The Thirteenth Fire
The Story of Montana's Mann Gulch Fire

by David L. Turner
David L. Turner is a retired forester. He worked the majority of his career with the U.S. Forest Service, assigned to the Helena National Forest in Montana. David began his study of the Mann Gulch Fire in earnest in 1991 when he was first assigned to guide visitors into the gulch. In the course of the next 12 years, until his retirement in 2002, David regularly led groups and VIPs into Mann Gulch. His intimate knowledge of the fire would ultimately lead to writing, stage and film appearances, and his selection as head of the Forest Service’s group that planned and executed the 50th Anniversary Commemoration of the Mann Gulch Fire in 1999. In recognition of his efforts David received the Northern Region Forest Service Gifford Pinchot Interpreter of the Year for 1999.

Since his retirement David has continued to guide fire teams, crews and interested groups into Mann Gulch each summer and make presentations of The Thirteenth Fire.

David lives near Helena, Montana, with his wife Kathleen. The couple has two grown sons.
This book is dedicated to the memory of the unsung hero of the Mann Gulch Fire . . .

THE THIRTEENTH FIRE

Every year since the agency was created to protect our nation’s national forests, the men and women of the United States Forest Service have fought forest and grassland wildfires. This business of firefighting is often portrayed as exciting and dangerous work, but the truth of the matter is that while firefighting does in fact have its dangers and occasional excitement, on the whole it’s more a matter of routine responses and a lot of hard, dirty work over many, many long hours.

But, most firefighters would also agree that every so often something goes wrong. Equipment fails. The wind suddenly changes direction and picks up speed. Or, in unfamiliar territory and amidst the confusion of flames, smoke or darkness, firefighters become lost. Wildfires and the business of fighting wildfires does have a sometimes unpredictable side and what was routine one moment can go wrong in a heartbeat.

On August 4, 1949, lightning from a passing summer storm set off a handful of fires in the National Forest outside of Helena. Listed on the local Ranger’s fire records as Fire Number Thirteen, the Mann Gulch Fire started out as a small blaze burning on a remote ridgeline. But something went terribly wrong. This otherwise routine fire, suddenly “blew up” and within mere minutes, sixteen firefighters were overrun by walls of flame. Of the sixteen men only three would emerge, physically unscathed, from the flames. This is the story of Fire Number Thirteen and the lives of the people it touched.
FIGHTING FIRES . . . 1905 to 1949

To understand the chain of events which occurred in Mann Gulch on the Helena National Forest nearly 70 years ago, and to put these events in a clearer perspective, we must return to the very earliest years of the U.S. Forest Service. One of the original charges from Congress to the newly created Forest Service in 1905 was contained in the Organic Administration Act of 1897. The Organic Act as it became known, empowered 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—would take very seriously.

As the new custodian of our nation’s forests the Forest Service quickly learned several fundamental lessons about fighting forest fires. One very basic lesson was that fires in our nation’s forests were easier to manage—thus cheaper to control and safer for firefighters to suppress—if they were attacked quickly and held to a very few acres. This experience crystallized into what became known as the “10:00 a.m. Policy.” This policy dictated that District Rangers were to try to control all forest fires by no later than 10:00 a.m. of the day following the fire’s discovery by sending out all available firefighters and firefighting equipment.

But in these early days, getting men and equipment to fires quickly after “smokes” were first reported was not always a simple matter. Men were either driven or walked into the fires and accomplishing that quickly was, of course, dependent upon roads and trails already being in place.

Where roads and trails existed it was a fairly simple matter of trucking firefighters to the scene, walking them over to the fire and then quickly surrounding the blaze with a line in the dirt to
stop the fire’s advance. However, in those situations where the fire was burning in more remote backcountry (and there was considerable backcountry in those days!), roads and even trails were for the most part non-existent. Attacking and controlling backcountry blazes was more difficult, ultimately more expensive, and frequently more dangerous for firefighters.

However, two technological changes occurred by the late 1930s, both of which combined 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 technological changes were trustworthy airplanes (which for the most part didn’t fall unpredictably out of the sky) and the development of dependable parachutes (which would let a person down reasonably easy if the airplane did fall out of the sky).
Beginning in 1940, the Forest Service began flying the best of the firefighters to remote fires and dropping them with parachutes near the fires. In July of that year, Rufus Robinson and Earl Cooley made the first fire jump on the Nez Perce National Forest in Idaho. After they retrieved their supply parachutes containing tools, water and rations, these smokejumpers (as they would later be tagged) would hike to the fire and encircle it with control fire lines. The advantages of being able to rapidly deliver trained and experienced firefighters to these small, remote fires was 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 was routine.

Smokejumper training during this ten-year period evolved, of course, as new parachuting equipment and jumping techniques were developed and tested. Thanks in large measure to military
developments during the war, there were significant improvements in parachute and parachute harness design.

Interestingly enough, it would not be the equipment that would play the more pivotal role in the disaster in Mann Gulch, but rather the training regimen in place at the smokejumper base in Missoula.

Today’s smokejumper training, thanks in part to the lessons learned from the Mann Gulch Fire, places heavy emphasis on crew identity and crew cohesiveness. Smokejumper training in 1949 was almost the antithesis of crew cohesiveness. In 1949 there were many total strangers among the 150 men who trained and jumped in the smokejumper program.

Each year the new men in the smokejumping program, the rookies, were trained separately from the experienced veterans with very little opportunity to get to know one another. An exception to this policy was that in between training sessions the rookies were sometimes sent out on work projects under the leadership of the older, more experienced, squad bosses and crew bosses.
But again, the jumper foremen and squad leaders were also rotated from work project to work project, so they didn’t work regularly together with the younger, less experienced smokejumpers.

Even after training has been completed, the concept of a set, cohesive work crew was not used. In fact, following completion of training jumps, the rookies and veterans were simply dumped into a pool of smokejumpers from which the dispatchers drew to fill requests for jumpers when they were received from the Region’s forests.

The result was that many of the 150 smokejumpers in the smokejumping program were relative strangers, especially early on in the fire season. And, this was indeed the situation in 1949 when the crew jumped into Mann Gulch that hot August afternoon.

Some members of the crew were strangers to each other and no one, short of the squad leader, was really well acquainted with the crew foreman. Some men on the crew may have seen the crew foreman around the smokejumper base, but no one had ever worked directly under his command or supervision. Perhaps significantly, however, several members of the crew did know the second-in-command and had worked with him on work projects.

The consequence of this training and dispatching regimen is that the crew that jumped into Mann Gulch in 1949 would lack a collective identity; that sense of being a cohesive unit that thinks and reacts as one. Survival for most of the men on this crew, late in the afternoon in this nondescript canyon, would call for a decisive, unified, cohesive response.

Yet another factor that came to play a subtle role in this disaster was the relative lack of experience (and the circumstances under which that experience had been gained) of the crew that jumps into Mann Gulch. For nine of the fifteen men who jumped that fateful day, this was their first season as a smokejumper. It
was only 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 and squad leader had more than two years’ smokejumping experience.

Further, it should be recognized that a majority of the crew’s collective smokejumping and firefighting experience was gained west of the Continental Divide, fighting fires burning in forested settings. Individually and collectively they had little firefighting experience on fires east of the Divide, in country with explosive, volatile fuels like the thick, dry grasses they encountered on the south-facing slopes in Mann Gulch.

Finally there was the problem of maps, or more precisely, the lack of maps. During the war effort topographic maps of the National Forests were scarce. And even though World War II had been over for more than four years, in 1949, without enough maps to go around, smokejumpers were routinely dispatched to fires without maps of the fire area. The routine procedure was for the jumpers to get copies of maps when they tied-in with the local firefighting forces on the fire. Consequently, when the smokejumpers landed in Mann Gulch they were jumping into unfamiliar territory and had no maps to guide them.
HELENA NATIONAL FOREST  August 1949

Seventy years ago the Helena National Forest was divided into four ranger districts. There were the Lincoln and Townsend Districts, however the Helena Ranger District was combined with the Canyon Ferry District in the 1970s.

The Canyon Ferry Ranger District, with headquarters located just southeast of the current Canyon Ferry Dam, administered the National Forest lands on the northwest end of the Big Belt Mountain range, including Mann Gulch and the newly created (in 1948) Gates of the Mountains Wild Area.

Headquarters for the Helena National Forest was located near downtown Helena with Forest operations under the capable hands of Arthur D. Moir, the Forest Supervisor. J. Robert “Bob” Jansson was the District Ranger out at Canyon Ferry. By August of 1949 Jansson had served as the District Ranger for eight years, having been assigned in 1941. Jansson lived right next door to the District Office with his wife, Lois, and their three young children. When fires broke out and the men were busy, Lois would often make sandwiches and coffee and carry them over to the office. This way she was able to unobtrusively listen in on
the radio traffic and track the progress of firefighting activities, not to mention keeping track of her husband, Bob, as well.

**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’s 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 percent grade in the drainage bottom to near 80 percent as one approaches the ridgelines. Slopes on the north side of the gulch, where the smokejumpers were forced to run for their lives, are nearly 76 percent. Except for spring snowmelt and a rare cloudburst, there is no water in this drainage.

Wildfires historically burn, on the average of one fire every 13 to 25 years, across the Mann Gulch landscape and many of the south-facing slopes of the Big Belt Mountains. By 1949 it had been several years since the gulch had 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 a carpet of 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. The area
had only recently been designated a Wild Area and it hadn’t been grazed for several seasons. The grass was fairly thick and two to three feet high. And because it had been a hot, dry summer, the grasses were already cured out and tinder dry by early August. 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. Mostly, rocks are 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 p.m. While the storm produces considerable rain it also hammers the Big Belt Mountains with lightening strike after lightening strike. Moments after the storm passes reports of smokes start pouring into the Helena National Forest offices. 25 smokes are reported and chased that evening, five would turn out to be actual fires. Ranger Jansson is out until well past midnight on August 4th chasing his share of these smokes.

**FRIDAY, AUGUST 5, 1949**

The day begins with Ranger Jansson making an 8:15 a.m. radio call to Meriwether Guard Station on the Missouri River. Jansson instructs his Meriwether Guard, Jim Harrison, to start a fire patrol at 11:00 a.m. This fire patrol consists of hiking to the top of the high ridge separating Meriwether Canyon and Mann Gulch to the north and looking into the deep side canyons off the Missouri for
smokes from the previous night’s storm. Harrison is directed to report back to the District on the radio at 3:30 p.m.

**Jim Harrison** is 20 years old, lives in Missoula and is a student at the University of Montana. This was 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 mother, concerned about the dangers of smokejumping, convinces 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, John Hersey, drive the 20 miles from the Ranger District to the Helena airport. Upon arrival at the airport they board a single engine airplane and fly over the Canyon Ferry District to look for smokes. There are two fires reported to be burning at this time on the Ranger 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 a.m., Jansson and Hersey fly directly over the Mann Gulch fire and then make a second pass to the west of the gulch. But, because the fire isn’t smoking or because it’s right under the plane, they fail to spot it.

Harvey Jensen, who operates 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 a.m. he spots a column of smoke coming up from the ridge between Meriwether Canyon and Mann Gulch. When he finally reaches Meriwether, he contacts Harrison (who has not yet started his patrol) and reports the smoke.

Harrison immediately returns to the Meriwether cabin, assembles his smoke chaser pack (shovel, pulaski, files, water and rations on a rigid pack frame) 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 p.m., Jim.”

Meanwhile, Jansson and Hersey continue with their air patrol, making a second pass 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 p.m.

It’s while talking on the phone with the Supervisor’s Office that Jansson is advised that a few minutes earlier, at 12:18 p.m., the Colorado Mountain lookout, located almost 10 miles southwest of Helena, has reported a smoke column coming up from somewhere near Mann Gulch in the Wild Area. Overhearing the lookout’s report of the smoke, the Canyon Ferry Ranger District radio dispatcher starts filling in the fire report form as he does for all reported fires.

Fire Name: Mann Gulch
Rangers Fire Number: 13

The thirteenth of 57 wildfires the men on the Helena National Forest would fight that dry, hot summer.

Colorado Mountain Lookout spotted the fire from 30 miles away
Jansson and Hersey help refuel the plane and then fly directly for the smoke. They arrive over the fire at 12:55 p.m. They estimate it at 6-8 acres and report it’s burning in juniper and small ponderosa pine trees on the top of the ridge between Meriwether Canyon and Mann Gulch. Further, they observe the smoke is trailing up the ridgeline to the northeast.

The two return to the Helena airport and land at 1:15 p.m. 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 the Missoula Smokejumper Center at 1:30 p.m. and makes his order for the smokejumpers.

When Moir reaches the dispatch center in Missoula he’s advised that while there are plenty of smokejumpers available, the jump base 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, and the plane 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 p.m. as the C-47 lifts off from the Missoula field with its load of 16 smokejumpers, 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, copilot Frank Small, Forest Service photographer Elmer Bloom, spotter Earl Cooley, assistant spotter Jack Nash, and the 16 jumpers.

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

R.Wagner “Wag” Dodge is the foreman and he’s in charge of this smokejumping crew. Dodge is 33 years old and 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 Dodge’s second-in-command. Bill is 24 years old, a Navy veteran and a native of Kalispell, Montana. A student at the University of Montana, Bill is married and has been smokejumping for five years.

Walter B. Rumsey is from Garfield, Kansas. He’s a Navy veteran and he’s 21. This is his second season with the Forest Service, but his first season as a smokejumper.

Robert W. Sallee is 20 years old. He’s from Samuels, Idaho. This is his second season with the outfit, but his first season as a smokejumper.

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 is a University of Montana student. This is his fourth season with the Forest Service and his first year in the smokejumper organization. August 5, 1949 is Diettert’s nineteenth birthday.

Phillip R. McVey is working his second year as a smokejumper with a total of three summers work for the Forest Service. McVey is 22 and calls Ronan, Montana his home.
Marvin L. Sherman is 21 years old, and another Missoula native. 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.

Silas R. Thompson, another veteran, 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.

Stanley J. Reba was born in Brooklyn, New York and is also working his second season as a jumper. Reba, like many young men his age, twenty-five, 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. 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 Stratton (not pictured) is the 16th smokejumper on the plane. But the flight from Missoula to Helena is rough with considerable turbulence and Stratton gets airsick during the flight. After he vomits into his helmet, he decides not to make the jump and lives to tell of the day.
FIREFIGHTERS ON THE GROUND IN MANN GULCH

Wag Dodge  William Hellman  Walter Rumsey  Robert Sallee
Robert Bennett  Eldon Diettert  Phillip McVey  Marvin Sherman
Joseph Sylvia  Silas Thompson, Jr.  Stanley Reba  Newton Thompson
Henry Thol, Jr.  Leonard Piper  David Navon  James Harrison
At 3:10 p.m. 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. They estimate the blaze has now grown to 50 to 60 acres in size, but notice it’s still burning along the ridgeline separating Meriwether Canyon and Mann Gulch. They also see the smoke and fire are moving in a northeasterly direction, still right up the ridgeline.

At somewhere between 3:15 and 3:20 p.m., after ruling out a small meadow on the Mann Gulch/Meriwether Canyon ridgeline, out in front of the advancing fire, Dodge and Cooley agree on a jump spot for the men and equipment; they choose a spot at the head of Mann Gulch. This jump spot is considered the safest as it has few trees to complicate the jump, is 500 feet lower than the fire on the ridgeline, and is nearly one-half mile north-west of the blaze.

At 3:35 p.m., after dropping colored streamers to determine how wind speed and direction would effect the drift of the men and cargo parachutes, the first group of four men jump from the C-47.

As is the custom with smokejumpers, crew foreman Wag Dodge is the first one out of the plane. The pilot 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.

On a routine drop of men and supplies, at this point the pilot would normally lose some elevation before dropping the cargo packs containing the hand tools, water, food, radio, first aid kit and other supplies. The reason for the low altitude drop is the cargo chutes are uncontrolled and making the drop from tree-top level 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, too, 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 several cargo packs. Everything is routine until they come to the pack which coincidentally contains the jumpers’ only radio. When this cargo pack is kicked from the plane, the static line—a braided metal cable attached to the airplane on one end and 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. Their radio and most of the other supplies in this pack are destroyed.

Back at the Missoula Smokejumper Base there is a growing concern about the weight of cargo packs, no back-up radio is included with the supplies and now the men are without a communication link to the outside world.
All the cargo is dropped by 4:08 p.m. The C-47 makes another two passes over Mann Gulch and at 4:12 p.m. 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 home for Missoula.

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

At about 5 p.m., Foreman Dodge instructs the crew to grab a bite to eat, get some water, gather their 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 he’s heard yelling on the ridge, 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 aggressively 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 and head back to the cargo assembly area near the bottom of the draw bottom. 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. Apparently Dodge’s plan 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 this is taking place, Jansson and Hersey have been busy outfitting their small force of 19 firefighters and getting them transported from Helena to the Gates of the Mountains boat launch, and then down river. Once down the river, Jansson decides the mouth of Mann Gulch is no place for a fire camp and moves it to Meriwether. Here he quickly sets up camp and dispatches Hersey and the 19 men to the fire at ridge top.

Jansson is concerned about Jim Harrison’s whereabouts. Jim was supposed to report in on the radio at 3:00 p.m., but no one has heard from him. Jansson assumes—correctly it turns out—that Harrison has joined the smokejumper crew.

At about 5:02 p.m., after unsuccessfully attempting to scout out the fire from the river, Jansson is dropped off, alone, at the mouth of Mann Gulch. He begins to hike up the drainage bottom to see where the fire is burning and to make contact with the jumpers. The Ranger hikes up the draw bottom several hundred yards before he encounters the edge of the rapidly spreading fire. Somewhat foolishly it turns out, Jansson goes into the fire and continues up the draw bottom picking his way through the
burning trees, brush and grass.

In the midst of the raging fire he thinks he hears someone shouting and pushes on. Finally though, the heat and smoke are just too much. He turns back down the draw only to find he’s trapped in the fire. Knowing his only escape is back towards the river, Jansson makes a run and then dives through a wall of dense smoke and fire. He makes it through but passes out from smoke inhalation. He comes to a few minutes later, is immediately sick and vomits violently. After a few moments he gets back to his feet and picks his way through the fire back down the draw bottom to the boat still waiting for him at the river. He returns to the fire camp at Meriwether.

Meanwhile, in Mann Gulch, it’s nearly 5:40 p.m. 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. The crew is strung out in single line, 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 real sense of urgency about this fire. The men have just eaten and are walking at a normal pace as they head for the safety of the river. David Navon even stops long enough to take a snapshot of the fire. There’s no great hurry, certainly no panic. Nonetheless, the fact that Dodge has decided to move the crew to the safety of the river, and that Navon finds the fire sufficiently interesting to photograph, suggests the fire is probably beginning to blow up. This “blow up” as firefighters call it is a phenomenon in firefighting where a low intensity, slow moving fire burning on the ground suddenly moves into the tree canopy and begins to spread and move with dramatic speed, incredible intensity and unimaginable heat.

At about 5:45 p.m., Wag Dodge, at the head of the column of men, starts up over a small finger ridge which up to this point has
prevented him from seeing directly to the river. When he reaches the top of this ridge he looks further down the draw bottom and immediately sees the fire has somehow jumped off the ridge to the south and is now burning furiously below them. Worse still, the fire is now burning uphill directly at them. Their escape route to the river is cut off.

Dodge quickly moves back to the end of the line of men and sends Hellman to what was formerly the head of the line. The men do an about-face and with Dodge in the lead they reverse their direction of travel and begin to climb, diagonally, out of the draw. They’re heading for the ridgeline, up hill, directly away from the fire.

They keep up like this for several minutes, but the going is tough. They’re headed up-slope. The slope is steep and the footing is treacherous. They’ve picked their way across three rock fields, but they’re still several hundred yards shy of the safety of the ridgetop. The fire is steadily gaining on them. It’s only 150 to 200 yards behind them and coming up fast.

Two minutes later, at 5:53 p.m., Dodge realizes that at the rate they’re moving they’re not going make it to the ridge. He turns to his crew and says, “Throw everything away that’s heavy.” Most of the men drop their shovels, pulaskis, two crosscut saws and two 5-gallon water containers they’re carrying, and other gear. But to some of the crew, Dodge’s order isn’t clear. He tells the men to throw down their heavy equipment while he, Dodge, keeps his shovel. So Harrison keeps his heavy smoke chaser pack and his pulaski. Diettert keeps both his shovel and his pulaski and carries them on up the hill. Walt Rumsey finally takes Diettert’s shovel away 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 percent. Their legs are beginning to feel like lead weights. They’re out of breath. The line of men stretches out and they find
themselves going more across the hillside and not up toward the safety of the ridgeline.

At 5:55 p.m., this group of organized strangers breaks out of a finger of big ponderosa pine trees and into a grassy opening on the steep hillside. Wag Dodge—without a word to anyone—pauses, kneels down, and with a match from a book of paper matches, sets fire to the grass in front of him.

![A 4” x 4” wooden post marks the spot below the ridgeline where Dodge lights his escape fire.](image)

The fire springs up in the dry grass and in a matter of seconds starts burning directly up the slope. Dodge’s fire has burned off no more than a 10’ x 10’ square area before he runs up the right side of the burn, leaps over the flames and into the newly blackened area. To those nearest him he yells, “Up this way!”

The next few seconds are more difficult to see and understand. Sallee, Rumsey and Diettert, who were in the line just behind Dodge don’t understand his 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. They run around the right side of Dodge’s still burning escape fire and head directly uphill for the ridgetop, 100 yards or so up the slope.
As for the rest of the crew, basically their discipline, their military training, their crew cohesiveness just evaporates. Bill Hellman, who was posted at the back of the line when they reversed their direction of travel a few minutes earlier, is now up near the head of the line. When he hears Dodge shout “Up this way,” Hellman says “To hell with that, I’m getting out of here.” and he starts for the ridgeline up the left flank of Dodge’s fire.

The remainder of the crew chooses not to follow Dodge into his burn; not to follow Diettert, Sallee and Rumsey up the right side of Dodge’s fire; or to follow Hellman up the left flank of Dodge’s fire. Instead, they continue on their own paths up and across the slope beneath Dodge’s fire.

Why they take this path is still a mystery of sorts. Maybe they don’t hear Dodge’s instructions because of the noise of the fire behind them. Or, maybe they hear him, but they don’t understand he wants them to get into the safety of the blackened, burned area. Maybe, because they know Hellman and trust his judgment more than Dodge’s, the rest of the crew makes the decision to simply disregard Dodge’s orders and following Hellman’s lead, they seek their own escape paths.

In any event, they continue 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 they’re quickly caught in a blast of super-heated air rushing up the slope. One by one, the men are dropped to the hillside. Within a minute or two the fire catches the last members of the crew. Jim Harrison’s wrist watch stops at 5:56 p.m.

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 wall of fire, smoke and hot air sweeps over him. Three times while the flames are passing he is lifted up off the ground by hot, swirling winds.
Meanwhile, Bob Sallee, Walt Rumsey and Eldon Diettert reach the ridgetop. They’re nearly done in now and they run smack into a low, but nearly vertical, wall of rock running along the top of the ridge. Frantically, Sallee and Rumsey search for an opening. Diettert, when he hits 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, a scree patch, 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 had a chance to catch 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 rock 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 manages to make it through an opening in the rock wall and staggers down the other side of the slope for 200 yards before he stops.

Back on the Mann Gulch side of the ridge it’s 6:10 p.m. 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 trees, stumps and limbs. Several minutes pass with no response, but finally he hears a weak cry from below him and to the left. He picks his way down through the burning trees and stumps and at 6:15 p.m. finds Joe Sylvia. Sylvia is horribly burned. He’s in shock but still conscious. Dodge moves Sylvia to the safety of a large boulder because rocks and burning logs continue to roll down the steep hillside all around them. Dodge retrieves Sylvia’s canteen and then removes his boots. At about 6:30 p.m. 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 p.m. they leave their rock pile in what would become known as Rescue Gulch and begin searching for the others. At 6:20 p.m. 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 crosses over the ridge and comes down to where Hellman is propped up against a boulder. Dodge tells Sallee and Rumsey that he’s found another man badly burned over in Mann Gulch, but he can only recall the man’s name begins with an “S.” As they have no radio to call for help, Dodge tells Walt Rumsey to stay with Hellman and that he and Sallee are going to head downhill for the Missouri River to get help.

Dodge and Sallee 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. Without maps of the area and 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 realize they’re headed in the wrong direction. They reverse direction and retrace their steps. Finally, they spot some campers across the river who eventually give them a ride to the Meriwether fire camp.

Two and a half hours after leaving Rumsey and Hellman in Rescue Gulch, at 8:50 p.m., 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 fire camp and
heads down river to the mouth of 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 p.m. 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’re forced to make a return trip to retrieve them from the ambulance.

All this time Lois Jansson is periodically eavesdropping on the radio messages back at the Canyon Ferry Ranger District. She hears bits and pieces of radio conversations talking about the fire blowing up and then, later, that men are injured and missing on the fire. She spends a sleepless night worrying about Bob and Jim Harrison and others she knows are sweating out the evening and early morning.

Finally, at 11:30 p.m. Jansson’s rescue party, with both doctors, starts up the hill in Rescue Gulch for the ridgeline.

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Halfway up the hill the rescue party spots 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 a.m. The doctors immediately begin treating Hellman’s burns, they wrap him up in a blanket and place him on one of the stretchers.

Shortly after the doctors begin treating Hellman, Ranger Jansson, and a couple of men head for the ridgeline and over into 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 a.m. before they locate him. Sylvia complains of the cold so
Jansson and his crew strip off their thin summer shirts and jackets to cover him and keep him warm. He’s thirsty so they give him small sips of water from their canteens, but they must hold the canteens up to Joe’s parched lips because his hands are charred stubs. Even with the covering of thin summer shirts and jackets, Sylvia is still cold. Ignoring the strong odor of burned flesh, Jansson and the men press against the injured jumper to share their 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 pick their way down to Sylvia to begin treating his burns. It’s 2:20 a.m. and Joe Sylvia has been sitting on this big boulder in Mann Gulch, with 2nd and 3rd degree burns over 80 percent 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 moving the two injured men off the hill. And as soon as the first weak light starts to illuminate the smoky eastern sky at 4:40 a.m., the rescue party heads down the hill for the river. They’re met by a boat and the men are hauled to the boat launch and taken by ambulance to St. Peter’s Hospital in Helena. Unfortunately, their lungs and airways are too severely burned and by early afternoon both men die from their injuries.

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 and packing the bodies out. Despite hours of searching, 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 about noon of the following day.

Finally, just after noon on Sunday, Jansson is released from the fire 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,” then turned his face to the wall.

“Hurt and anxious, I laydown on the davenport in the living room, 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 years to come.

On this same Sunday, August 7, 1949, another towering storm sweeps over the Continental Divide. But unlike the previous one, this one brings only rain. The much-needed moisture checks the fire’s progress but it still takes 450 men, working out of five separate fire camps, three more days to control the stubborn blaze. In the end the fire burns nearly 5,000 acres of grassland and timber. Like many fatal fires before 1949 and many fires to follow, the Mann Gulch Fire would not be remembered for the acreage burned, but for the lives lost.

The following summer of 1950, fellow smokejumpers from Missoula would return to Mann Gulch. Only this time they hike into the Gulch. Their mission is to erect 13 whitewashed concrete crosses to mark the spots where their comrades fell the previous fire season. It would be decades before smokejumpers would “crack silk” and parachute into Mann Gulch again, however, in the spring of 1997, six smokejumpers from the Missoula base jump into the head of the Gulch as part of a project to set 13 new, engraved granite monuments near the crosses.

One of the thirteen concrete crosses set in 1950 to mark the spot where one of the bodies was discovered
THE AFTERMATH

Today’s visitors to Mann Gulch are often heard commenting on how slowly Mann Gulch has been to heal. Still standing 70 years after the fire, the trunks of big, blackened and nearly limbless trees dot the old fire landscape. And visitors are quick to notice how slowly young trees are coming back on to the south-facing slope. The physical landscape has indeed been slow to recover. Much the same could be said for the psychological landscape; it too was slow to heal. The fire’s scars remain and with good cause.

Even before the fire is put out, 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 legal action. Later, after viewing his only son’s body, Thol is seen on Helena’s main street screaming and sobbing out his grief.

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 transcribed, but 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. 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.

Henry Thol, 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 smokejumper training for his son’s and the others’ deaths. Later, Henry Thol would organize and lead a small group of parents to file a lawsuit against the Forest Service; the suit would eventually be dismissed because the statute of limitations would run out. Some who knew Henry Thol, Sr. say he was never the same after his son’s death.

In late September the Board reveals its findings. No one is found at fault. No fault is found with the choice of the jump spot nor is anyone with a direct hand in the events of August, including Wag Dodge, blamed for the tragedy. Even the 13 dead men are exonerated.

The Board of Review does, however, come out with a list of recommendations suggesting 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 families of the victims or the media who were excluded from the proceedings.

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

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 effects. 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 side hill, on a narrow game trail, taking a break. It’s 5:30 p.m. 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 p.m. 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 p.m. 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 p.m., a boat comes down river with help to retrieve the body.

The Mann Gulch Fire continues to haunt Bob Jansson’s days and nights. 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 scene of the disaster and the recently installed concrete crosses. With each of these visits Jansson has another night of intense “sleeping nightmares.”

Finally, in late spring of 1950, with Jansson’s doctor’s recommendation, Bob and his family transfers from Helena to the Priest Lake Ranger Station in northern Idaho. Trying to put the whole incident behind him, Bob’s last act 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 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 stress and strain of his job; 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 previous 18 months he’s been secretly 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 which he and Lois live under a cloud of suspicion.

Misfortune, tragedy and violent death also shadows other Mann Gulch fire principals. Wag Dodge drops out of the smoke-jumper 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. 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 spotter Earl Cooley put the tragedy behind them and go on to pursue successful Forest Service careers. Cooley, continued to live in Missoula.

Bob Sallee jumped the remainder of the 1949 season but didn’t return the following year. Sallee went on to pursue an engineering career and worked for an engineering consulting firm in Spokane, Washington. Of the fifteen smokejumpers who dropped into Mann Gulch that fateful day, he was the only living survivor for many years.
THE SURVIVORS

Wag Dodge

Robert Sallee, Walter Rumsey

Robert Sallee pictured standing in front of a Ford Trimotor, 1991
THE LEGACY OF THE MANN GULCH FIRE

With all of the tragedy and heartache associated with the Mann Gulch Fire and its victims—both living and dead—it is easy to lose sight of the fact that there were many positive developments that rose out of the ashes of Fire Number Thirteen; developments designed to avoid a repetition of the events which played out in Mann Gulch and designed to make smokejumping and wildland firefighting a safer business.

One of the spin-offs of the Mann Gulch incident 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 variety 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 burn overs 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—again, in part prompted by the loss of 13 smokejumpers in Mann Gulch—today’s wildland firefighters are much better prepared to take on wildfire suppression than were the crews in 1949.

Today, we have a little clearer picture of the conditions necessary to produce, but certainly not prevent, a blow up similar to what the men in Mann Gulch experienced. Wildland firefighters in this day and age more clearly understand (and most importantly are able to predict) how local weather conditions, local topography and fuels interact with the fire, and how quickly burnable fuels, temperature, humidity, wind
speed and slope can rapidly combine to place firefighters and equipment in harm’s way. And in theory, if you know the conditions necessary for a blowup to occur, you can avoid those situations and save lives.

The Mann Gulch Fire also lead 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. And now maps and extra radios have also became standard equipment with firefighter and smokejumper fire assignments.

The tragic events which played out in Mann Gulch taught the Forest Service and others engaged in suppressing wildland fires a number of important lessons. These lessons have been taken to heart. The thirteen men who took a fire assignment on the Helena Forest’s thirteenth fire of the season and died that hot, dry August afternoon in 1949 did not die in vain. And even though wildland firefighting may always have some element of risk and danger, and regretfully we may still occasionally lose a life while firefighting, we have learned. We know we can avoid many of the situations that led to these thirteen young men racing up the north slope of Mann Gulch, running for their lives, but ultimately losing that race.
See next page for corresponding numerical information
SITES – TIMELINE

1, 2, 3 – Lightning strikes trees, starts fire – fire spotted 12:18 pm
4 – Jump plane drops firefighters and cargo – 3:10 pm
5 – Approximate fire perimeter at time of jump – 3:10 – 4:10 pm
6 – Where men gathered gear and ate before fire dispatch – 5:00 pm
7 – Foreman Dodge meets up with Meriwether Guard, Jim Harrison
8 – Dodge and Harrison meet up with crew at 5:40 pm
9, 10 – Wind picks up, fire begins to blow up
11 – Spot fires
12 – Wag Dodge realizes danger – tells men to head back up gulch
13 – Men instructed to drop gear – approximately 5:53 pm
14, 15 – Dodge lights escape fire – 5:55 pm
16 – Rumsey, Sallee follow edge of escape fire to ridgetop and safety
■ – Firefighter memorials – Jim Harrison’s watch stops at 5:56 pm.

MOVEMENT OF CREW – POSITION OF FIRE

Lightning from a passing summer storm set off a handful of fires in the Helena National Forest in the hot, dry summer of 1949. The local Forest Supervisor called in smokejumpers to fight a fire in a remote Wild Area—Mann Gulch. Located north of Helena, near the Gates of the Mountains on the Missouri River, there were no roads and was comprised of extremely rough terrain—a good time to call for the services of elite firefighters.

Fifteen smokejumpers are dropped from a C-47 airplane. They meet up with the fire guard stationed at Meriwether Guard Station shortly thereafter. These sixteen men were facing a routine fire—Fire Number Thirteen as recorded in the local Ranger’s fire record book. The thirteenth fire turned out to be anything but routine. Overwhelmed by walls of flame, thirteen firefighters perished that day.

This is the story, as reconstructed to the best of the author’s ability, of the events that shaped this fateful day and the legacy of Mann Gulch.