

MANN GULCH
75TH ANNIVERSARY
MEMORIAL TRIBUTE

NATIONAL SMOKEJUMPER ASSOCIATION



Robert James Bennett

Bob was born March 18, 1927, in Paris, Tennessee. He was the third of four children born to Robert Guy and Anne Louise Moses Bennett. His older siblings were Jeanne Bennett Sharber and Maurice Guy Bennett. He had a younger sister, Joyce Bennett Russell, who wrote the following tribute.

"Bob had a life-threatening bout with diphtheria when he was four. From all reports he was a delight to the family. He completed elementary school in Paris, and with his siblings chased lightning bugs, wove clover chains, played hide and seek, red rover, tag, and other childhood games.

Bob did most of the things boys did then. He had a paper route, built and flew kites, made model airplanes, and experimented with chemistry and wood burning sets. Bob was a good brother, son, and human being, one of those rare people who truly cared about others and exhibited excellent character traits throughout life. He attended Sunday school and worship services, joining the First Christian Church in Paris. Lest anyone polish a premature halo for him however, he also started a grass fire near the garage, experimenting with matches and frightening his mother to near hysterics.

Bob graduated from Grove High School in 1945, where he played football as a center, working hard and consistently. Just after graduating from high school, he joined the Army, on May 31, 1945, and served in the military until the end of the war."



"Bob was a member of the 29th General Medical Corps stationed with the occupation forces in Japan. While serving also in Korea, he attained the rank of staff sergeant and was honorably discharged from the Army December 25, 1946."



"After his service, using the GI University in Missoula. What is now the State from 1935 to 1965. Bob enrolled there fine forestry program. The study of forestry had declared that as his major. Bob was looking university and knew his smokejumper's pay Montana told of his life there, his introduction to This, of course, was not to be. Mann Gulch, Aug.



Bill, he enrolled in Montana State University of Montana was Montana because of its reputation for having a been his goal since childhood, and he forward to his junior year at the would help. His letters home from the ski slopes and friends he had met. 5, 1949, happened instead."



"Bob trained to be a smokejumper, an elite group of fire fighters, at Missoula in 1949, like many healthy, strong young men in this geographic area. A rookie in his first season smokejumping, he made a positive impact among his fellow jumpers, including Leonard Piper (MSO-49) who became a best friend and also died at Mann Gulch."

Eulogies: From Barbara Bigham Simons: "Robert Bennett was my schoolmate for as far back as I can remember. Because our last names both began with B, we always sat close together in class. I can't say that he dunked my pigtails in the inkwell because I neither had pigtails nor was he inclined to do such things. He was intelligent, studious, quiet and unassuming, very courteous, pleasant and well-liked by everyone. Bob will always be an excellent man in my memory and an important part of my past to be cherished. I always felt that he would do well in anything that he undertook."

"However, I never imagined that Bob would aspire to such a dangerous career as being a firefighter in the Forest Service. He gave his life courageously while serving his country. I'm proud to have counted him a good friend."

From Ms. Bobbie Parker: *"We lived across the street from the Bennett family from about 1943 on. Joyce and I became fast friends and are to this day. I remember Robert as a quiet, shy boy with a sweet smile, well-liked by all who knew him. I will never forget hearing on the radio of the danger of the forest fire in Montana and seeing Mrs. Bennett's worry. Then I remember the flag-draped casket being carried up the porch steps to the front hall of the Bennett home. We knew we had all lost a good man and a good friend then."*

From Mrs. Lucille Long: *"Bob Bennett, my brother-in-law, was a kind, thoughtful young man. When Pearl Harbor was bombed, my planned marriage to Bob's brother Maurice (who was in the Navy) was delayed three years because of the war. Robert and all the Bennetts were very kind to me. I visited their home often, as I was very lonely. I worked at the Paris 5 & 10 Cents Store. Robert would come to Fry's Drug Store and have a Coke with me at the soda fountain while I ate my lunch. He was a polite, good-looking boy with a kind smile, and he was dearly loved by all his family and me."*

"I can remember his mother, who was in ill health at the time, hearing on the radio about the forest fire, and being so worried about Robert. Then later, the Western Union boy knocked at the door. We all knew then. His father called the family doctor before they read the message to her. The whole town of Paris, Tenn., was saddened by her loss."

Bob Sallee's letter to Bob Bennett's mother, Mrs. Annie Bennett: *"I'm glad you have written to me, as I have been wanting to tell you about Bob. The smokejumpers are some of the best fellows in the world and your son was one of the best-liked men in camp. Several of the fellows came to me after I came back from that fire and asked if Bob had been along. I shall never forget the look of shock and pain on their faces when I told them that he had."*

"Of the men who died at Mann Gulch, Bob was the only one who showed any sign of using his head and thinking out a way or method that might have meant survival for him. He took refuge in an open spot where there was nothing but grass. There he laid face down and gambled that the flames would go through the grass so fast that he would not burn. But God had decided it was Bob's time to come. He died without suffering because there is no pain from a hemorrhage of the lungs. Your son is a hero. All men who die protecting something they love are heroes. Bob loved the forests very much. He died in a war that is as great as any other war ever fought on this earth. The war man fights against the eternal enemy of the forest—fire."



Bob



Robert, his mother, and sister.

It is interesting to note that several of the men knew one another before they became smokejumpers. Coming from small communities, some families knew one another. This surely added to the shock and trauma experienced by many people within and beyond their immediate families.



The Fire

Much has been produced in regard to the Mann Gulch disaster in newspapers, magazines, books, songs, and videos. For the purposes of this writing only a synopsis will be presented.

On Aug. 5, 1949, a team of 15 smokejumpers parachuted into Mann Gulch, a remote canyon northeast of Helena, Montana, to fight a small lightning caused wildfire. They were joined by a recreation specialist/fire guard from the Helena National Forest named James Harrison, who walked into the fire. Harrison had been a smokejumper the two previous years but gave it up when his mother pleaded with him to take a less dangerous job.

Making their way down the canyon, the smokejumpers soon found themselves in an ominous situation when the fire exploded into a raging inferno, trapping them on a steep ridge with no escape route. Despite their training and experience, the smokejumpers struggled to survive against the fast-moving flames that consumed the dry grass and timber around them.

Of the 16 men, two of the smokejumpers, Walter Rumsey and Robert Sallee were able to make it to safety at the top of the ridge. Fourteen of the men were overtaken by the smoke and flames. All perished except one who lit a fire in the grass ahead of the approaching fire and positioned himself in the burnt-out area. This was the crew foreman Wagner Dodge who was unable to get others to join him.

Of the 13 men that were killed in this disaster, 11 died in Mann Gulch and two were able to be evacuated to a hospital in Helena but soon died of their injuries. This became one of the deadliest firefighting disasters in U.S. history.

“The Mann Gulch fire was momentous from the day it happened. It was the first time in the 10-year history of the smokejumpers and the first time in 52,000 fires in the U.S. Forest Service’s Region One that the agency lost a man fighting a fire. On that day, August 5, 1949, it lost 13 men—12 jumpers and a ground firefighter—to a fire that looked like a routine 60-acre blaze just off the Missouri River.” (From Men of Mann, Missoulian Online, October 8, 1998)



Ten of the 13 Mann Gulch fatalities had served with distinction in the United States military protecting our nation’s freedoms. In addition to their service in time of war, they continued to serve our country as smokejumpers protecting our natural resources.



A Tragedy that Shocked the Nation

Thirteen young men died on August 5, 1949, when they were overtaken by the flames of a raging forest fire in northwest Montana at a place known as Mann Gulch. The men included one ground attack firefighter and 12 U.S. Forest Service smokejumpers who parachuted onto the hilltop above the fire and when hiking down the steep canyon were suddenly confronted as the fire exploded beneath them.

On the 75th anniversary of this tragedy the National Smokejumper Association intends to honor each of these young men on or about August 5, 2024, by inviting family members to a memorial grave-side program that would include a verbal tribute, the presentation of a bronze memorial marker (as shown above), and this commemorative booklet presenting the story of the victims and a historical outline of the events at Mann Gulch.

This publication is dedicated to preserving and honoring the memories of the young men who made the ultimate sacrifice in protecting our nation's natural resources. The focus of this project is on the families, supporting them in their loss. Herein is a personalized tribute recognizing each of the 13 men lost.

The Legacy of Mann Gulch

The Mann Gulch Fire of 1949 became a turning point in the history of wildland firefighting in the United States. The tragic loss of life and the heroic efforts of the smokejumpers who tried to contain the fire galvanized the firefighting community. The incident led to significant changes in wildland firefighting response strategies and training and inspired a renewed commitment to safety.



The Smokejumper Memorial at Mann Gulch



The lessons learned from this tragic event continue to influence modern wildland firefighting practices, emphasizing the importance of situational awareness, communication, and ongoing training to enhance the safety and effectiveness of firefighting operations.

Not Forgotten

The National Smokejumper Association is eternally grateful for the many sources and people who contributed to this publication. Assembly, formatting, and printing was done by Bob "Spider" Smee, MSO '68.

LEGEND

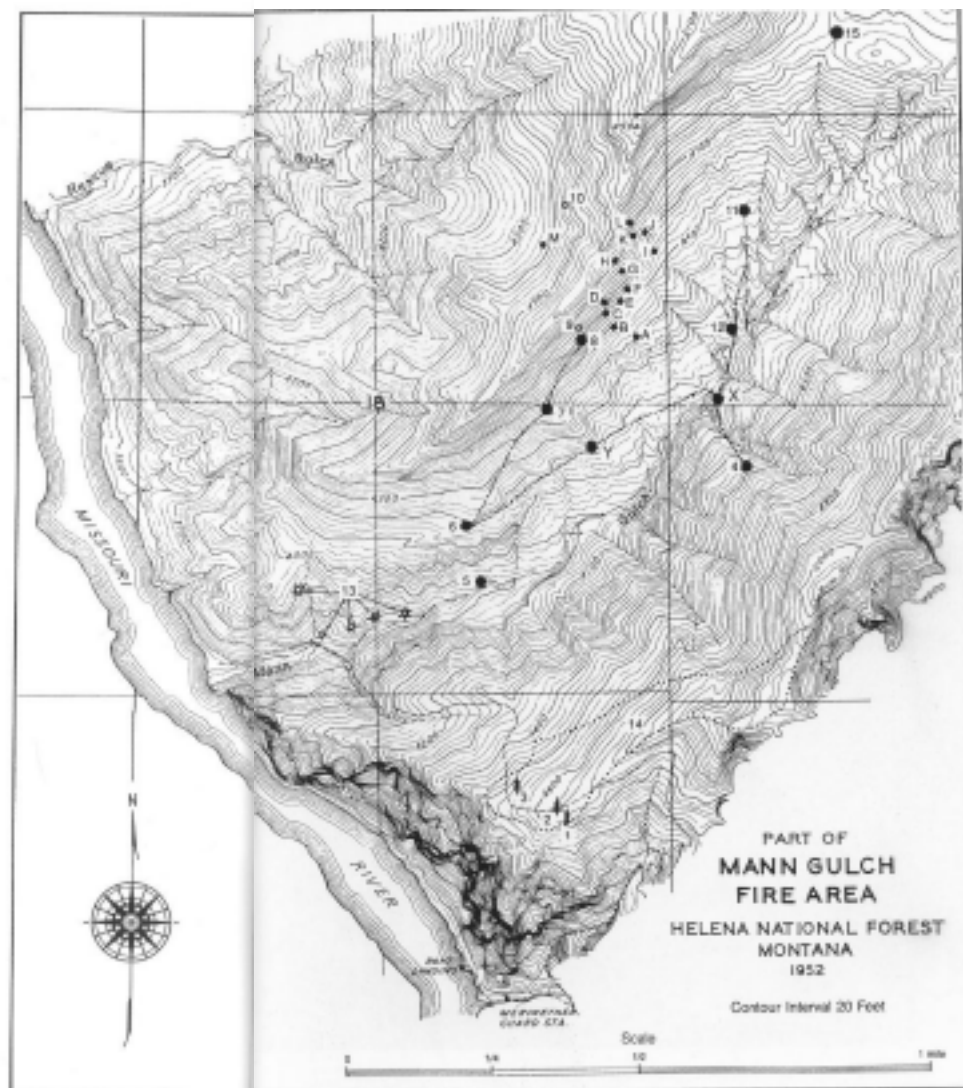
- 1, 2, & 3 Lightning struck trees
- 4—Dodge met Harrison
- X—Dodge ordered crew to north side of gulch*
- Y—Dodge and Harrison rejoined crew; beginning of the crew's race*
- 5—Janson turned back
- 6—Dodge and crew turned back
- 7—Dodge ordered heavy tools dropped
- 8—Dodge set escape fire
- 9—Dodge survived here
- 10—Rumsey and Sallee survived here
- 11—jumping area (chutes assembled, burned)
- 12—Cargo assembly spot (burned)
- 13—Spot fires
- 14—Approximate fire perimeter at time of jumping and cargo dropping (3:10 P.M.—4:10 P.M.)
- 15—Helicopter landing spot

BODIES FOUND

- A—Stanley J. Reba
- B—Silas R. Thompson
- C—Joseph B. Sylvia
- D—James O. Harrison
- E—Robert J. Bennett
- F—Newton R. Thompson
- G—Leonard L. Piper
- H—Eldon E. Diettert
- I—Marvin L. Sherman
- J—David R. Navon
- K—Philip R. McVey
- L—Henry J. Thol, Jr.
- M—William J. Hellman

*Points X and Y added by the author

1952 contour map: "Part of Mann Gulch Fire Area."



MANN GULCH FATALITY BURIAL LOCATIONS





From the song "Cold Missouri Waters"
by James Keelaghan

August 'Forty-Nine, north Montana
The hottest day on record, the forest tinder dry
Lightning strikes in the mountains
I was crew chief at the jump base; I prepared the boys to fly
Pick the drop zone, C-47 comes in low
Feel the tap upon your leg that tells you go
See the circle of that fire down below
Fifteen of us dropped above the cold Missouri waters

Gauged the fire -- I'd seen bigger
So I ordered them to sidehill and we'd fight it from below
We'd have our backs to the river
We'd have it licked by morning even if we took it slow
But the fire crowned, jumped the valley just ahead
There was no way down, headed for the ridge instead
Too big to fight it, we'd have to fight that slope instead
Flames one step behind above the cold Missouri waters

Sky had turned red, smoke was boiling
Two hundred yards to safety, death was fifty yards behind
Thirteen crosses high above the cold Missouri waters
Thirteen Stations of the Cross to mark their fall
Thirteen crosses high above the cold Missouri shore



**National Smokejumper
Association**
Keepers of the Flame