

MANN GULCH
75TH ANNIVERSARY
MEMORIAL TRIBUTE

NATIONAL SMOKEJUMPER ASSOCIATION



James Oliver Harrison

James was born on January 8, 1929, in Spokane, Washington. James's family consisted of his father, Arthur; mother, Susan; and two brothers John "Jack" Harrison and Arthur "Larry" Harrison. The Harrison family was very close growing up and were good friends of the Diettert family who lived near them in Missoula, Montana.

James was an excellent student by anyone's standard. He was also very athletic. In 1945 James and his brother Jack were on the 1945 state championship football team. James received an Elks scholarship to go on to college. He was a chemistry major at Montana State University (the current University of Montana). His scholarship, personality, and strength of character were that of a superior individual.

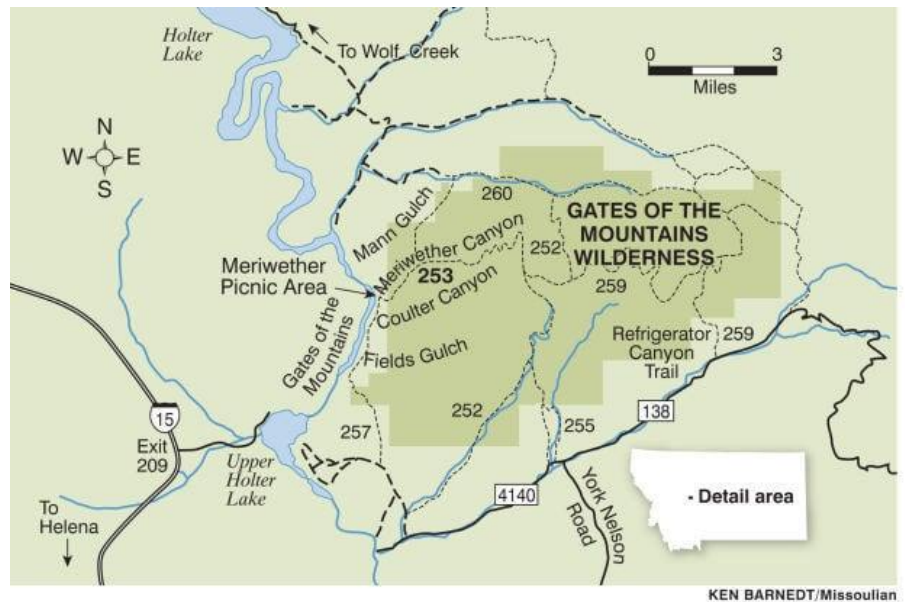


James had been with the Forest Service for three years and was a smokejumper for two years. His mother, Susan, pleaded with him not to smokejump and convinced him to take a less dangerous job in 1948. James went to Gary Nelson and asked if he could help him get a ground job in the Forest Service next summer. Gary told him to send a completed SF 57 to Ranger J. Robert Jansson with a note attached saying he and Gary had talked.



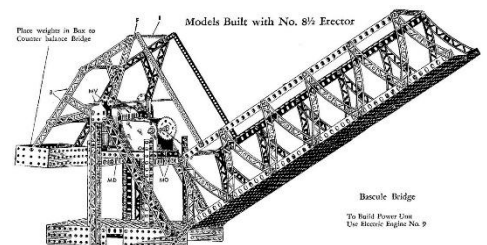
Later that year Jansson was in Missoula on other business and met James. After a short visit, Jansson hired him on the spot and told him that he would fill a newly created job as a Recreation Guard at Merriweather Campground. He explained to Jim that the campground was located at the mouth of Merriweather Canyon, just South of Mann Gulch on the Missouri River, and was accessible only by boat.

James's job would include making a fire patrol. That meant hiking up the north ridge of Merriweather Canyon after all lightning storms for the purpose of checking on any smoke that might be visible.



This is a remembrance of James O. Harrison by his brother Larry Harrison. Jim was the second oldest of a family of three brothers. Jack was the oldest and was very outgoing and carefree. Jim was 15 months younger and more serious. Growing up he was somewhat competitive with his older brother. I was the youngest, about 8 years 9 months younger than Jim so my memory of events is that of being the kid brother.

Jim always worked hard on any chosen activity and was conscientious and serious. He along with his older brother played on their high school football teams. He did, however, find time to help me with various boyhood tasks like building with erector sets or model planes. My recollections are of Jim's high school and university years.





Jim worked for the Forest Service in summer jobs for five seasons starting at age 16. His first season was working on a Blister Rust mitigation crew. He continued on during the seasons in various fire control roles including manning a lookout. He trained for and served over two seasons as a smokejumper. Jim took pride in a job that required the mental and physical strength to jump into back country wildfires. Jim was always liked by his superiors as a conscientious and responsible young man.

One season, his supervisor invited his family to spend about 3 days at one of the Elk Summit Ranger Station cabins. There was no electricity at the time, cooking done on a wood stove, water from a sink mounted pump, and gas lanterns for the evening. We all loved it.



On the morning of August 5 as part of his duties, he noticed wildfire smoke and hiked up and over the crest of Meriwether canyon to the head of Mann Gulch to attempt working on fire containment. He needed to return to his cabin at Meriwether to call in the expanding fire situation. He returned to Mann Gulch to join the smokejumper crew that was dropped in. He became one of the 13 victims.



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.

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 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

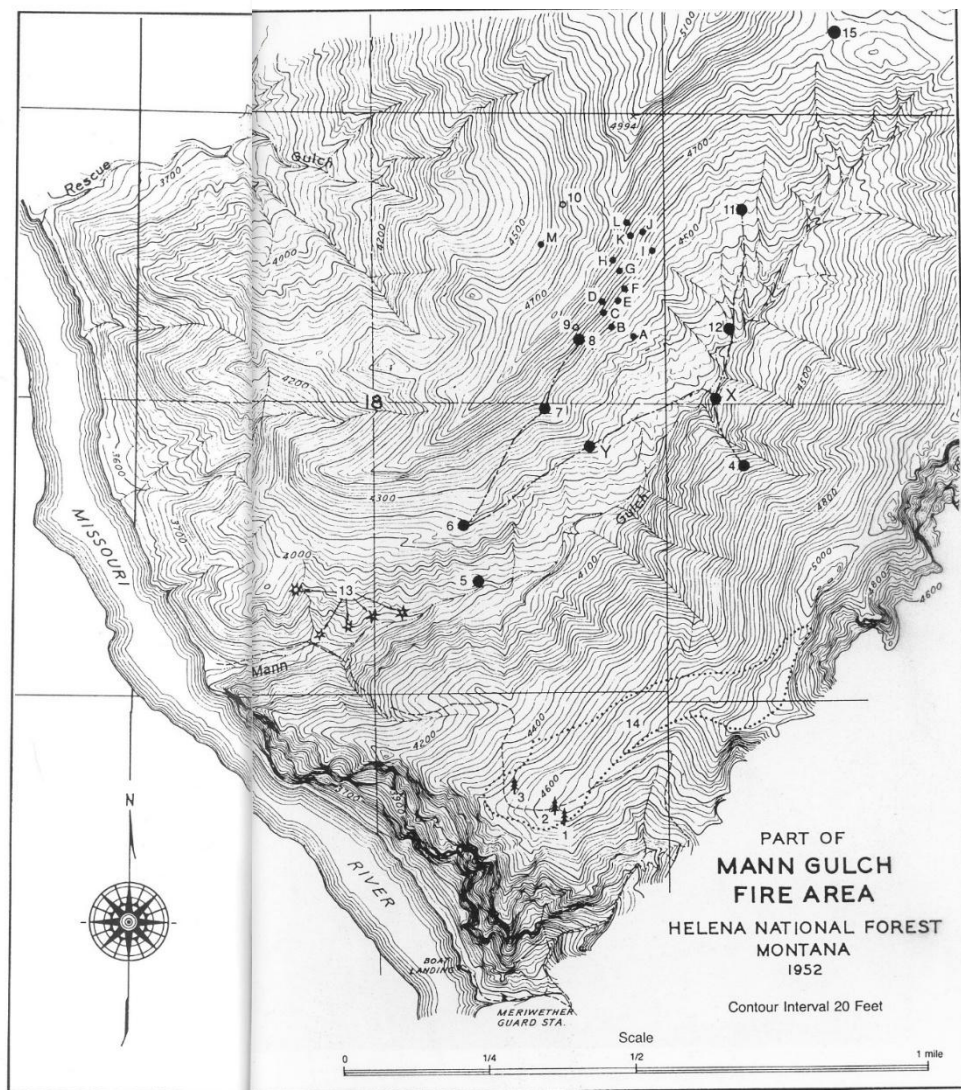
- 1, 2, & 3 Lightning struck trees
- 4—Dodge met Harrison
- X—Dodge ordered crew to north side of gulch*
- Y—Dodge and Harrison rejoined crew; beginning of the crew's race*
- 5—Jansson turned back
- 6—Dodge and crew turned back
- 7—Dodge ordered heavy tools dropped
- 8—Dodge set escape fire
- 9—Dodge 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

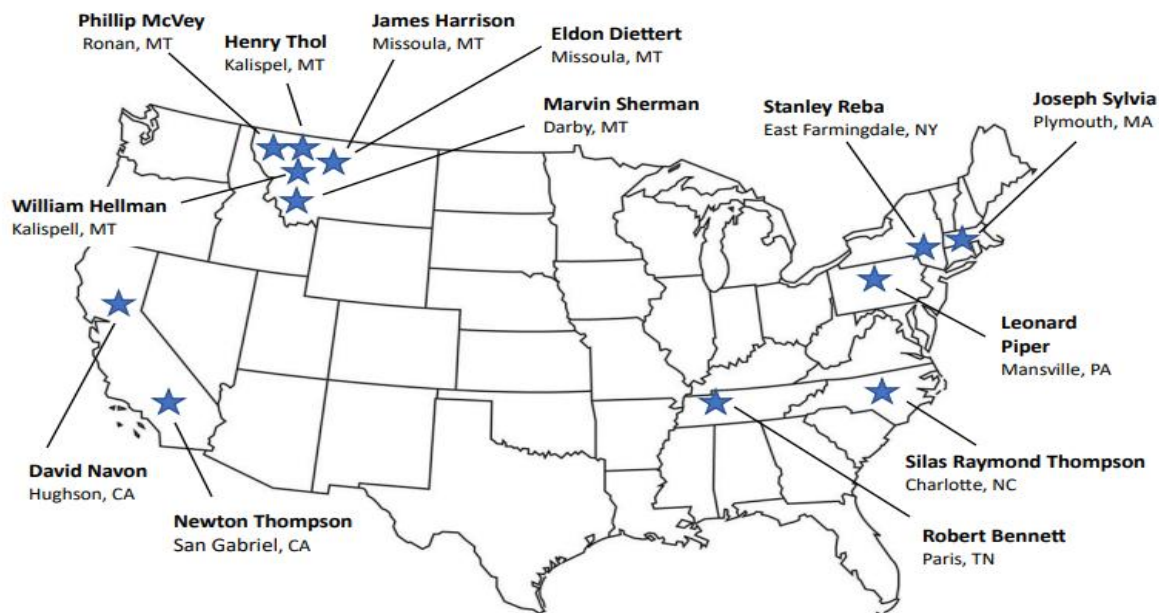
- A—Stanley J. Reba
- B—Silas R. Thompson
- C—Joseph B. Sylvia
- D—James O. Harrison
- E—Robert J. Bennett
- F—Newton R. Thompson
- G—Leonard L. Piper
- H—Eldon E. Diettert
- I—Marvin L. Sherman
- J—David R. Navon
- K—Philip R. McVey
- L—Henry J. Thol, Jr.
- M—William J. Hellman

*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