

Canyon Ferry Route  
Helena, Montana  
September 1, 1949

Dear Wag:

I've been going to write you for some time but it seems I never get around to do the things that I want to. Under separate cover I am returning your fleece lined socks which you so generously loaned me Saturday morning. That's the first time my feet ever played out on me and at all times. I raised the nicest set of blisters, seven on one foot and 9 on the other, that I ever did. I felt like a heel to have gotten myself to the point where I couldn't walk anymore.

I spent 5 days last week going over Mann Gulch with a fine tooth comb until at least for myself I am satisfied as to what happened to that fire. It was an unpredictable freak.

The evidence is on the ground and since I saw the lower side of the fire before and after the blow-up it has been relatively easy for me now to figure out the rest. Especially since I was directly in front of the blow-up.

Sitting up on the ridge between Meriwether I tried to put myself in your shoes that afternoon and frankly Wag, I don't think if I had been in your place I would have done as well as you did. I think all along, with what you could see of the fire you did what you thought best and from the way you saw things I think I would have made the same decisions had I been there. Maybe not as quickly as you did.

As to your retreat fire I feel you did the only thing left that you could do. To have gone into the Gulch further would have been certain suicide. The condition of the ground shows that. Some are of the opinion that the retreat fire was too small. However, from the opposite side of the canyon the timber in the slide rock which you passed through before lighting the fire, is a chimney. It is my opinion that this chimney sucked away most of the heat from around you and allowed cool air to enter your vicinity. This coupled with the lack of flaming fuel prevented any gas streaks from becoming ignited or burning your clothes. Very much live flame may have ignited any gas and sucked in additional heat. You picked the right spot to do the job. If I had been in your place I don't think I would have had presence of mind enough to do what you did.

Further more this action of yours has been so publicized that people will remember this and other men caught in the same predicament may do likewise because they heard of your doing the same. Thus in this way you may be instrumental in saving many lives in the years to come.

Had quite a visit with Henry Thol, Sr. the other night when he made a second trip into Mann Gulch. Wag, don't be bothered by him whatever he spouts off about. Sure he can see lots of things now like we all can with hind sight and possession of all the facts but I don't think he'd done any better or different under the same circumstances.

He strikes me as sort of a psychopathic case - like a lot of old rangers who were embittered by injustices within the Service, real or imaginary. I've met the type a lot. Frustrated, sore at the top brass and the "swivel service" bureaucrats. In his grief he wants to get at the "brass" make them flinch. He told me all about troubles in the service, many of them old stories. Apparently he has been harboring a grudge against Major Kelley for years and probably the untouchable brass. He sees this as his opportunity to strike back now that he is retired and they can't get back at him.

He told me some of the remarks he has made to you. Personally I don't feel he has any basis for them. What happened was an act of God not of man. Those boys cards were drawn and there wasn't anything that any human could do to stop God in his way.

Well Wag, maybe I shouldn't write to you this way but I wanted you to know that here is one guy who believes you did the right thing, that you're plenty okey and that you've got just a hell of a lot of guts to take what you have as magnificently as you have.

Thanks for the use of the socks.

Very sincerely yours,

P.S. Anytime we can do anything for you look us up.