

MANN GULCH



...remembering those who died



United States
Department of
Agriculture

Forest
Service

Helena
National
Forest

What Happened in Mann Gulch?

On August 5, 1949 about 6:00 PM, fifteen USDA Forest Service Smokejumpers and a Helena National Forest fire guard were entrapped by a wildfire in Mann Gulch that was caused by lightning struck trees **1 2 3** (*map*). Ten jumpers and the forest guard perished that evening, two jumpers died later from burn injuries and three jumpers survived. The jumpers, dispatched from Missoula, MT, had parachuted into Mann Gulch to help fight a lightning caused fire burning on the ridge between Meriwether and Mann Gulch.

The jump plane arrived over the fire with the jumpers at 3:10 pm. Spotter Earl Cooley and Jumper Foreman Wag Dodge chose a jump site up canyon in Mann Gulch **11**. The fire size was estimated at 60 acres, but was still considered a routine fire. The air was quite turbulent requiring a higher than normal approach....causing the jumpers and cargo to scatter widely. Also, the cargo chute for the radio failed to open, leaving the jumpers without outside communication.

By 5:00 pm, the men had gathered their gear and were eating before attacking the fire **12**. Foreman Dodge left squad leader Bill Hellman in charge and crossed to the south side of Mann Gulch to meet Meriwether Guard Harrison **4**. He told Hellman to take the crew toward the river on the north side of the canyon and said he would tie in with them later.

Dodge and Harrison caught up with the crew around 5:40 PM **X**. They had continued down Mann Gulch for about 5 minutes when Dodge noticed the fire had crossed to the north side of the gulch. Realizing the danger, he told the men to head back up Mann Gulch **Y**. The wind had increased and the fire was beginning to blow up, burning rapidly toward them in light grass and brush **5 6**.

The men had only traveled 300 yards when Dodge gave instructions to drop their gear **7**. Flames were estimated at 50 feet high and were moving 50 yards every 10 seconds. The men quickly became exhausted due to the steep slopes, high temperature and smoke filled air.

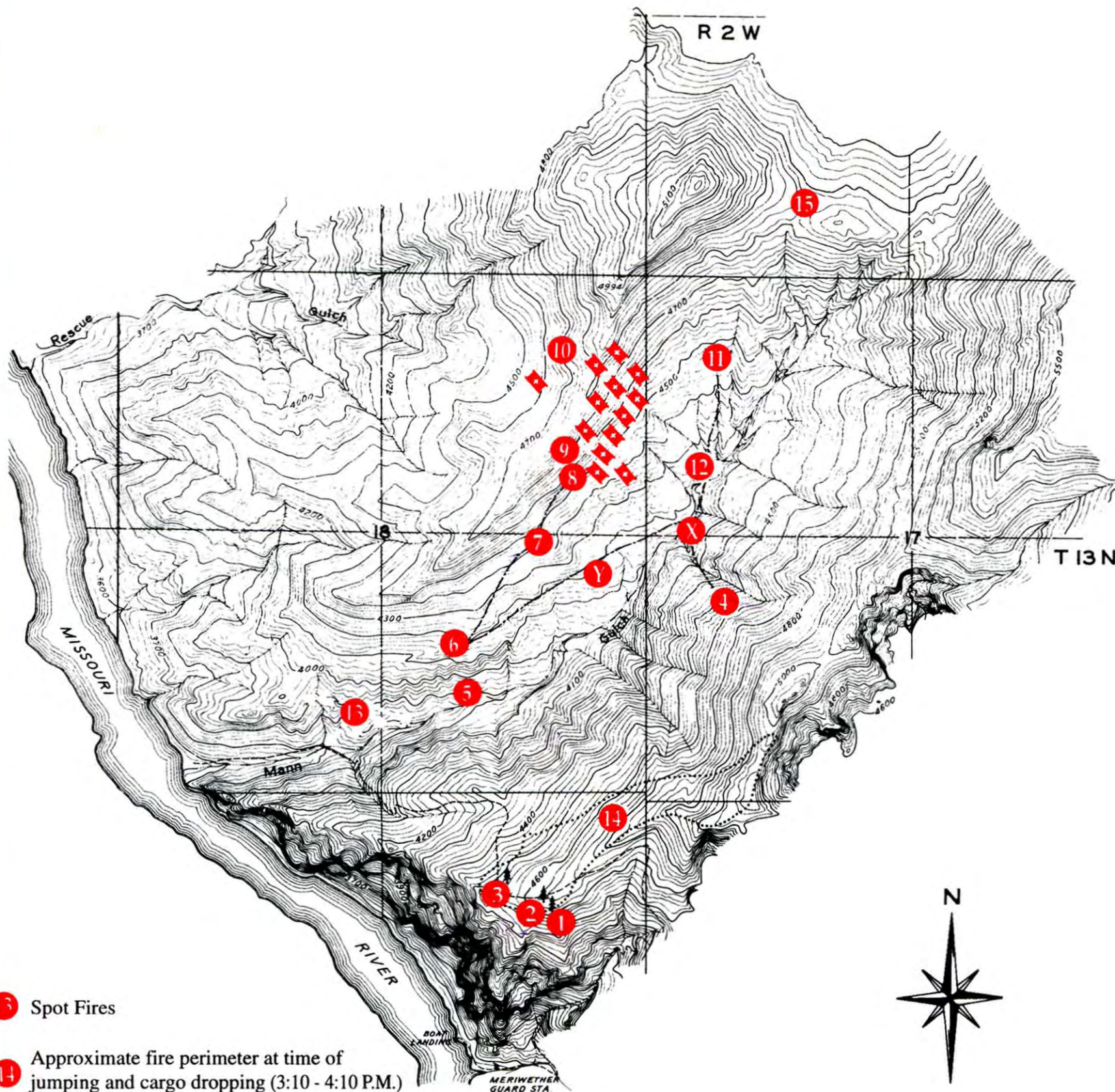
The crew traversed another 200 yards when Foreman Dodge realized the fire was going to catch them. Dodge lit an escape fire hoping it would quickly burn out, allowing his men to get into the burned area and survive **8 9**. For unknown reasons, the crew did not follow Dodge's instructions and continued toward the ridgetop.

Jumpers Rumsey and Saltee followed the edge of the escape fire to the ridgetop where they escaped the flames **10**. After the blowup had subsided, they found Hellman, badly burned, but alive. Wag Dodge, who had survived inside the escape fire area, joined Rumsey and Saltee and reported he had found Jumper Sylvia alive, but badly burned. Dodge and Saltee proceeded down Rescue Gulch to the Missouri river to find help while Rumsey stayed with Hellman.

A rescue crew arrived on the scene at 12:30 AM on August 6th. At 1:50 AM, the rescue crew found Jumpers Sylvia and Hallman. The two injured men were evacuated at 5:00 AM, but both died in a Helena hospital later in the morning. Before the day was over, 11 bodies would be found. All had died within 300 yards of each other.

During the blow up stage, the Mann Gulch fire covered an estimated 3,000 acres in 10 minutes and eventually burned 5,000 acres.

The fatal smoke and flames that roared on that hot, August afternoon have long since cooled and vanished. However, the events of the Mann Gulch Fire will forever be etched in our hearts and continue to influence wild-fire safety and suppression tactics. Today, firefighters nationwide analyze fire behavior from investigative conclusions and follow the Ten Standard Fire Orders that were influenced in part, by the events that occurred in Mann Gulch.



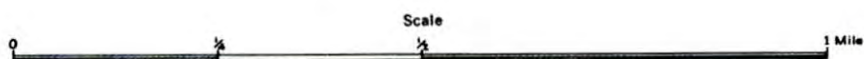
13 Spot Fires

14 Approximate fire perimeter at time of jumping and cargo dropping (3:10 - 4:10 P.M.)

15 Helicopter landing spot

Firefighter Memorials

CONTOUR INTERVAL 20 FEET



How to Experience Mann Gulch

Reaching Mann Gulch today is nearly as difficult as it was in 1949. There are still no roads in the area and one must still boat, hike or ride horseback to reach the site.

For those who choose to hike or ride horseback to visit the area, there are three main Forest Service trails leading from north, east and south of Mann Gulch. These trails range in length from seven to 18 miles and offer over-night or day hike opportunities.

By far the easiest way to reach Mann Gulch is by boat. Many visitors take a commercial tour boat originating at the Gates of the Mountains Boat Club. This tour offers seasonal transportation to and from Meriwether picnic area with boats arriving and departing every two hours. By taking the morning tour boat and returning on the last tour boat of the day, many people visit Mann Gulch by hiking from Meriwether picnic area. Visitors choosing this two-mile route will need to maintain a brisk walking pace to visit the site and return to the picnic area in order to catch the tour boat.

Private or rental boats can also reach the mouth of Mann Gulch from launching facilities located on both Upper and Lower Holter Lakes. Visitors choosing to boat to the mouth of Mann Gulch should be advised that there are no docking facilities provided and that landing and launching are done at the operator's risk. Once beached at the mouth of the canyon, a two-mile hike up the bottom of the gulch will take a visitor to the area of the firefighters' memorials.

FOR YOUR SAFETY

Visitors to Mann Gulch should be prepared for a backcountry experience with all its inherent risks and dangers. In keeping with the rugged and wild character of the area, there are no trails or directional signs in Mann Gulch. The footing is sometimes treacherous, the slopes are steep, and boulder fields are numerous. Watch for rolling rocks from above as you approach the ridge between Mann Gulch and Rescue Gulch. Wear good hiking shoes and carry a map. There is no water and temperatures in the canyon frequently exceed 100 degrees during the summer months, so take along plenty of drinking water.

Among the wild creatures that call Mann Gulch home are rattlesnakes and ticks. Be prepared to encounter both critters during your hike. Wearing tight-fitting clothing will keep the ticks on the outside of your clothes—where they belong—and closely watching where you place your hands and feet during the hike will help prevent you from waking a dozing snake.

Visiting the Memorials

Since that tragic August day, families, friends and colleagues have remembered those who lost their lives in Mann Gulch. In 1950, white crosses were designed and cast in Missoula, Montana by smokejumper comrades of those who perished. They were placed in the location where each body was recovered.

Harsh weather and time have caused the crosses to become fragile and crumble. Respectfully the Forest Service and the Smokejumpers have placed marble plaques next to the original crosses. The memory of those 13 men has been renewed and the memorials serve as a lasting reminder of all women and men who have served as wildland firefighters, especially those who have paid the ultimate price for that service.



For more Information Contact:

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Smokejumpers Visitor Center
5765 Highway 10 West
Box 6, Airport Terminal
Missoula, MT 59802
(406) 329-4934



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Montana Department of
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R1-97-17

In Memoriam

Stanley J. Reba

Silas R. Thompson

Joseph B. Sylvia

James O. Harrison

Robert J. Bennett

Newton R. Thompson

Leonard L. Piper

Eldon E. Diettert

Marvin L. Sherman

David R. Navon

Philip R. McVey

Henry J. Thol, Jr.

William J. Hellman