



Questioning Mann Gulch

By Mark Matthews
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On August 5, 1949, a surging wildfire trapped fifteen smoke jumpers and one fireguard in a chimney-shaped canyon called Mann Gulch, whose mouth opened onto the banks of the Missouri River outside Great Falls, Mont. The fire instantaneously killed eleven men; another two died in the hospital the next day. A total of 450 men fought Mann Gulch fire before it was controlled on August 10. By that time it had covered 5,000 acres. Around noon on August 6, 1949, a Bell 47-D helicopter flew the last of the bodies out of Mann Gulch.

Later that day Henry Thol received the official notification that his son, smoke jumper Henry Thol Jr., was dead. He immediately got into his car and drove from his home in Kalispell to Helena. When Thol arrived at the funeral parlor, he ran into pioneer smoke jumper Earl Cooley, who had acted as spotter on the Douglas C-47 on August 4, the day the jumpers parachuted down to Mann Gulch. Cooley, then the personnel director for the jumpers, reported that some of the bodies had been so badly burned that he had had to identify them from telltale characteristics or from personal possessions retrieved at the site. Cooley told the elder Thol that the body of his son had already been sealed in a metal tube for transport to Kalispell. Thol insisted that the coffin be opened. After Cooley removed the last bolt, he stepped back to let the father lift the lid. Henry Jr.'s head and hair had not been scorched, but flames had burned out his stomach. Undeterred by the grisly scene, Henry Thol Sr. reached into the casket and brushed his hand over his son's head. Cooley later described the scene as "the most emotional thing I ever saw."

Henry Thol Sr. never forgave the Forest Service for the death of his son and eventually convinced other parents to join him in suing the agency. On the last day of the Board of Review hearings in Helena--September 28, 1949--Thol first insisted that the men never should have jumped into the gulch so near the fire, which Cooley had said was not active at the time the C-47 first flew over the scene.

Thol argued that the fire was most likely burning well down the slope, and he pointed out that smoke often will "trail along the bottom through the heavy green timber until finally it shows up." If the fire had in fact burned lower on the slope, it would have been that much easier for hot rocks or tumbling pine cones to ignite spot fires downhill, cutting off any escape route to the Missouri River. "There was no assurance that there was no . . . fire down to the bottom of the gulch . . . ready at any moment to take up on . . . a whiff of wind," he said.



*Investigation party photo taken from the N slope of Mann Gulch looking S from Dodge's escape fire.
Photo: NIFC*

Thol also pointed out that the men had arrived at the peak time of the day for fire danger, after an afternoon of relentless hot sunshine had dried and primed the fuels to peak flammability. He insisted that the men should not have jumped at that time of the day under those conditions and in such a place.

Thol also questioned Wag Dodge's judgment, arguing that once the jumpers hit the ground, the foreman should have realized that digging fire line under such conditions would have been a waste of time; that an eighteen-inch trench was not going to contain that type of fire. Dodge's first course of action, Thol insisted, should have been to get the men out of harm's way by leading them up to the ridge atop the south slope, half a mile away from the landing spot. From that vantage point, they could have clearly witnessed the progress of the fire. Otherwise, Dodge should have "looked around and found" a clear escape route that would have led the men to a safety zone, such as the scree slope that two of the

survivors eventually located. According to Thol, the foreman should have told the men that "if something goes wrong . . . here's the place we go."

In summary, Thol contended that Dodge was more concerned with putting out the fire than evaluating the safety of his crew. "The value of human life didn't mean much" to Dodge, Thol testified. "He took that big, big risk. . . . The canyon was running east and west with the prevailing wind. He should make doubly sure--try to look for an avenue of escape and protect the human life first." Instead, Thol argued, Dodge had led the men "into a trap." Even if the men had sensed their danger, they had no recourse but to follow their foreman, he continued.

At one point Dodge recognized the danger and set an escape fire, intending to lead the men into the black to avoid the onrushing wall of flame. Either the men couldn't hear him, or they couldn't understand Dodge's shouted instructions above the roar of the fire, or they panicked and ran. Thol was not surprised that none of the men followed Dodge into the black with a hundred foot high wall of flame nipping at their heels. By that time, Thol speculated, the men had given up on Dodge as a leader. The fact that they would not follow him into the black of his safety burn indicated that they had thought he didn't know what he was doing. When "there is life or death involved," Thol asked, "should I still obey him?" As for Dodge's fire itself, Thol stated that although it might have saved the foreman, it ended up killing most of his men. Thol said the escape fire "caught up with some of the boys up there above him" and "prevented those below him from going to the top. The poor boys were caught; they had no escape."

Whether Thol was right or not in questioning the judgment of Cooley for delivering the jumpers that day or the judgment of Dodge for his leadership on the ground, he made one unarguable point--that "the value of lives of men should be given first consideration."

Bob Sallee, the only remaining survivor of the tragedy, remains adamant that the smoke jumpers--and especially their foreman --followed appropriate procedure that fatal day, up until the point when the men ignored Dodge's pleas for them to get behind his escape fire.

"I really think that fire we saw when we flew over there was a typical smokejumper fire," Sallee said. "And if they didn't jump on that fire they wouldn't have jumped on half the fires they jumped on that year. So I don't think it was a mistake to jump. After we got on the ground I think it was a freak of nature that caused the wind to do what it did and to pick those coals up and drop them in the canyon below us. With hindsight it's pretty obvious if we'd had gone from the jump spot out over the top we'd have had no problem. But that's hindsight, and there wasn't any way, when all this was happening, for Wag to determine that. He thought he could take us down to the river and we'd be safe, and when we got almost down to the river there was the fire in front of us. So we couldn't get down. So no, I don't think it was a mistake. I don't think it was a mistake to jump, and I don't think he made any mistakes in what he did. If there are any mistakes in the whole thing, the mistake was in not training people about [escape] fires. So the people who had an opportunity to get into his fire didn't do it--they didn't recognize it as an opportunity, so they didn't do it. If they had, they'd have all been safe, the ones that had the chance to get in there."

When Sallee, who had successfully retreated straight up the steep slope directly to the ridgetop, took a few moments to gaze back into Mann Gulch that day, thick smoke prevented him from seeing the progression of the men who were trying to outrun the fire by angling up the gulch, but he remains adamant that Dodge's fire could not have impeded them.

"Some people have said that they thought Wag's fire burned the people who got past where he lit his fire," he said. "I don't believe that's possible because Wag's fire was burning in those ebb currents that are associated right in front of a large fire. The fire's drawing oxygen in from all directions and it was drawing air in from back in front of it. Any fire will do that. . . . Wag lay down in his . . . burned-over area and the

main fire jumped across him. The main fire jumped across Wag's fire, so there's no way, in my mind, that Wag's fire burned anybody."

For years Sallee never talked about the tragedy--not with Walt Rumsey, another survivor who had dogged his side step by step that day, nor with his family. "I went thirty-five or forty years without talking to anybody about Mann Gulch," he said. He and Rumsey, he said, were able to turn it off so that at times it seemed as if it hadn't happened. "In the quiet times when we were alone with just ourselves we were thanking the good Lord that he had chosen to let us live longer," Sallee said. "I spent a lot of time for a few years after that wondering why. But I finally decided there wasn't any answer to that question and just went on with my life."

That all changed when Norman Maclean began researching his book *Young Men and Fire* "and a lot of people started talking about it." Sallee and Rumsey escorted Maclean and smoke jumper Laird Robinson into Mann Gulch in the mid-1970s. Each tried to recreate his escape route and mark the place where Wag Dodge had started his fire. Sallee is sure they got it right. "I came at it one way and Rumsey came at it another and we were fifty feet apart and there's no question," Sallee said. Yet Maclean insisted that they were mistaken, saying the location of Dodge's fire did not fit into his analysis and re-creation of the events. Maclean also questioned the location of the escape route that the men retraced for him.

"In Rumsey and Sallee's memory," wrote Maclean, "the experience of their flight from death is not bound together by narrative or cartographic links--it would be hard to make a map from it and then expect to find ground to fit the map. It has the consistency more of a gigantic emotional cloud that closes things together with mist, either obliterating the rest of objective reality or moving the remaining details of reality around until, like furniture, they fit into the room of our nightmare in which only a few pieces appear where they are in reality."

Sallee eventually resented Maclean's insistence that he and Rumsey couldn't exactly recall their actions that day. "I would never agree with Maclean [about his theory]," he said. "I never forgot that opening in the rocks. . . . I remember that crevice. . . . I don't know [exactly] where Wag started his fire, but I do know where the crevice was. . . . They [Maclean and Robinson] tried to tell us what we had had for breakfast that day. I just told him he was wrong." Sallee believes that if he had agreed with Maclean, the author would have pushed forward with his project and published his book. Instead, Maclean set the manuscript aside and it wasn't published until 1992, two years after his death.

In its final assessment of the tragedy, the Joint Boards of Review report refuted all of Thol's arguments. The Forest Service supported the decision to drop the jumpers as well as the one to land them at the chosen spot. They supported Dodge's strategy to fight the fire and described his decision to lead the crew to the river as being "logical." The sudden explosive runs of the fire from the upper slope of the ridge between Mann Gulch and Meriwether Canyon across the lower end of Mann Gulch "could not reasonably have been expected," the findings stated. The report also described Dodge's "coolness and good judgment" in setting the escape fire and said that "all evidence available to the Board indicated that the escape fire in no way impeded the progress of the men seeking to attain the ridge, or was otherwise instrumental in causing or contributing to any of the deaths."

Thol pressed the issue in court, encouraging other families of the victims to do the same. Within two years, four suits were brought in federal court against the Forest Service in connection with the deaths of the firefighters. But the cases eventually bogged down in the legal system and were dropped after exceeding the statute of limitations.

Sallee's good luck seemed to have followed him throughout life. He continued to jump fires throughout the 1949 season and into 1950. In 1951, he abandoned his dreams of working full-time with the Forest Service to pursue a career in the paper industry. With a business degree in hand from Eastern Washington University, Sallee first worked for Potlatch Forest, Inc. in Lewiston, Idaho, then moved on to

Hoerner-Waldorf, based in Missoula. Later he worked for four years as a paper consultant with Sandwell International in Portland, Oregon, during which time he traveled extensively around the world. Bob ended his career as the director of special projects for the Inland Empire Paper Company in Spokane, where he still lives.

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