



NATIONAL SMOKEJUMPER ASSOCIATION

Mann Gulch 75th Anniversary Special Issue

NSA President's Message

by Mike Bina (MSO '68)

Norman Maclean, in his book *Young Men and Fire: A True Story of the Mann Gulch Fire*, wrote, "The Mann Gulch fire smokejumpers were young and did not leave much behind them and need someone to remember them." **Bob Sallee** (MSO '49), who was one of three survivors of the Mann Gulch fire, aptly said at the Mann Gulch 50th Anniversary memorial, "It is time to rededicate ourselves to the memory of these fine young men and the lesson they best taught us, that wildfires are, and always will be, dangerous and we must respect its potential to put a firefighter in harm's way. Life is precious—and for some very short." **Jim Cherry** (MSO '57), former NSA President, said, "As 'Keepers of the Flame,' we in the NSA must forever honor and remember the loss of our fellow jumpers whose lives were ended short in the line of duty protecting our natural resources. We must have 'long memories.'"

With the 75th Anniversary of the Mann Gulch fire approaching, the NSA board of directors, on April 24, 2023, passed a motion to conduct a memorial tribute at each of the 13 Mann Gulch fatality cemeteries. **Chuck Sheley** (CJ '59), who fully endorsed the project, recognized the magnitude of such a project. He supportively cautioned, "This is really good, but it is an ambitious and challenging undertaking considering organizing events at 13 separate cemeteries all around the country." A committee organizer responded, "Indeed, it is ambitious—with challenges. Absolutely. But we are confident. We have smokejumpers who know how and love to work!"

The NSA Mann Gulch committee consisted of tri-chairs **Jim Cherry** (MSO '57), **Sarah Doehring** (MSO '91), and **Mike Bina** (MSO '68), and members **Denny Breslin** (NCSB '69), **Tory Kendrick** (MSO '00), **Jodi Stone** (MSO '02), and **Bob Smea** (MSO '68).

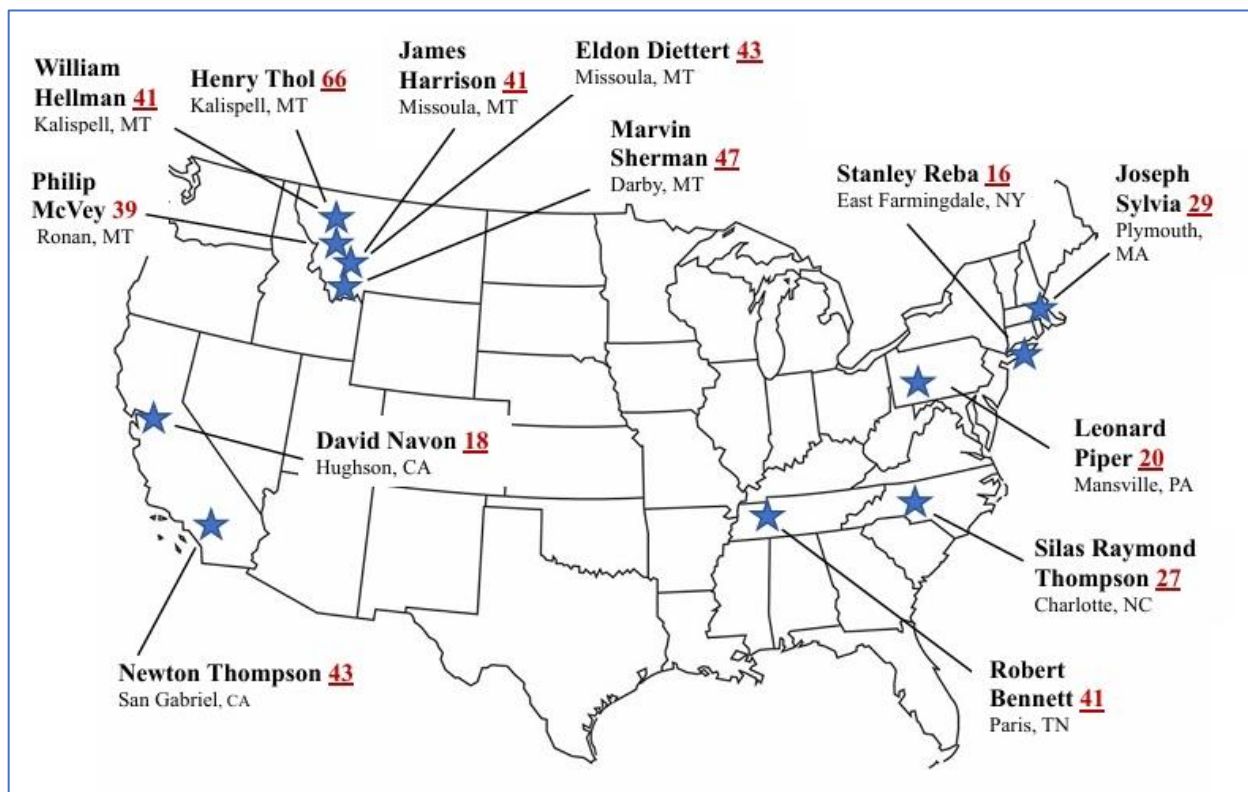
NSA Memorial Grave Marker



A “Call to Action” to recruit volunteers was published in **Smokejumper** magazine.

At each site, a standard memorial program was followed. Each attendee was provided a 12-page booklet personalized for each smokejumper. These very well-done booklets were skillfully created and printed by **Bob Sme** (MSO ‘68).

An NSA brass memorial grave marker, funded by **Milt Fredenberg** (MSO ‘67), was affixed to the head or footstones except at the Long Island National Cemetery in New York, whose regulations prohibited doing so. In tribute to ten of the 13 smokejumpers who were U.S. military veterans, local American Legion and VFW posts were invited to honor the veterans by presenting the American flag, firing rifle volleys, and playing Taps.



As seen in the map above, true to form, smokejumpers from around the country responded to the “Call for Action.” An estimated 650 individuals

attended the memorial tributes, including family relatives, smokejumpers, and local community citizens. The 13 sites averaged 50 individuals per location.

The idea for the individual graveside memorial tributes came to me after reading Norman Maclean's *Young Men and Fire: A True Story of the Mann Gulch Fire*. I was struck that after the fire, the federal government did not extend any meaningful emotional or financial support to the families, who received only \$200 for funeral expenses and no benefits for widows. Maclean detailed a great deal of friction between some of the families and the Forest Service. This included legal action and disputes about what had caused the tragedy. My impression was that the government at the time had left the families virtually on their own to bury their sons.

I was particularly drawn to Mann Gulch after learning that **Silas Raymond Thompson, Jr.** (MSO '48), one of the 13 Mann Gulch fatalities, was from Charlotte, North Carolina, where I lived. His gravesite turned out to be only eight miles from my Charlotte home in a cemetery I regularly drove past. In a wonderful 54-minute video on Raymond's life entitled ***Death at Mann Gulch***, I learned that Raymond went to the same elementary school where I was teaching part-time. I recognized his home immediately in the video as I walked past it many times, teaching my blind students to travel independently with their canes in his former neighborhood.

When I visited his grave, I experienced many hard-to-describe emotions. First, I felt a distinct kinship as a fellow smokejumper. While 19 years apart, we both trained in Missoula and probably frequented the same "watering holes." Second, we also shared the same hometown. Third, we were both U.S. Army airborne paratroopers. Even though we had many similar experiences and commonalities, what really hit me was how we differed. After his fate at Mann Gulch, Raymond returned home and was buried there at age 21, while I also returned home after smokejumping but was fortunate to go on with my life. That made me sad for him and his family. As I stood at his grave site, it struck me—"this could have been me." If our roles had been reversed, I wondered at the cemetery how my family would have been impacted.

Wayne Williams (MSO '77), who organized the 50th Mann Gulch Anniversary Memorial, put me in touch with Raymond's niece and nephew. They shared with me how devastating Raymond's untimely death was on Raymond's parents and their mother and how the family never recovered

from the tragedy of losing a son and brother at such a young age. They talked fondly of Uncle Raymond. Even though they were a generation removed with the passing of 73 years, the grief of Raymond's death was passed on and likely will be for generations that follow. I wondered if the other 12 families had the same continuing feeling of loss. I would soon find out the answer to my question.

Visiting Raymond's grave three years ago, I noted that there was no recognition that he was a smokejumper who died in the line of duty. As I walked back to my car, my eyes were drawn to numerous six-to-eight-inch bronze American Legion and VFW grave markers placed on the graves to honor U.S. military veterans. The idea evolved that at each Mann Gulch gravesite, a memorial tribute could be held, along with placing an NSA medallion to designate that the smokejumper buried there was a significant part of America's history.

I was privileged to represent the NSA and speak at the Helena Memorial at the Montana capitol along with **John Maclean** and **Governor Greg Gianforte** on August 5, 2024. Thanks to the efforts of **Joe Stutler** (MSO '71), the USFS color guard presented the American flag and added significantly to the solemnness of the memorial. Governor Gianforte was surprised at how many smokejumpers and family members were in attendance. While it surprised the governor, John and I fully understood why so many people gathered, with many who traveled across the country to be present. Earlier in the day, when Ms. Montana flew low over the capitol, I was talking to someone and suddenly froze. Looking skyward, I watched in appreciative amazement. All smokejumpers instantly recognize the unique song of smokejumper-aircraft pistons firing. Music to the ears, but in my case, one of the reasons I wear hearing aids.

Sarah Doebling, NSA Treasurer, and I, on August 6th, hiked with the family members to Mann Gulch. This was one of my life's most meaningful and memorable experiences. The families made wreaths two days before and carried them for placement at their family member's cross or Star of David marker. I was not sure my atrophied muscles could propel me from the Missouri River to the top of Mann Gulch, but thanks to being fueled by the families' excitement, I was swept along. Hiking to Mann Gulch, I got my earlier question answered. I learned that, indeed, all 13 families still see Mann Gulch as a "recent" event despite the passing of 75 years. While three-quarters of a century has passed, the Mann Gulch family descendants continue to carry with them deep feelings of loss. I am

confident that future generations will never forget Mann Gulch, and certainly, neither will our smokejumper community.

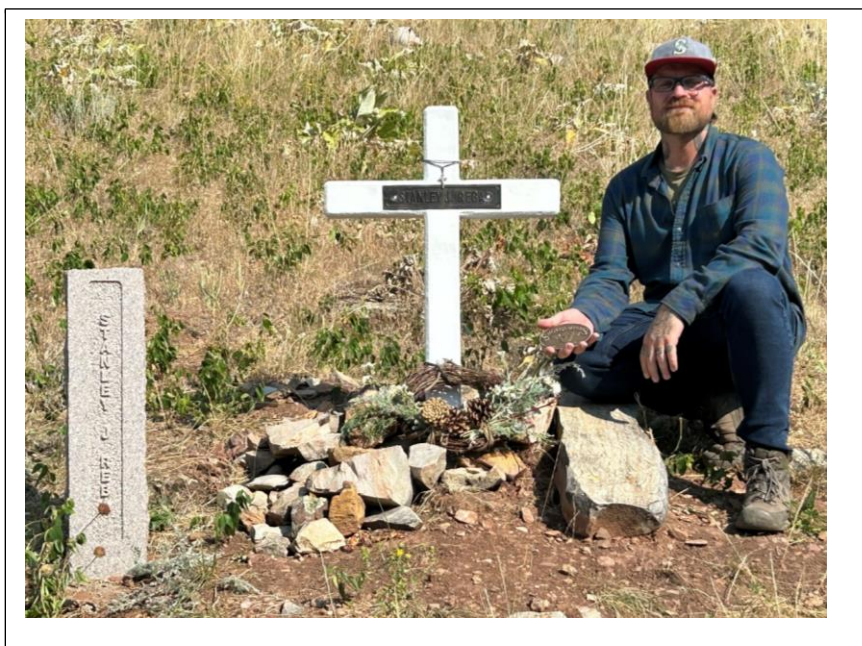
Many unique facts stick in my mind. **Eldon Diettert** left his birthday party to respond to the Mann Gulch fire call for his first fire jump. Tragically, he died on his birthday. **James Harrison**, a Helena NF fire guard, had been a smokejumper the previous two fire seasons. He left the program because his mother thought parachuting to forest fires was too dangerous. Jim's brother shared the intimate family story with me that when his mother was called about his brother's death, she was adamant that it couldn't have been her son since he was no longer a smokejumper. The caller from the MSO base had to inform her that he had walked into the fire to join the smokejumping crew. Jim's brother also shared with me that he learned of his brother's death while riding in a car with his buddies and hearing the news on the radio. **Joe Slyvia** left behind a two-year-old son whose mother re-married after Joe's death. The stepfather adopted the young boy. It was not until Slyvia's son became an adult that he learned that his natural father died at Mann Gulch. The son, who lives in the Midwest, takes great pride in his father being a smokejumper. He would have attended his father's memorial in Massachusetts in August but was not able due to his wife's fragile medical condition.

I was touched that **Eric and Sue Sallee**, relatives of Bob Sallee, one of three Mann Gulch survivors, attended the Hellman Memorial Tribute in Kalispell. That they supported the Hellman family speaks volumes, and I also suspect perhaps was a recognition of the "*second victim*" impact the fire had on the three who survived it.

Mann Gulch was the first fire jump for seven rookie jumpers. These were Bennet, Diettert, Navon, Piper, Sherman, Thol, and Newton Thompson. The average age of the 13 fatalities is 22.4 years. Mann Gulch had a far-reaching national geographic impact. While six of the 13 fatalities are buried in Montana, a majority of them are interred in seven other states, which include North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, Tennessee, New York, and two from California. Many families were well acquainted with each other at the time of the tragedy. Observing the families reconnecting 75 years later at the Helena memorial was very meaningful. The NSA is creating a family email list where families can share information and expand their connections. Credit goes to **Sarah Doehring** and **Jodi**

Stone for locating many Mann Gulch relatives. They were excellent and successful detectives, even utilizing Ancestry.com.

Pictured below is **Ace Reba**, Stanley Reba's great nephew, displaying in his right hand the NSA medallion I presented to him at Mann Gulch. The medallion could not be affixed to Stanley's grave marker at the Long Island National Cemetery. Ace will take the grave marker and present it to his grandmother, Stanley's mother.



There are so many people to thank for the success of the Mann Gulch memorial tributes. First and foremost, **Jim Cherry** and **Sarah Doehring** deserve the very highest level of gratitude. Appreciation is also expressed to **Denny Breslin** for coordinating the two California sites and organizing this special issue and, ultimately, the NSA website Mann Gulch feature.

Scheduled Mann Gulch Memorial Tribute Visitations

Name	Age	Scheduled Visitation	Cemetery	City
Robert J. Bennett	22	August 4, 2:00 pm	Maplewood Cemetery	Paris, Tennessee

Leonard L. Piper	23	August 4, 2:00 p.m.	Bethel Cemetery	Mansville, PA
Stanley J. Reba	25	August 4, 2:00 p.m.	Long Island National	East Farmingdale, NY
Joseph B. Sylvia	24	August 4, 2:00 p.m.	St. Joseph's Cemetery	Plymouth, MA
David R. Navon	28	August 5, 12:00 p.m.	Lakewood Memorial Park	Hughson, California
Newton R. Thompson	23	August 6, 12:00 p.m.	San Gabriel Cemetery	San Gabriel, CA
Henry J. Thol, Jr.	19	August 8, 11:00 a.m.	C.E. Conrad Memorial	Kalispell, Montana
William J. Hellman	24	August 8, 11:30 a.m.	C.E. Conrad Memorial	Kalispell, Montana
James O. Harrison	20	August 9, 11:00 a.m.	St. Mary's Cemetery	Missoula, Montana
Eldon E. Diettert	19	August 9, 12:00 p.m.	Missoula Cemetery	Missoula, Montana
Marvin L. "Dick" Sherman	21	August 10, 10:00 a.m.	Lone Pine Cemetery	Darby, Montana
Philip R. McVey	22	August 10, 2:00 p.m.	Ronan Cemetery	Ronan, Montana
Silas Raymond Thompson, Jr.	21	August 12, 11:00 a.m.	Evergreen Cemetery	Charlotte, NC

Thanks to **Chuck Sheley** for adding the special issue to his already-full plate. Solid appreciation is directed to the site coordinators: **Jim Cherry**, **Denny Breslin**, **Lyle Best** (MSO '68), **Roger Archibald** (RDD '84), **John Pietras** (MSO '73), **Tory Kendrick** (MSO '00), **Chuck Underwood** (MSO '61), **Nels Jensen** (MSO '62), **Ed Ward** (MSO '80), **Kurt Rohrbach** (MSO '03), **Dan Roberson** (MSO '75), **Jeff Kinderman** (MSO '75), **Mark Nelson** (IDC '68), **Eric Hansen** (MSO '62).

A special shout-out is reserved for **Bob Beckley** (RAC '83), who obtained The White House Statement from **President Joe Biden** and the U.S. Congressional Resolution sponsored by Montana **U.S. Senator John Tester**. Thanks to **Miles Cipriano** for obtaining the Massachusetts Governor's Proclamation. **Chiara Cipriano** from the Helena-Lewis and Clark National Forest merits very special kudos for leading the Helena-L&C

Committee and so meaningfully including the NSA as a contributing partner. Thanks also to the **Montana Discovery Foundation** for the funding that it provided the NSA for the memorial tributes. Thanks to **Barry Hicks** (MSO '64), **Fred Cooper** (NCSB '64), **John Berry** (RAC '70), and **Larry Lufkin** (CJ '63) for their contributions. Thanks to **Joe Stutler** (MSO '71) for getting approval for the USFS color guard. Thanks also to **Tom Boatner** (FBX '80) and **Bob McKean** (MSO '67) for posting videos on Facebook to encourage NSA member involvement. And finally, a special thanks to all the smokejumpers who participated in the individual tributes across the United States and, indeed, the families with whom we had the privilege of interacting.