

The Thirteenth Fire

by
Dave Turner,
Helena National
Forest

August 5, 1999 marks the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Mann Gulch Fire, on the Helena National Forest in Montana. The small fire, which ignited the canyon in a "blow-up," cost 12 smokejumpers and a fire guard their lives.

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Wildland firefighters on the Helena National Forest in southwest Montana fought more than 57 wildfires during the summer of 1949. But only one of these fires, the thirteenth of the season as luck would have it, would become seared into the collective memory of the Helena Forest and Forest Service firefighters everywhere. That fire was the Mann Gulch Fire.

Probably like most infamous wildfires, the Mann Gulch Fire started out routinely enough. A storm passed over the Helena Forest on the afternoon of August 4, 1949. Like most storms in August in Montana, it hailed lightning down on the mountainous landscape. Even before darkness had set in, reports of fires started by the storm began pouring into the Helena Forest offices.

But, burning high up on a rocky ridge in the remote Gates of the Mountains Wild Area twenty miles north of Helena, the Mann Gulch Fire wasn't spotted until just before noon the following day, August 5th. A fire lookout 30 miles away spotted the first wisps of smoke curling up off the rocky ridge. By the time District Ranger Bob Jansson flew over the fire at 12:30 P.M. the fire had already grown to six acres in size. Because most of the local firefighters were already busy battling two other local fires, the call went out for smokejumpers from the jumpbase in Missoula, Montana, located 120 miles west of the fire.

In 1949, the practice of smokejumping was only ten years old. Beginning with a series of experiments in 1939, smokejumping proved to be an effective, safe method of quickly delivering the best firefighters to fires burning in remote backcountry or in difficult terrain. Using aircraft and smokejumpers, fire managers could attack these remote fires and keep them small. And keeping these fires small prevented millions of trees going up in flames, meant keeping firefighting costs down, and made firefighting safer for everybody.

So, the jump plane was dispatched from Missoula with a smokejumper crew and was over the fire by 3:00 P.M. The fire had grown to 60 acres by then, but was still confined to burning on the ridge. By 3:10 that afternoon 15 smokejumpers had parachuted into the head of Mann Gulch, a half mile from the fire's edge. The jump was uneventful until the parachute on the cargo pack containing the smoke-jumpers' only radio failed to open. The radio was destroyed and the crew had no means to communicate with the outside world.



Smokejumpers soon after leaving the plane, above the Lolo National Forest in Montana. The parachute is completely distended and the 30-ft canopy is unfolding.

As soon as the jumpers landed and retrieved their tools, water and food from the cargo packs, crew foreman, R. Wagner "Wag" Dodge instructed the crew to catch a bite to eat before heading up to the fire. He himself headed up to the ridgeline and the fire to see who was up there yelling. When he reached the fire he discovered that another firefighter who was stationed at a nearby popular Forest Service picnic site had hiked up to the fire and was already busily working trying to slow the fire's advance, single handed. But, the fire was starting to burn aggressively and Dodge and the firefighters Jim Harrison, walked off the ridge to get back to the rest of the smokejumpers whom they met coming up the slope to the fire.

The smokejumping crew and Jim Harrison, all under Dodge's command, regrouped and started to head down Mann Gulch for the safety of the nearby Missouri River, a mile or so down the gulch. But before they could reach the Missouri, high winds materialized and the fire suddenly blew up. Whereas the fire up to this point had been creeping along the ground, it leaped up into the tree and brush canopy and started to expand and grow at an incredible rate. In the process of blowing up the fire tossed burning pine needles, pine cones and other burning material up into the air. Some of these firebrands dropped into

the thick grass on the north slope of Mann Gulch, below the line of men steadily heading for the river. In the blink of an eye the grass was ignited and stiff winds began to sweep the fire up the slope, toward the smokejumper crew. As Dodge at the head of the line of men crested a small finger ridge, he saw the fire now rushing up the slope toward his men. He immediately realized their escape to the river was cut off.

Dodge immediately reversed the crew's direction of travel and headed the men back up the draw and uphill for the safety of the north ridgeline. But the fire was moving too quickly. Dodge realized his crew was still carrying all their tools and equipment and that they were not moving fast enough to outrun the rapidly advancing fire. He ordered them to drop their heavy equipment and the crew tossed down shovels, pulaskis and crosscut saws. Again, they turned up hill and began the steep climb out of the draw bottom.

As they came out of the timber and into an open grassy area on the steep hillside, Dodge realized the fire was going to catch his crew before they could reach the ridgeline. Without a word to anyone, Dodge bent down and set fire to the deep grass he was standing in. Within moments his fire quickly burned up the slope and burned off a 10' x10' area in the grass. Dodge jumped into the burned area and shouted, "Up this way!" But the men either didn't hear his instructions or they didn't understand what he wanted them to do because they all bolted and ran. Some ran right up the slope for the ridgeline. Most continued their escape path across the hillside. The lethal fire swept over them. Jim Harrison's watch stopped at 5:56 P.M.



A memorial cross marks the spot where Stanley J. Reba was found. Reba was one of the 13 firefighters killed in the Mann Gulch fire of 1949.

Wag Dodge survived in his burned off area. Two other smokejumpers, Robert Sallee and Wait Rumsey made it to the ridgeline and sought safety in a rockslide on the north side of the ridge. Two other jumpers, Bill Hellman and Joe Sylvia, were caught by the wall of flames moving up the slope and badly burned.

After locating the injured men, Wag Dodge and Bob Sallee (without a radio to call for help) hiked down out of the still burning fire to go for medical assistance. Walt Rumsev was left with one of the injured smokejumpers, but the

other jumper, Joe Sylvia was left alone in the dark and smoky hell of Mann Gulch. Dodge and Sallee, after getting lost for a time, finally reached the Fire Camp at 8:50 PM and informed Ranger Bob Jansson they had two injured men and 11 men missing in Mann Gulch.

Jansson immediately called on the radio for doctors and medical supplies, and then organized a rescue party. It took several hours to round up the doctors and transport them from Helena and then into a boat headed down the Missouri. In their haste to get to the disaster scene the physicians forgot the stretchers and more time passed as a boat sped back up river to retrieve the litters. Finally, at 1:30 PM, the rescue party headed up the hill from what would become known as Rescue Gulch for the two injured smokejumpers

Shortly after 2:00 A.M. on August 6th, Ranger Jansson, Dodge and the rescue crew with two doctors in tow finally reached Joe Sylvia and the doctors began treating his burns. (The party had reached Bill Hellman earlier and treated him before dropping over the ridge into Mann Gulch.) When Sylvia had been treated and made as comfortable as circumstances would permit, the rescue party debated trying to move the men down out of Mann Gulch. But, the danger of the still burning fire, the heavy smoke, the darkness and the steep slope dictated they wait until first light.

At last, around 4:30 A.M., at first light, the rescue party started out of Mann Gulch. When they reached the Missouri a boat whisked the men to an ambulance standing by, seven miles upstream. From there they were taken to the hospital in Helena. But, both Hellman and Sylvia died from their burn injuries that afternoon.

The fire continued to burn for another four days gobbling up nearly 5,000 acres of timber and grasslands. Later that same fall, on November 9, 1949, a Forest Service fire researcher, Harry Gisborne, became Mann Gulch's 14th victim when he suffered a fatal heart attack while researching fire behavior in the gulch. The loss of 12 smokejumpers in the Mann Gulch Fire was a tragic blow to the Forest Service's ten-year-old smokejumping program. The smokejumpers had never lost a man to fire before Mann Gulch and no fire since Mann Gulch has been nearly as devastating to their ranks. Following the fire, smokejumper training was immediately modified to place much more emphasis on crew discipline and control.

The events experienced in the Mann Gulch Fire also focused attention on the phenomena of fire blow-ups and the need to understand, and most importantly the ability to predict erratic fire behavior. The tragedy at Mann Gulch provided the needed impetus for the Forest Service to establish the science of fire behavior and spurred needed research into this little understood area of fire suppression. The knowledge gained from this fire research continues to influence how wildfires are fought and managed, and done so without exposing

firefighters to unnecessary risk.

Likewise, Fire Number 13, the Mann Gulch Fire, would prompt the Forest Service to establish two new centers, one in Montana and another in California, dedicated to developing and testing firefighting equipment. Over the years these centers have provided an array of items designed to protect firefighters including fire resistant clothing, hardhats and reflective metal-coated pup tents, or fire shelters, which enable modern-day firefighters to survive burnovers similar to the one experienced in Mann Gulch.

Men who died in the Mann Gulch Fire:

Robert J. Bennett
Eldon E. Diettert
James O. Harrison
(Meriwether Fire Guard)
William J. Heilman
Phillip R. McVey
David R. Navon
Leonard L. Piper
Stanley J. Reba
Marvin L. Sherman
Joseph B. Sylvia
Henry J. Thol, Jr.
Newton R. Thompson
Silas R. Thompson

Survivors of the Mann Gulch Fire:

R. Wagner Dodge, foreman
Walter B. Rumsey
Robert W. Sallee



A smokejumper from Missoula, Montana, is dressed for action, 1954. Five years earlier, the lives lost by the experienced men who jumped into the Mann Gulch situation led to improved fire fighting equipment development at the Missoula center.