as Chief Ranger. He could have stayed in more the management aspect as opposed to getting back into the field. There's all kinds of avenues you could do.

TM: I see. All right.

BF: And JT was still there when I left, and I left the Grand Canyon in, I think, the spring of 1987, and I'm pretty sure JT was still there.

TM: Well, he would eventually become the Deputy Superintendent at Grand Canyon National Park.

BF: Yeah, but he went— There were a bunch of other stops for him in between.

TM: Okay. But he was still working at Albright when you left in the spring of '87.

BF: I think so. Yeah, that's right.

TM: Okay. What else do you remember about him? Just, you know, any other events that— Well, you were starting to talk about the 1986 helicopter versus a fixed-wing mid-air collision. Maybe we should go into that.

BF: Okay, sure. Do you want me to just start rambling or—

TM: Yeah. I mean, I'm assuming that the phone rings or the radio call comes in that either planes are missing or someone has seen smoke? Or how did that work?

BF: Sort of how that unfolds— Do you want me to get the date and stuff quickly for you or not? Do you already have that?

TM: I'm sure that future researchers can dig that up.

BF: Well, there are a couple things that took place, I think, sort of parallel at the same time. One is that Ernie Kuncel and Tom Caldwell were in the air, responding, were launching, were responding to, I think, an ill or a sick minor diplomat at Phantom Ranch, was either Chinese or Russian. And the call came in. It was a routine kind of a thing. Ernie being the paramedic, terribly talented guy that he was, was on his way. He and Tom had launched from the South Rim, were coming up into the air. At about the same time, there's sort of a broadcast over the aviation radios, not the park's, but I mean, between helicopters, between the planes and stuff, that there was a plane missing and was as, I think, sort of an advisory, like, "Okay,

everybody. Keep your eyes open. We've got a big plane gone. We don't know where it is exactly. It hasn't reported in at the right times," or something.

So when Tom and Ernie go up, on their way to Phantom, they look over off to the West, and here's this column of smoke coming up, and it doesn't take a rocket scientist in this case to figure out what— So, they flew out over there. They did a number of circles. I don't even think they landed because they literally, according to Ernie, could still see people burning in their seats, which is a pretty gruesome image to conjure it up. So, based on that, they knew that they weren't going to be of any help there. I mean, what could we do, you know, so they continued on their way to Phantom Ranch. The helicopter isn't known to even be involved yet for probably another 45 minutes or so, perhaps even an hour before it becomes known that, okay, we're missing a helicopter also. At the time, it was like, okay, we've got a one-person, not one-person, a one-plane accident. We knew that it was a Twin Otter, I think, 19 people on board. The two pilots and, I think, 17 other individuals, so 19 total. We knew that. We knew by this time that everybody on board was presumed to be dead just based on preliminary sighting by two people who flew right over the top of it and circle around a couple of times. That was a definite, for sure. Ernie or Tom, one or the other, calls it into the park dispatcher, as well. I'm sure that they did the same thing to the control tower at the airport. And when the call comes in or when the radio transmission comes in, I hear it, and even though I'm the management assistant, I'm still in charge of search and rescue.

And I had the best of two worlds in some ways. If it was a pretty minor kind of a thing where you actually had to go down and get dirty and sweaty and carrying somebody out of the park, I might choose not to do that. But if it was something bigger or better or more interesting or whatever, I mean, more complicated, I would often insert myself into it, not necessarily as the boss but as a participant. Well, in this case, I knew that with 19 people on board, it was going to turn into a zoo pretty quickly from several different facets.

TM: And what were those facets?

BF: Well, so you've got the press, obviously. You've got the National Transportation Safety Board, or the NTSB, is going to be quickly on scene. You're going to have the, you know, as well as parts the FAA. You're going to have the Sheriff's Office involved. You're going to have, of course, the park is involved. The management from the Grand Canyon Airlines are going to be involved. And all of these are going to be moving parts, trying to sort out what's going on, and what's happening, and where's everything, and all that sort of thing.

So, I step into the middle of it. I basically get on the air, literally on the radio and pretty much say that I'm becoming the incident commander. And this was not so much for me to exercise my muscle but rather to define a chain of command and who's making the decisions, or how and who are we answering to kinds of things. Now, that might not be quite so critical on a smaller event, but when you've got this kind of an event going on, my training and my experience over the years was I needed to do that, which is what I did. And pretty quickly I ended up getting ahold of JT. I mean, within minutes of getting ahold of JT and doing what I mentioned before about, you know, is your camera working and are you available? If so, you know, because all he had to do was walk out of his front door at the training center.

TM: Walk right across the street to get the helicopter. Yeah.

BF: Yeah. I mean, 200 feet later, he's there at the helicopter.

TM: Okay. With his camera in hand.

BF: Well, hopefully that's right, which, in fact, that's what happened. And because I knew that because of all these moving parts that were going to be taking place that I wanted to have as much documentation before the scene got muddled up, so to speak, which is the reason I asked JT to do that for me. So, that worked out fine. And, of course, we're starting to make all the notifications and— But one of the neat things, I guess, or one of the good things is that because of Ernie and Tom Caldwell actually being on site, on scene, and actually seeing these people literally burning in the seats, we knew that this was not a rescue. I mean, we sort of made that decision early on. And that's important from a practical standpoint in terms of

urgency notification kinds of stuff. Who needs to be there, who needs to be on scene, that sort of thing. So, it was more than just academic that Ernie and Tom were able to declare as best they could that, hey, you know, everybody is dead. It's an unfortunate situation, but now we need to deal with the fact that we got 19 people dead. And things unfold from there.

TM: When you flew out with JT—

BF: No, I didn't fly out with JT.

TM: Oh, okay. When JT took off to make that film, did you know there was a helicopter involved by then?

BF: No. As I say, it was another 45 minutes or something like that. It was some period of time, less than an hour but more than half an hour. But before we were alerted to the fact that there was a helicopter missing—and I don't know exactly how that unfolded—but people started putting two and two together, either out at the airport or the control tower or the Grand Canyon airlines or helicopters.

TM: Right. Their dispatchers must have known, okay, they've got a ship gone. And now they're counting heads, going, "Wait a minute. We've got a helicopter gone too."

BF: Well, sort of. Yeah. I mean, I think that's right. And John Thybony was the pilot for the helicopter. I don't remember who the pilot was for the fixed-wing. Actually, I think there were two pilots. It's like a pilot and a copilot. I worked with the guys from the helicopter much more than the airline, so I wasn't as familiar with them. But pretty quickly, it's everybody is speeding there, conceptually at least, to get there. You know, the NTSB, the FAA, the Sheriff's Office, etc. That first night— And also at the same time, you may recall, I'm both the incident commander and the public information guy, which is a terribly unique situation, which I'll come back to in just a minute or two, a couple of minutes. But that first night we ended up having Steve Lucassen, the deputy, and I say we, I mean, basically the Sheriff's Office, who really had the authority now because of the deceased and the coroner responsibilities.

The park played a major role. But at this point, we've then become sort of ancillary to the whole operation. I mean, we provided manpower. We provided the helicopter. We provided facilities. You know, we helped orchestrate getting in a refrigerated semi-truck for the bodies. That sort of thing. But at night, Steve Lucassen, I think, maybe spent the night out there by himself, which if I had been Steve, I would have been— That would have been pretty eerie for me, I think. That would not have been a comfortable spot to have been in, and there might have been somebody else out there with him. Come to think of it, I think there was actually a Park Ranger that went out there with him too. I don't think we were that heartless to put him out there by himself.

So, you know, then things unfolded the next day. It was a matter of, you know, we didn't put out the fire. I mean, there wasn't any— There was a fire, but there wasn't any real practical way that we could fight that fire without disturbing any kinds of evidence about what happened. At this point, we did know that there was another helicopter. I mean, *a* helicopter. And I'm pretty sure that we knew, you know, that the two had been involved together. But you didn't want to go in and drop buckets of water. We had a 70-gallon water bucket that we would use on small fires, but once you do that, you really disturbed the evidence and what have you. And the fire is not going to spread. it's just a matter of let nature sort of take its place here.

TM: And the fire didn't head off into the heavy pine trees and burn acres and acres and acres.

BF: No. Well, in fact, it was on the Tonto Plateau and there wasn't any pine trees nor hardly any brush.

TM: Right. And the Tonto is, maybe I want to just roughly say, 700 feet above the river in that area.

BF: Yeah, probably. I mean, it's possible.

TM: So, you know, the Grand Canyon is 4-5,000 feet deep, and so this is quite a ways down near the bottom. There's a flat bench called the Tonto.

BF: Correct.

TM: And so, the helicopter and fixed wing landed, crashed onto this platform. And it's a black brush. It's a mid-shin-high, kind of spiky bush and lots of it. Lots of cactus.

BF: Little hills out there. And I guess I don't remember. I'd have to go back to look at the map. But the helicopter ended up landing, or not landing, crashing several miles away. It wasn't right there next to the plane. And it did not burn. So, there was a little search for it, and I think that was pretty quickly resolved and maybe— I guess I don't want to mislead anybody on this, Tom. I'm not sure if we found it that afternoon or the next morning. But we did know there was another one involved. We knew there were six people onboard the helicopter, so there were 25 people total involved, which I think— I did some research on this not too long ago, within the last six months when that big boat fire took place at Channel Islands with 33, I think, divers were killed in the fire. So, I had several people asked me about how did that fit into the great scheme of accidents within the Park Service. I think that this 25-person mid-air collision was 4th or 5th in terms of the sheer numbers of people.

Of course, the largest was a 1956 mid-air collision over the Grand Canyon also. But one of the things— Well, you mentioned you thought I flew out there with them. And it's too easy to have gotten suckered into that because a lot of the work, the necessity for telephones and contacting people and answering questions and all that sort of thing, was actually back at the South Rim.

TM: Right. I would assume if you're doing the coordination of all the different groups involved, you've listed out quite a number, and dealing with the press, your job is by telephone somewhere, and a radio.

BF: Yes. That's correct. And I'm sure that Dick Marks is right at my right-hand side or something, too, which is the reason I didn't want to get trapped into going out there by helicopter. That's the reason I sent JT out there, so that he could bring back this film. And rather than having all of these entities flying in and flying out and that sort of thing, they could at least see this video and have a pretty clear understanding of where it was, what's going on, what's it looks like, there's definitely nobody alive. You know, those kinds of answers right off the bat. We did not need to have everybody and his brother going out there and checking on this. Now, as it turns out, lots of people and their brothers did go out there. But we didn't need to have that initially anyway. So, I chose not to go out, and part of that's just from the all the training and stuff and experiences I did in Yosemite, principally. One of the things I mentioned is that I was the Public Affairs Officer, as well, or the public information guy. I was the one to put out the press releases and things for other stuff at the park. And I have this very clear memory of me being in the middle of what used to be the Visitors Center where they used to have the boats, the historic boats that did the early river stuff. We had a press conference out there, and I probably had 50 or 60 or more different press and media outlets: TV stations, radio stations, newspapers. You know, when you got 25 people killed, it's quite an attraction.

TM: Oh, yeah.

BF: So, I'm standing on— I don't know if it was a chair or whether— Somehow, I was raised above all of these people standing there because we didn't have a spot big enough for them, at that point, where we could talk to everybody, you know. Everybody talking and yelling, not yelling so much, but shouting questions. And I just got irritated because, one, I'm the IC, but two, I'm this PIO guy. And the reason I didn't delegate it is that I already had the contacts. It was easier, in terms of just pure efficiency, for me to do this rather than bringing somebody else up to speed on it.

In retrospect, probably I should have delegated that to somebody, but at the time, I'm pretty harried by what's going on. You know, I've never done anything quite this size before. So, I'm standing on this chair, this little stepstool or something. And all these people are, you know, sort of a minor chaos going on in front of me. And I'm shouting at these people to shut up. "If you want to have some answers and some, you know, do this, we're going to do it in a civilized fashion." And I was kind of impressed that I was that organized, I guess. Because people shut up, and I would take questions. I gave a briefing first. I would end up taking questions and answered people's questions or whatever. And then— I don't know if it was the

next day or the third day, but we end up bringing in a large helicopter or something like a, you know, CH46 or a Jolly Green Giant out of Luke.

TM: A heavy-lift helicopter.

BF: Yeah, but it wasn't so much for heavy lifting as much as it was— I guess, it was heavy lifting. But we were capable of putting in a bunch of body bags at one time. And they were flying into— Let me think about this. They were flying into what is currently the heliport because where our helicopter would sit down was not big enough for— It was just too dangerous for this bigger helicopter to sit down. So, we were shuttling, but we had this refrigerated, you know, half of a semi-truck stationed there and—

TM: This was out at the Grand Canyon Airport, out at Tusayan?

BF: No, no. This is right there next to the training center.

TM: Oh, okay. So, you had the heavy-lift helicopter actually land right near the training center.

BF: No. That's what I was trying to clarify. The large ship was landing, I think, where the current heliport is on the South Rim, the park's helispot.

TM: Oh, out by the new maintenance yard. Okay.

BF: But as I think about it, it could have been over in the football field of the high school, too. That I don't remember. I do remember, however, that the bodies were transported to this refrigerated semi, which was parked at the maintenance yard that you're talking about now, which is right across the street from the Albright Training Center.

TM: Right. And the football field is just a block away from Albright Training Center in this other area, so it would make sense that actually that would be—

BF: That's probably where we ended up doing it. I did not go there. I was trying to keep track of all these news people now, and I have a great photo someplace of a tape across one of the big bays of the building. The news media people are inside of it, looking out onto the refrigerator truck as the body bags are being hoisted into this refrigerated truck. At this point, I didn't have, you know, that much responsibility. I mean, you know, the Sheriff's Office is there from a coroner standpoint. The NTSB was there to start doing an investigation.

There wasn't anything I was, or even the park, for that matter, other than just providing support and, you know, doing gopher for kinds of things. You know, we really didn't have any real big part of this anymore. It was sort of out of our hands, except for maintaining control on the public affairs aspect of it, I guess. We ended up— And we ended up, “we” meaning this group, this team, this Park Service team, we got a, like, a unit citation from the Department of the Interior, which are not super unusual, but they're not handed out every day, either. So, the park received one of those for this effort.

TM: And I'm assuming that the park ship would have been used to fly the NTSB team daily out to the site until their investigation was continuing, was completed.

BF: No, I don't think so. I think we— I think we kept that for other incidents.

TM: Did they have their own ship then? Did they hire up?

BF: No, I don't think they hired. I think Grand Canyon Helicopters provided some of that for them. You know, I don't know at the time— I don't think— Well, I shouldn't say this. I guess I was thinking that we had not cleaned it up by the time I left, but perhaps we had at night. It might have been that the Sierra Club came in and helped clean up burnt frames and stuff.

TM: Yeah, I was going to say you'd need another heavy-lift helicopter. Well, I guess you could use a smaller helicopter with sling loads and just take multiple loads out.

BF: Well, I think, yeah, from the plane. I don't know about the helicopter, but the plane was so burnt up and broke it up that it was already in pieces anyway. And, you know, surprisingly, I mean, that I guess I didn't really quite understand how much that metal burnt. What other questions do you have about that?

TM: That's probably it. I'm assuming that— Well, I don't know. I'm assuming that Grand Canyon Airlines, you know, it was their ship, they would have been responsible for trying to remove it, I suppose, but I'm not sure about that.

BF: Well, yeah. They got the insurance companies and stuff going in to doing that. One thing that, you know, from a personal standpoint— John Thybony, who was the pilot of the helicopter. My son, my oldest son, Lincoln, who at that time was about 11, had entered into some kind of charity bicycle bike-a-thon thing in the park, and the person that rode the furthest, going around this one circle, which is about a mile-long track, if you will.

TM: Is that Park Circle?

BF: Yeah, it was actually Park Circle.

TM: Which is a loop road, a circular road. It's about a mile long, and on either side of it are Park Service employee houses.

BF: Right. Well, they had this bike-a-thon there. And the first prize was a helicopter ride with Grand Canyon Helicopters.

TM: Oh, wow.

BF: Well, you know, an hour-long ride. My son rode some humongous numbers of miles as this little 11-year-old, winning first prize. So, John took my two sons and myself, the oldest one that won this prize was up in the front seat, and I was in the back with my youngest son, and we're balancing the load out. And John proceeded to take us on— The award was, like, about an hour, but John proceeded to take us on closer to a two-hour tour around the entire Grand Canyon National Park from the air for my kids. And, of course, I'd spent hundreds of hours in the air in helicopters and flying around the park but even I saw things that I had never seen before, you know, parts of the park I'd never seen before. And John is the one that was the pilot that ended up getting killed a couple of months later. I don't think I've ever pointed that out to my sons, but I often think about that. I often think about that midair collision for one thing.

TM: Yeah, I'm sure.

BF: And, you know, it's not hard to then reflect back on other parts of that, including my sons and I flying with the guy that was the pilot.

TM: Maybe this is a good place to wrap up this part, and next time we'll talk about air traffic over the canyon and your involvement then in that.

BF: Okay. I'm going to try to see if I can go back and find a few news clippings and things. I tend to, once we hang up here, Tom, I tend to go on to other things and forget that I had made commitments to do stuff.

TM: I understand. I'll make a note of it. I'll remind you. Okay. Well, with that, this will conclude Part 15 oral history interview with Butch Farabee. You never thought we'd get to 15!

[Laughter]

BF: Well, when you get to Part 34—

TM: It's not going to happen, I'll tell you that!

BF: I hope not.

TM: Today is July 2, 2020. My name is Tom Martin. And, Butch, thank you so very much.

BF: As always, Tom, it's my pleasure.