

THE THIRTEENTH FIRE

by Dave Turner

Every year since the agency was created to protect our nation's national forests, the United States Forest Service has fought forest and grassland wildfires. Despite the popular image of firefighting as an exciting and dangerous occupation, most Forest Service men and women actually engaged in this line of work would probably agree that while firefighting does in fact have its dangers, on the whole it's simply hard work, long hours and still largely just a matter of marshalling firefighters and equipment, and then getting everything into place to halt the fire's advance.

But, they would also agree that every so often something goes wrong: equipment fails; firefighters get lost in unfamiliar territory amidst the confusion of flames, smoke or darkness; or the wind suddenly changes direction and picks up speed. On August 5, 1949, on a small routine fire, something went terribly wrong and 13 young men perished on a barren steep hillside in southwestern Montana. This is the story of that fire.

THE FOREST SERVICE...1906 to1949

To understand the events which occurred in Mann Gulch on the Helena National Forest nearly 50 years ago, and to put these events in a clearer perspective, the reader must return to the very earliest years of the US Forest Service. One of the original charges from Congress to the newly created Forest Service in 1897 is contained in the Organic Administration Act of that same year. The Organic Act as it became known, empowers the Secretary of Agriculture to "...make provisions for the protection against destruction by fire...the public and national forests which may have been set aside or which may be hereafter set aside..." This is a charge the Forest Service---not only by Congressional direction, but also by necessity---takes very seriously.

As the new custodian of our nation's forests we quickly learn several fundamental lessons about fighting forest fires. One very basic lesson is that fires in our nation's forests are easier to manage---thus cheaper to control and safer for firefighters to suppress---if they are attacked quickly and held to a very few acres.

But getting men and equipment to fires quickly after "smokes" are first reported in these early days of the Forest Service is not always a simple matter. Men are either driven or walked into the fires and accomplishing that quickly is, of course, dependent upon roads and trails already being in place. Where roads and trails exist it is a simple matter of trucking firefighters to the scene of the fire and quickly surrounding the blaze with a line in the dirt to stop the fire's advance. However, in those situations where the fire is burning in the more remote backcountry---and there was considerable backcountry in those days---roads and even trails are for the most part non-existent; attacking and controlling these blazes is more difficult, ultimately more expensive, and frequently more dangerous for firefighters.

But two technological changes occur by the late 1930s, both of which combine to provide the Forest Service---and later, other firefighting agencies---with an important tool in the annual effort to protect the forests from devastating forest fires. These two technologies are airplanes, which for the most part didn't fall unpredictably out of the sky, and the development of dependable parachutes which will let a person down reasonable easy when they do.

Beginning in 1939, in Missoula, Montana, the Forest Service begins experiments with flying firefighters to these remote fires and dropping them with parachutes near the fires. After they retrieve their supply 'chutes containing tools, water and rations, these smokejumpers (as they would later be tagged) hike to the fire and encircle it with control firelines. The advantages of being able to rapidly deliver trained and experienced firefighters to these small, remote fires is immediately obvious. And, despite the shortage of men and parachutes during World War II, by 1949 the use of smokejumpers as an effective, safe firefighting tool is a routine.

Smokejumper training during this ten year period evolves, of course, as new parachuting equipment and jumping techniques are developed and tested. Significant improvements in parachutes and harnesses and the use of the static line are witnessed by these early smokejumpers. But interestingly enough, it is the actual training regiment in place at the smokejumper base in Missoula, and not the equipment, that will play the most important role in the disaster in Mann Gulch.

Smokejumpers in 1949 are neither trained or dispatched to fires as set, established crews. Rather, they are simply a pool of firefighters from which the fire dispatcher draws whenever a request for jumpers comes into the base from one of the region's forests. Possibly, the high rate of turnover in the smokejumping program each year (as post-war job opportunities opened up) discourages trying to form up fixed crews. Whatever the reason, the consequence is that many of the 150 smokejumpers in the smokejumping program each season during these years never has an opportunity to get to know each other very well, or possibly even know each other's name! And adding to this lack of crew cohesiveness is the fact that jumper foremen and squad leaders are also rotated from jump to jump so that it is possible to jump a fire and be working for and under the command of a crew foreman who is a perfect stranger.

This is the situation in 1949 when the crew jumps into Mann Gulch that hot August afternoon; not everyone on the crew knows each other and no one, but the squad leader Bill Hellman, really knows R. Wagner "Wag" Dodge the crew foreman. Some of the crew have seem Dodge around the smokejumper base, but no one, short of Hellman has ever worked with him. Perhaps significantly, however, several members of the crew do know Bill Hellman and, in fact, have worked with him.

Yet another factor that comes to play a subtle role in this disaster is the relative lack of experience (and the circumstances under which that experience has been gained) of the crew that ultimately jumps into Mann Gulch. For nine of the fifteen men who jump that fateful day, this is their first season as a smokejumper. It is the second season for four other jumpers, but 1948 was a wet cool year with very few fires and even fewer jumping opportunities. Only the crew foreman Dodge and squad leader Hellman had more than two years' smokejumping experience. Further, it should be recognized that a majority of the crew's jumping and firefighting experience was gained *west* of the Continental Divide fighting fires burning in a forested setting and not in grassland setting like they encountered on the south-facing slopes in Mann Gulch.

HELENA NATIONAL FOREST---August, 1949

Fifty years ago the Helena National Forest is divided into four administrative units or ranger districts. Then, as now, there are the Lincoln and Townsend Districts, but the current Helena Ranger District is divided between the Helena District and the Canyon Ferry District. The Canyon Ferry Ranger District, with headquarters located just southeast of the current Canyon Ferry Dam, administers the National Forest lands on the northwest end of the Big Belt Mountain range, east of the Missouri River down to the Townsend District boundary between Avalanche and Whites Gulches. Included within the Canyon Ferry District boundary are both Mann Gulch and the newly created (in 1948), Gates of the Mountains Wild Area.

Headquarters for the Helena National Forest are located near downtown Helena with Forest operations under the capable hands of Duncan Moir, the Forest Supervisor. J. Robert "Bob" Jansson is the District Ranger out at Canyon Ferry. By August of 1949 Jansson has served as the District Ranger for nine years, having been assigned since 1941. Jansson lives next door to the District Office with his wife, Lois, and their two young children. When fires brake out Lois often makes sandwiches and coffee for the radio dispatcher and carries it to the dispatch office. Thus, she is able to track the progress of firefighting activities and keep track her husband Bob, as well.

In August, 1949, communications between the Canyon Ferry District and the rest of the world leave much to be desired. The equipment consists of a single telephone---shared with 12 other customers on a party line---and a two-way radio which is so undependable it is only turned on briefly twice a day to prevent it from overheating and burning out the vacuum tubes. District policy dictated the radio is turned on from 9:00 to 9:30 AM and then again from 3:00 to 3:30 PM; so, if you are a District employee and needed to communicate with the District via radio, those are the only times available.

Significantly, another link in the District's communication system is a radio located at Meriwether Picnic Area on the Missouri River just to the south of Mann Gulch. At Meriwether, the Forest stations a seasonal employee to patrol for fires and maintain the Forest Service campground at Coulter Canyon and the picnic area at the mouth of Meriwether Canyon. As the fire lookouts can not see down into the Missouri River canyon, after lightening storms have passed over the area it is often necessary to send out the Meriwether fire guard in his boat to scan the side canyons for new smokes.

MANN GULCH---August, 1949

Mann Gulch is a minor side drainage off the Missouri River's east shoreline. The gulch is oriented in a northeast to southwest direction with the mouth emptying into the Missouri River. It is basically funnel-shaped, being narrow (200 yards wide) at the mouth of the gulch and wide at its head some one and one-half miles from the River. Prevailing winds in the summer months are from the west or southwest, but the rough topography of the River has a considerable influence and makes for locally erratic wind speeds and direction. Slopes on the north and south sides of the gulch run from a gentle 15% in the drainage bottom to near 80% as one approaches the ridgelines. Slopes on the north side of the gulch,

where the smokejumpers are forced to run for their lives are nearly 76%. Except for spring snowmelt and a rare cloudburst, there is no water in this drainage.

Although wildfires will burn across the Mann Gulch landscape and many of the south-facing slopes of the Big Belt Mountains on the average of one fire every 13 to 25 years, by 1949 it has been several years since the gulch has witnessed a fire of any significance. Vegetation on the south side of the gulch is thick and fairly contiguous. With only an occasional mature ponderosa pine tree poking above the tree canopy, the cooler, more moist, south slope is carpeted with 60 year old Douglas fir trees mixed with juniper. By contrast, the warmer, drier north side of the gulch has few trees; only stringers of 60-100 year old ponderosa pine trees running up the slope to the ridgeline which separates Mann Gulch and what would later become known as Rescue Gulch. Predominantly, this side of the gulch grows grass. Because the area has not been grazed for several seasons and has recently been designated a wild area, the grass is fairly thick and two to three feet deep. And because it has been a hot and dry summer, the grasses are already cured out and tinder dry by the time this fire starts.

Adding to the fatal mix of things that would ultimately contribute to this disaster are the rocks and boulders on the north slope. At some locations the rocks are concentrated and numerous enough to form entire fields of rock or scree slopes as they're called. But mostly the rocks are just scattered across the slope and hidden in the deep grass and brush. These rocks are numerous and range in size from softballs to a few boulders the size of small cars. The rocks make walking on the slope difficult. They make running nearly impossible.

THURSDAY, AUGUST 4, 1949

After several weeks of hot, dry weather, a large storm system rolls across Montana on the afternoon of August 4, 1949. This storm system sweeps across the Continental Divide and the Helena area at 4:00 PM. While the storm produces considerable rain it also hammers the Big Belt Mountains with lightning strike after lightning strike. Moments after the storm's passing reports of smokes start pouring in to the Helena Forest offices. Twenty-five separate smokes are reported and chased that evening, five would turn out to be actual fires. Ranger Jansson is out until well past midnight August 4th chasing his share of these reports.

FRIDAY, AUGUST 5, 1949

The day begins with Ranger Jansson calling Meriwether on the radio at 8:15 AM to instruct his Meriwether Guard Jim Harrison to start a fire patrol at 11:00 AM. Harrison is directed to make a report back to the District on the radio at 3:30 PM.

Jim Harrison is 20 years old, he's from Missoula and a student at the University of Montana. This is his first season as the Meriwether Guard and he was hired personally by Ranger Jansson. Ironically, Jim Harrison had been a smokejumper during the 1948 season, but his parents, concerned about the danger of smokejumping, had convince him to find another job with the Forest Service. Consequently, Jim applies for and is hired for the job at Meriwether.

Following the radio call, Jansson and his second-in-command, ranger-alternate Hersey, drive the 20 miles for the Ranger District to the Helena airport . Upon arrival at the airport they board a single engine aircraft and the two are flown over the Canyon Ferry District to look for smokes. There are two fires reported to be burning at this time on the District, the Cave Gulch Fire and the York Fire. Both fires are burning 10 to 20 miles southeast of Mann Gulch. Jansson and Hersey fly these two fires and then continue on their aerial patrol. At about 11:25 AM Jansson and Hersey fly directly over the Mann Gulch fire and then make a second pass to the west of the fire. But, because the fire isn't smoking or because it's right under the wing of the plane and they can't see it when they fly over, they fail to spot it.

Meanwhile, Harvey Jensen, who runs the commercial boat tours on the Missouri River through the Gates of the Mountains, is bringing the day's first boatload of tourists down river. At around 10:00 AM he spots a column of smoke from the river. It looks like there's a fire burning on the ridge between Meriwether and Mann Gulch. When he finally reaches Meriwether, he contacts Harrison (who has not yet started his patrol) and reports the smoke on the ridge. Harrison immediately returns to the Meriwether cabin, assembles his smokechaser pack (shovel, pulaski, files, water and rations on a rigid packframe) and heads up out of the Meriwether Canyon for the ridge. But not before tacking a note to the cabin door reading, "Gone to the fire. Be back at 3:00 PM, Jim".

Jansson and Hersey, meanwhile, continue with their air patrol, making passes over both the York and Cave Gulch fires. Finally, they head back for the airport to make their report to Forest Supervisor Moir. They land at the airport at 12:25 PM. It's while talking on the phone with the Supervisor's Office that Jansson is advised that a few minutes earlier, at 12:18 PM, the Colorado Mountain lookout, located almost 10 miles southwest of Helena, has reported a smoke coming up from somewhere near Mann Gulch in the Wild Area.

Jansson and Hersey help refuel the plane and then fly directly for the smoke. They arrive over the fire at 12:55 PM. They estimate it at 6-8 acres and report it's burning in juniper and ponderosa pine reproduction on the top of the ridge between Meriwether and Mann Gulches. Further, they observe the the smoke is trailing up the ridgeline to the northwest.

The two return to the Helena airport and land at 1:15 PM. They proceed uptown to the Forest Supervisor's Office where they confer with Supervisor Moir. Following their discussions a decision is made to use the bulk of whatever local firefighting forces they can muster to man the Cave Gulch and York fires. They also decide that Jansson and Hersey, primarily because they are familiar with the country around Mann Gulch and the Wild Area, will take 19 men and establish a fire camp at the mouth of Mann Gulch. The men also decide that because of the extremely rough terrain in the Wild Area they will request 25 smokejumpers from the Missoula Smokejumper Base. Accordingly, Supervisor Moir telephones Missoula and makes his order at 1:30 PM.

When Moir reaches the dispatch center in Missoula he's advised that while there are plenty of smokejumpers available, the jumpbase is running short of airplanes. Apparently the same system of storms that swept across the Continental Divide the previous afternoon also raked western Montana and started a number of new fires. Moir is told the only airplane available for immediate dispatch is a C-47, but that the C-47 only holds 16 jumpers and their gear. Moir requests they immediately send whatever they have.

Jansson and Hersey gather up their men and tools and head for Mann Gulch.

At 2:30 PM, August 5th, 1949, the C-47 lifts off from the Missoula field. The temperature in Helena pegs at 97 degrees.

On board the east-bound plane on its 40 minute flight to the Helena Forest are the pilot Ken Huber, co-pilot Frank Small, Forest Service photographer Earl Bloom, spotter Earl Cooley, assistant spotter Jack Nash, crew foreman R. Wagner Dodge, squad leader Bill Hellman and jumpers Walt Rumsey, Robert Sallee, Robert Bennett, Eldon Diettert, Phillip McVey, Marvin Sherman, Joseph Sylvia, Silas Thompson, Stanley Reba, Newton Thompson, Henry Thol, Leonard Piper, David Navon and Merle Stratton.

Earl Cooley, the spotter on this ill-fated jump, is the most experienced smokejumper and spotter the Forest Service has to offer. Cooley participated in the first-ever smokejumping experiments in 1939 in Region 1. By 1949 he has been jumping and spotting for ten years.

R.Wagner "Wag" Dodge is 33 years old. He's a veteran of WW II. He's been with the Forest Service for 16 years and worked as a smokejumper for eight of those years.

William J. Hellman is 24 years old and a native of Kalispell, Montana. He's been smokejumping for five years.

Walter B. Rumsey is from Nebraska and he's just 17. This is his second season with the Forest Service, but his first season as a smokejumper.

Much like Walt Rumsey, Robert W. Sallee is 17 years old, this is his second season with the outfit, but his first season as a smokejumper.

In August of 1949 Robert J. Bennett, from Paris, Tennessee, is just 22. But, he's already a WW II veteran and this is his third season with the Forest Service. It is, however, his first season as a smokejumper.

Eldon E. Diettert is from Missoula, Montana, and this is his fourth season with the Forest Service and his first year in the smokejumper organization. Diettert is nineteen years old and today is his birthday.

Phillip R. McVey is working his second season as a smokejumper with a total of three summers work for the Forest Service under his belt. McVey is 22 and calls Ronan his home.

Another Missoula native, Marvin L. Sherman is 21 years old in August of 1949. He's already served in WW II and has three seasons with the Forest Service. This, too, is his first season as a smokejumper.

Joseph B. Sylvia is 24 and comes from Plymouth, Massachusetts. Sylvia also served in World War II, and has worked for the Forest Service for three seasons---two of those three years as a smokejumper.

Another veteran, Silas R. Thompson is 21 and comes from Charlotte, North Carolina. It's Thompson's second season with the Forest Service, both seasons he's been a smokejumper.

Also working his second season as a jumper is Stanley J. Reba. Reba was born in Brooklyn, New York. Reba, like many young men his age (25), is a veteran.

Newton R. Thompson---no relation to fellow jumper Silas Thompson---comes to Montana from Alhambra, California. Thompson is 23, a veteran and this is his second season working for the Forest Service. It's his first season as a smokejumper.

Henry J. Thol, Jr. is from Kalispell, Montana. The son of a retired District Ranger, Thol is 19 years old and this is his first season as a jumper, but his second season as a Forest Service employee.

Leonard L. Piper from Blairsville, Pennsylvania, is working his first season. He's 23 years old and a WW II veteran.

David R. Navon, a veteran also, is 25 and hails from Modesto, California. Like Piper, it's his first season.

Merle "Skip" Stratton is the 16th smokejumper on the plane. But, Stratton has been getting airsick on his last few dispatches and the flight from Missoula to Helena is rough with considerable turbulence. He gets sick on this flight, too, and after vomiting into his helmet he decides not to make the jump into Mann Gulch. Stratton will not escape Mann Gulch, however. The very next day he's directed to return, not to help control the fire, but to help recover the bodies of his fellow jumpers.

At 3:10 PM the C-47 arrives over the fire. Cooley and Dodge move to the floor of the open rear door of the airplane. They survey the fire. Later, both men would testify the fire is 50 to 60 acres in size and still burning along the ridgeline separating Meriwether Canyon and Mann Gulch. The smoke and fire are moving in a northeasterly direction, right up the ridgeline.

At somewhere between 3:15 and 3:20 PM Dodge and Cooley agree on a jumpspot for the men and equipment. After ruling out a small meadow on the Mann Gulch/Meriwether Canyon ridgeline out in front of the advancing fire, they decide on a spot at the head of Mann Gulch. This jump spot has few trees to complicate the jump, is 500 feet lower in elevation than the fire on the ridgeline, and is nearly one-half mile from the blaze.

At 3:35 PM, after dropping their test chutes to determine how wind speed and direction would effect the drift of the men and supply parachutes, the first group of four men jump from the C-47; Wag Dodge is the first one out of the plane. Huber takes the C-47 around in a large lazy circle and the next group of four men jump into the head of the gulch. He makes another round, heads down the gulch and four more smokejumpers step from the plane. Another turn and the last group of three men step out into space.

Now on a routine drop of men and supplies, at this point the pilot would normally lose some elevation before dropping the cargo chutes containing the hand tools, water, food, radio, first aid kit and other supplies. The reason for doing this is the cargo chutes are uncontrolled and making the drop from a low elevation insures the supplies will come down reasonably near the jumpers. But, perhaps as an inkling

of things to come, the air in Mann Gulch has become turbulent and Huber is forced to maintain the same altitude from which he has just dropped the smokejumpers.

On the next pass Cooley and his assistant Nash kick out the first of the cargo chutes. Everything is routine until they come to the parachute which coincidentally contains the jumpers' single radio. When this cargo pack is pushed from the plane, the static line---a braided metal cable attached to the airplane on one end and attached to the parachute cover on the other end to deploy the parachute---snaps in two before the parachute is deployed. The cargo pack free-falls about 1,200 vertical feet and smashes into the ground down-slope about 400 yards from the jump spot on the west side of the drainage bottom. The radio and much of the other supplies in this pack are destroyed.

All the cargo is out by 4:08 PM. The C-47 makes another two passes over Mann Gulch and at 4:12 PM Cooley and Nash spot the orange streamers the crew has laid out in a double "L" indicating everyone's landed safely. The C-47 turns west and heads for Missoula.

As soon as the last cargo chute touches down the men begin to retrieve their gear and equipment. This task would normally take a crew this size about 15 minutes to complete, but because they were dropped from such a high altitude and the cargo chutes are scattered across the upper end of the gulch, it takes the crew 45 minutes to an hour to gather up the parachutes and pack the cargo packs to a central location Dodge has selected near the bottom of the drainage. This extra 30-45 minutes becomes critical time lost in their race with the fire later that afternoon.

At about 5:00 PM Foreman Dodge instructs the crew to grab a bite to eat, get some water, gather their hand tools and follow him up the south side of the canyon to the fire on the ridge. He tells them he's going to go up to the fire and tie in with the guy who has been yelling and whistling (Jim Harrison).

Leaving the crew under Bill Hellman's command, Dodge drops into the drainage bottom and then heads up the hill for the ridgeline and the fire. Though the timber is quite thick, Dodge is able to contact Jim Harrison in short order. But, once on the fireline Dodge is concerned about how actively the fire is burning. He makes a quick assessment and instructs Harrison to follow him and join the rest of the crew. Dodge and Harrison then retrace Dodge's route heading back to the cargo assembly area near the draw bottom. However, when they are about half-way down the slope they encounter the rest of the jumper crew headed up to the fire with Hellman in the lead.

Dodge explains to Hellman that he doesn't like the looks of things on the ridge and instructs Hellman to take the crew and head them down the gulch to the Missouri River. His thinking is to attack the fire from the rear and the safety of the river. Dodge adds that he and Harrison are going to proceed on to the cargo spot to get water and something to eat.

While all this is taking place, Jansson and Hersey have been busy organizing their small force of 19 firefighters and getting them transported from Helena to the Gates of the Mountains Boat Club launch and then down river. On his first trip down the river Jansson decides the mouth of Mann Gulch is no place for a firecamp and moves the location to Meriwether. Here he quickly sets up a camp and dispatches Hersey and the 19 men to the fire and the top of the ridge. He is concerned about Jim Harrison's whereabouts since Jim was supposed to report in on the radio at 3:00 PM and no one has

heard from him. Jansson assumes---correctly it turns out---that Harrison has tied in with the smokejumper crew.

At about 5:02 PM, after several vain attempts to scout out the fire from several locations in a boat on the river, Jansson is dropped at the mouth of Mann Gulch and begins to hike up the drainage bottom to both see where the fire is burning and to try to make contact with the jumpers. He proceeds up the draw bottom several hundred yards and encounters the fire. Somewhat foolishly it turns out, Jansson picks his way through the burning trees, brush and grass and continues up the draw. In the midst of the conflagration he thinks he hears someone shouting and pushes on until finally the heat and smoke are just too much. He turns around only to find he appears to be trapped in the flames and smoke. Knowing his only escape is back towards the river, Jansson runs and dives through the dense smoke and fire. He makes it through but then passes out for a few minutes, probably from smoke inhalation. He comes to, is immediately sick and then vomits violently. After a few moments he gets back to his feet and picks his way through the fire back to the boat still waiting for him at the river. He is returned to the firecamp at Meriwether.

Back up in Mann Gulch it's about 5:40 PM. Dodge and Harrison, after returning to the cargo area, finally head down the north side of the gulch and catch up with the rest of the crew strung out in a single file, still heading for the river. When Dodge catches up with the crew he takes the lead and places Hellman at the rear.

It's important to recognize that up to this point there's been no sense of urgency about this fire. The men have calmly eaten dinner and are walking at a normal pace as they head for the safety of the river. As they walk down the gulch jumper David Navon even stops long enough to take a snapshot of the fire. There's no great hurry, certainly no panic.

At about 5:45 PM Wag Dodge at the head of the column of men starts up a small finger ridge which up to this point obscures his view to the river. When he reaches the top of this ridge he immediately sees the fire has somehow jumped from the south side of the gulch and is now burning furiously below them on the north side of the gulch. Worse still, the fire is now burning up-hill to the north and west of where he's standing. Their escape route to the river is now cut off.

Dodge quickly moves to the end of the line of men and sends Hellman to what was formerly the head of the line. The line of men reverses its route of travel with Dodge in the lead and they begin to obliquely head for the ridgeline in a northwesterly direction, directly away from the direction the fire is now travelling on the north side of Mann Gulch.

They proceed in this direction for several minutes, but the going is tough. They're headed up-slope, the slope is steep, the footing is treacherous. They've picked their way across three rock fields, but they're still several hundred yards shy of the ridgetop. The fire is steadily advancing toward them and at this point it's only 150 to 200 yards behind them and gaining fast.

It's 5:53 PM and Dodge realizes that at the rate they're moving up the slope they're not going to make it. He turns to his crew and says, "Throw everything away that's heavy". The men drop their shovels, their pulaskis, the two crosscut saws they're carrying, and other gear. But to some of the crew members Dodge's order isn't clear. Harrison retains his heavy smokechaser pack and his pulaski. Diettert keeps

both his shovel and his pulaski until Walt Rumsey takes the shovel and tosses it down the hill. The line of men continue to struggle diagonally up the slope for another two minutes, but the pitch of the hillside approaches 76% here and the line of men stretches out and they find themselves going more across the hillside and not up toward the ridgeline.

At 5:55 PM, as the line of men breaks out of a finger of big ponderosa pine trees and into a grassy opening on the steep hillside, Dodge---without a word to anyone---pauses, knells down and with a match from a book of paper matches sets fire to the grass in front of him. The fire springs up in the dry grass and in a matter of seconds starts burning directly up the hill. Dodge's fire burns off no more than a ten foot by ten foot square area when he runs up the right side, leaps over the flames and into the freshly blackened area. To those nearest him he yells, "Up this way!" Sallee, Rumsey and Diettert, who are in the line just behind Dodge don't understand Dodge's order to get into the blackened and burned area. They think Dodge intends for his fire to be some sort of buffer between them and the main fire, which is rapidly closing in on them, and they run around the right side of his still burning escape fire and head directly up the slope and for the ridgetop. Bill Hellman, who was posted at the back of the crew when they reversed their direction of travel a few minutes ago, is now up near the head of the line. When he hears Dodge's "Up this way", Hellman says, "To hell with that, I'm getting out of here" and he starts for the ridgeline on the left flank of Dodge's fire.

The rest of the crew either doesn't hear Dodge's instructions or they hear him, but they don't understand he wants them to join him in the safety of the blackened area. It's also possible that because they knew Hellman they trusted his judgement more than Dodge's so they simply follow his lead and seek their own escape route. In any event, they bolt and continues on a path that takes them on the diagonal across the slope. But the fire is moving at 600 to 700 feet per minute now and the men are quickly caught in a blast of super-heated air and dropped to the hillside.

Within a minute of two the fire catches the crew at 5:56 or 5:57 PM. Jim Harrison's wrist watch stops at 5:56.

Wag Dodge after jumping into his escape fire and trying unsuccessfully to get the crew to join him, finally flattens himself on the hillside as the flaming wall of fire sweeps over him. Three times in the passing of the flaming front he is lifted up off the ground by hot, swirling winds.

Bob Sallee, Walt Rumsey and Eldon Diettert run directly up the slope along the right side of Dodge's escape fire and head for the ridgetop which is only 100 yards or so up the slope. But as they reach the ridgetop, nearly exhausted now, they run smack into a nearly vertical wall of rock running along the top of the ridge. Frantically, Sallee and Rumsey search for an opening. Diettert upon hitting the wall turns to the right trying to find an opening. Sallee and Rumsey finally find an opening amidst the smoke and near panic, and they squeeze through to the other side. Once through the opening they spot a long narrow patch of rocks just off the ridge and down the slope. They scramble to safety in the bottom of the rocks but minutes later are chased to the top of the rock slope as a finger of the fire sweeps over the ridgetop. And then, before they've caught their breaths, yet another finger of fire snakes over the ridgetop and chases them back down to the bottom of their island of safety. Diettert, who had turned right when he hit the wall is trapped by the fire before he's run 200 feet across the slope.

Bill Hellman, who had tried to run up the left side of Dodge's fire, gets to the ridgetop and then he's hit by the fire. Though severely burned he managed to make it through the rock wall and stumbles down the other side of the slope for 200 yards before he stops running.

Back on the Mann Gulch side of the ridge it's 6:10 PM before Dodge can leave his escape fire. He immediately wonders about his crew and begins to call out through the thick smoke and noise of burning material. After about five minutes he hears a weak cry from below him and to the left. He picks his way through the burning trees and stumps and at 6:15 PM finds Joe Sylvia. Sylvia is horribly burned, but he's still conscious and alert. Dodge moves Sylvia to the safety of a large boulder---rocks and burning logs continue to roll down the steep hillside all around them---retrieves Sylvia's canteen and removes his boots. At about 6:30 PM Dodge leaves Sylvia alone on the hillside and heads up to the ridgetop to find the rest of his crew.

Meanwhile, the fire has swept on past Sallee and Rumsey and by 6:15 PM they leave their rock pile and begin searching for the others. At 6:20 PM they discover Bill Hellman just down-slope from them and a little off to the west. Like Sylvia, Hellman is badly burned. They give him a drink of water and what comfort they can offer.

About this time Dodge comes over the ridge and comes down to where Hellman is propped up against a boulder. Dodge tells Sallee and Rumsey that Joe Sylvia is badly burned over in Mann Gulch. Dodge then tells seventeen year old Walt Rumsey to stay with Hellman and that he and Sallee are going to head downhill for the Missouri River to get help. They scramble through the still burning fire until they reach the river. Seeing no one on the river, they take a shovel one of them has kept, tie a red bandanna around it, and plant it in the riverbank. Thinking they could reach a ranch they had spotted from the C-47, Dodge and Sallee turn north and walk the riverbank for nearly half a mile before they figure they're going in the wrong direction. They reverse direction and retrace their steps, finally spotting some boats on the river as people watch the fire. Hearing a barking dog on the far side of the river, they're finally able to signal some campers who eventually cross the river and give them a ride to the Meriwether firecamp.

At last, at 8:50 PM, Dodge and Sallee walk into the radio shack at Meriwether and meet Ranger Bob Jansson. Dodge informs Jansson he has two injured men up on the hill and that 11 other men are missing.

Ranger Jansson immediately calls on the radio to Helena informing them of the situation and requests doctors, litters, and plasma to treat the burn victims. Next, he organizes a rescue party, puts Hersey in charge of the Meriwether firecamp and heads down river to the mouth of what would become Rescue Gulch to await the arrival of the doctors.

Doctors T.L. Hawkins and R.E. Haines in Helena volunteer to answer the call for medical help. Shortly after 9:00 PM they and an ambulance leave Helena and a short time later arrive at the Gates of the Mountains boat launch. A boat is waiting and takes them down-river to Rescue Gulch, but when they meet up with Jansson and his rescue party they realize they've forgotten the litters back at the boat launch and they are forced to make a return trip to retrieve them from the ambulance.

Finally, at 11:30 PM Jansson's rescue party, with both doctors, Dodge and Sallee in tow, starts up the hill for the ridgeline.

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Half way up the hill they spot a flashlight in the smoke and dimming light; it's Walt Rumsey coming down to the river for more water for a dehydrated and thirsty Bill Hellman. Slowly making their way up the slope, the party reaches Hellman at 12:35 AM. The doctors immediately begin treating Hellman's burns, they wrap him up in a blanket and place him on one of the litters.

Shortly after the doctors begin treating Hellman, Ranger Jansson heads for the ridgeline and Mann Gulch to see about the other injured smokejumper. It takes some time to find Sylvia in the fire and smoke and it's almost 1:50 AM before Jansson discovers him. Sylvia complains of the cold and his thirst so Jansson and his crew strip off their shirts and cover him to keep him warm because the doctors bring only one blanket. They give him small sips of water from their canteens, but they must hold the canteens up to Joe's parched lips as Sylvia's hands are mere charred stubs. Even with the covering of thin summer shirts Sylvia is still cold and ignoring the strong odor of burned flesh, Jansson presses against the injured jumper to share his body heat and keep him comfortable.

It's a full half hour after the doctors reach Hellman until they're able to crest the ridgeline and find their way down to Sylvia to begin treating his wounds. It's 2:20 AM, and Joe Sylvia has been sitting on this big boulder in Mann Gulch, with 2nd and 3rd degree burns over 80% of his body, for over eight hours and twenty-some minutes.

After the doctors finish treating Sylvia the decision is made to wait until first light to begin trying to move the two injured men off the hill. And as soon as the first weak light starts to illuminate the smoky eastern sky...4:40 AM...the rescue party starts to head down the hill for the river. They are met by a boat and the men on litters are hauled to the boat launch and taken by ambulance to St. Peter's Hospital in Helena. Unfortunately, their lungs and airways are severely burned and by early afternoon both men are dead.

Jansson, Dodge and the rescue party spend the balance of Saturday, August 6th, trying to complete the gruesome task of finding and identifying the remaining causalities. Despite hours of searching and walking up and down and back and forth across the steep north slope of Mann Gulch---and with painful blisters on both his feet---Jansson and his crew are unable to account for all the missing jumpers until the following day, Sunday about noon.

Finally, just after noon on Sunday, Jansson is relieved and sent home for rest. Lois Jansson, Bob Jansson's wife, writes in her biography "Have You Ever Stopped To Wonder?" about that afternoon of nearly 50 years ago: "Bob came home Sunday afternoon for a twenty-four hour rest, so tired and unstrung he hardly seemed like the husband and father we knew. I knew the children were frightened and I couldn't do much for them because I was frightened, too."

"His feet were in terrible shape, swollen so that it was very hard to get his boots off, and (*his*) socks---glued on by running blisters, had to be soaked off in the bathtub. After the second tub of water (the first was absolutely black), he called me in and asked me to burn his shirt and undershirt. I started to protest,

unthinking, that I could wash them and he nearly shouted, 'Burn them, they smell of death'. Then he asked me to wash his hair, which smelled the same, as he was too weak to do it as he sat in the tub. I soaped and lathered his head, but he could still smell the odor. I thought this was (*his*) imagination until I got a whiff of the leather watchband he had worn when he sat with his arms around Joe Sylvia trying to keep him warm; it had a terrific odor, so we burned that, too."

"What shall I tell of that long, strange night? Ruth and Paul (*Janssons' two young children*) were so upset they couldn't settle down, and to my sorrow, I finally had to spank them to make them stay in bed. They both cried themselves to sleep. Bob seemed to need help to get into his pajamas and into bed, and then he said, 'I don't want you to sleep with me,' and turned his face to the wall. Hurt and anxious, I lay down on the davenport in the livingroom, but he called so many times for water---which he drank in great, gulping swallows as though he couldn't get enough of it---that I...made up a pallet on the floor beside him."

"Even Lassie (*the family dog*), with that family telepathy she always showed, went moaning around and around the house. Fearing she would awaken Bob, I let her in and she settled down to sleep at my feet. Then Bob began to moan and finally scream and call in agony, 'Go away, go away!'"

These "sleeping nightmares" as Lois Jansson called them would continue to haunt her husband's nights for months to come.

On this same Sunday, August 7, 1949, a light rain falls over the area and the fire's progress is checked. It takes 450 men working out of five separate fire camps three more days to control the stubborn blaze, but on, August 10, 1949, the fire is declared controlled after burning nearly 5,000 acres of grassland and timber.

THE AFTERMATH

The lives of the 12 young smokejumpers and the Meriwether fire guard ended in early August 1949, but the pain and anguish of the survivors (Dodge, Sallee and Rumsey), the next-of-kin of the 13 men, Ranger Jansson, Forest Supervisor Moir and the Forest Service in general would continue for decades. In truth that pain and suffering continues right up to today. Visitors to Mann Gulch today often comment on how slowly the fire area has been to heal; few new trees have re-established themselves on the south-facing slope and the blackened and nearly limbless---but still standing---trunks of dead trees still dot the old fire landscape. Much the same could be said for the psychological landscape; it has been slow to heal.

Before the fire is even controlled, retired forest ranger Henry Thol, Sr. makes the trip to Helena and wants to be taken into the fire area to see the scene of the tragedy for himself. Later in the day he shows up at the funeral home in Helena where the bodies of the victims, because of the severity of the burns and the advanced state of decomposition, have been sealed in metal containers. He demands to see his son's remains. The funeral home director at first refuses to unbolt the container but finally relents after Thol threatens to go get the local sheriff. Later, after viewing his only son's body, Thol is seen on the main street of Helena screaming and sobbing out his grief.

Some who knew Henry Thol, Sr. say he was never the same after his son's death. Henry, Sr. would be the only parent or next-of-kin of the 13 men who perished who would testify at the Forest Service Board of Review of the fire. During his testimony Thol would blame Wag Dodge, Earl Cooley and the training the smokejumpers for his son's and the other deaths. Later, he would organize and lead a small group of parents who file a lawsuit against the Forest Service; the suit would eventually be dismissed because the statutes of limitations would run out.

In September of 1949, in an effort to discover the causes of the Mann Gulch disaster, the Forest Service convenes a Board of Review. The Board is made up of upper level Forest Service fire, safety, personnel and administration specialists. The proceedings are closed to the public and the media. The Board travels to Mann Gulch and tours the fire area with Dodge, Sallee, Rumsey, Jansson, Moir and others. They review the written statements provided by these principals and then receive verbal testimonies in Missoula, Montana. Ranger Jansson agrees to testify only under the condition that he be able to face away from his inquisitors. He testifies sitting on a wooden chair with his back to the Board.

In late September 1949 the Board reveals its findings. No one is found at fault. No fault is found with the jump spot nor is anyone with a direct hand in the events of August, including Wag Dodge. Even the 13 dead men are exonerated when Regional Forester P.D. Hansen is quoted as saying, "There occur times when men's lives are at stake, when they alone must make the decision as to the course of action they select." The Board of Review does, however, come out with a list of recommendations including that future training of smokejumpers and firefighters stress crew discipline and the understanding of fire behavior. Needless to say, the Board of Review's findings were not popular with the next-of-kin.

Unfortunately the tragedy that is Mann Gulch doesn't end when the fire's extinguished, after the funeral ceremonies are held or after the media has lost it's interest. Mann Gulch claims another victim in November 1949.

Winter has yet to lay its heavy hand on the Canyon Ferry Ranger District when in early November Ranger Jansson receives a telephone call from Harry T. Gisborne. Gisborne is a fire researcher working for the Forest Service in Missoula and he wants Bob to take him into the fire area so he can see first-hand the fire's effect. Jansson is warned about Gisborne's heart condition, but reluctantly agrees to guide the researcher.

On November 9th, thinking he can avoid most of the strenuous walking it takes to get into Mann Gulch, Jansson decides he can drive Gisborne to the top of the ridge in a 4-wheel drive jeep approaching from north of Rescue Gulch. However, they find the route impassable and are forced to set off on foot. Keenly aware of Gisborne's heart problems, Jansson hikes with Gisborne for short distances and then sits him down for rest breaks. He repeatedly attempts to turn Gisborne back, but Harry is in his element and pushes on. They make the ridgeline and drop into Mann Gulch.

After several hours in the fire area it's getting late and Jansson guides Gisborne back to the north and the awaiting jeep. They are within a half to a quarter of a mile from the parked vehicle and sitting on a steep sidehill, on a narrow game trail, taking a break. It's 5:30 PM when Gisborne comments that he's made the trip fine, although he says his legs may ache a little in the morning. This said, he stands up suddenly and then just as quickly collapses. Jansson has to quickly grab Gisborne to prevent him from rolling down the steep incline and into the Missouri River. He holds Harry in a sitting position, loosens

his tie and belt, checks his false teeth and struggles to drag him up onto the game trail. Gisborne takes a couple of shallow breaths and then he's gone.

Jansson props rocks on the down-hill side of the body to keep it from ending up in the river and then goes for help. He hasn't driven far before he runs into a local ranch hand. Jansson explains the situation and tells the ranch hand to call for help and send a doctor and litter bearers down the river. Jansson returns to Gisborne and builds a signal fire. When by 7:00 PM no help has arrived, Jansson hikes back to the jeep and starts driving for help. He encounters a couple of local ranchers and sends them for help while he returns to Gisborne's body and the signal fire. Around 8:20 PM it starts to rain. He returns to the jeep and gets a canvas tarp to cover Gisborne. He sits on the steep hillside in the rain, tending the fire. Finally, close to 9:00 PM, a boat comes down river with help to retrieve the body.

The Mann Gulch fire continues to haunt Bob Jansson. Through the fall of 1949 and into the early spring of 1950 Jansson is asked to guide parents of the dead smokejumpers up to the recently installed concrete crosses in Mann Gulch; crosses installed by the smokejumpers to mark the spots where the bodies were recovered. Each of these visits brings on another night of intense "sleeping nightmares".

With Jansson's doctor's recommendation, Bob and his family are transferred from Helena to the Priest Lake Ranger Station in northern Idaho in late spring of 1950. One of Bob's last acts before leaving Helena is to burn the hat he wore during the Mann Gulch fire and the jacket he had been wearing the evening Harry Gisborne died in Rescue Gulch.

But adversity and death follow Jansson to even this most remote duty station. Ironically, a year from the day of the Mann Gulch disaster, August 5, 1950, he is called upon to help in another rescue mission. A boat loaded with a Forest Service blister rust crew upsets while crossing nearby Lake Pend Oreille during stormy weather. In spite of four to five foot waves, Bob sets out across the lake in an open boat. Other, faster, boats reach the over-turned Forest Service boat first and save the five of the men still clinging to its sides, but not before the crew foreman slips off and drowns. Jansson helps drag the lake for the foreman's body the following day, but they're unsuccessful.

It's not long afterward that Bob Jansson starts to develop serious kidney problems: problems thought to be brought on by the stresses and strains of his job and medical problems that would plague Bob's life until his death in 1965. Adding to this stress, Jansson discovers during the early 1950s that for the past 18 months he's secretly been under investigation by the FBI for being a suspected communist. It takes two more years until he's cleared of the allegations; two years during he and Lois lived under a cloud suspicion.

Misfortune, tragedy and violent death also shadows other Mann Gulch fire principals. Wag Dodge drops out of the smokejumper program the year following the Mann Gulch fire, but continues to work for the Forest Service. Just five years after the fire he dies from Hodgkin's disease. Smokejumper Stanley Reba's infant son dies of a congenital heart ailment just three months after the fire. Reba's wife never re-marries and commits suicide in 1959. Walt Rumsey survives the fire in 1949, but meets a violent death in an aircraft crash in 1981. The C-47 co-pilot, Frank Small, continues to fly but in 1956 while flying into Grangeville, Idaho, after dropping smokejumpers he suffers a heart attack, still manages to land the plane, but collapses and dies on the runway when he steps from the plane.

Others, like smokejumper Merle Stratton and spotter Earl Cooley, go on to pursue Forest Service careers and eventually retire from the outfit. They're both alive today. So is Robert Sallee. Bob Sallee ends up in Portland, Oregon, working for an engineering consulting firm. Of the fifteen smokejumpers who dropped into Mann Gulch that fateful day, he is the only living survivor.

THE LEGACY OF THE MANN GULCH FIRE

With all the tragedy and heartache associated with the Mann Gulch fire and its victims---both living and dead---it's easy to lose sight of the fact that there were many positive consequences that came out of the fire. Moreover, these consequences were all efforts to avoid a repetition of the events which played out in this remote gulch in southwestern Montana and to make smokejumping and wildland firefighting a safer business.

One of the spin-offs was the eventual development of centers devoted to creating better---that is to say safer---equipment for firefighters. Over the years since the Mann Gulch fire, equipment development centers in Montana and California have come up with a multitude of items designed to reduce some of the risk inherent in firefighting. These improvements range from fire retardant clothing to hardhats to reflective metal-coated pup tents or fire shelters which enable modern-day firefighters to survive burnovers similar to the one experienced in Mann Gulch in 1949.

Events which played out in Mann Gulch are also given major credit for firmly establishing the science of fire behavior as a permanent fixture in the Forest Service. Thanks to decades of research---in part prompted by the loss of 13 smokejumpers in Mann Gulch---today's wildland firefighters are better prepared to take on suppression of wildfires than were the crews in 1949. Wildland firefighters in this day and age more clearly understand, and most importantly are able to predict, how local weather conditions and the fire interact and how quickly burnable fuels, temperature, humidity, wind speed and slope can combine to place equipment and firefighters in harm's way.

The Mann Gulch fire also led to rapid changes in smokejumper and firefighter training. After 1949 fire training began to place considerably more emphasis on crew and foreman training, especially crew discipline. A major milestone in this new emphasis on training was development of the Ten Standard Firefighting Orders. Drawing on the experience and lessons learned in Mann Gulch, these orders quickly became, and still are, the cornerstone of firefighter safety. Since the early 1950s these Ten Standard Firefighting Orders have been drilled into generations of new firefighters and reiterated to the veterans each and every firefighting season. Copies of the Orders continue to be carried in thousands of wallets and pasted on thousands of hardhats worn by today's firefighters.

The tragic events which played out in Mann Gulch nearly 50 years ago taught the Forest Service and others engaged in suppressing wildland fire a number of important lessons. We have taken these lessons to heart in the spirit that the 13 men who died that hot, dry August of 1949 will not have died in vain and that even though wildland firefighting will always be a risky, dangerous business, we can avoid many of the pitfalls that trapped these men