

MANN GULCH
75TH ANNIVERSARY
MEMORIAL TRIBUTE

NATIONAL SMOKEJUMPER ASSOCIATION



William James Hellman

Bill was born August 3, 1925, in Kalispell, Montana. His father, James Hellman, was a retired Forest Service Ranger. Bill had an older sister and brother of two years, Mildred and Philip. Bill was raised a Catholic.

Bill attended Flathead County High School and would have graduated in 1943, but he volunteered for the Navy at 17. He later transferred to the Marine Corps, where he was trained as a combat medical corpsman. As such, he took part in many invasions in the Pacific. He also served for a time in occupied Japan.

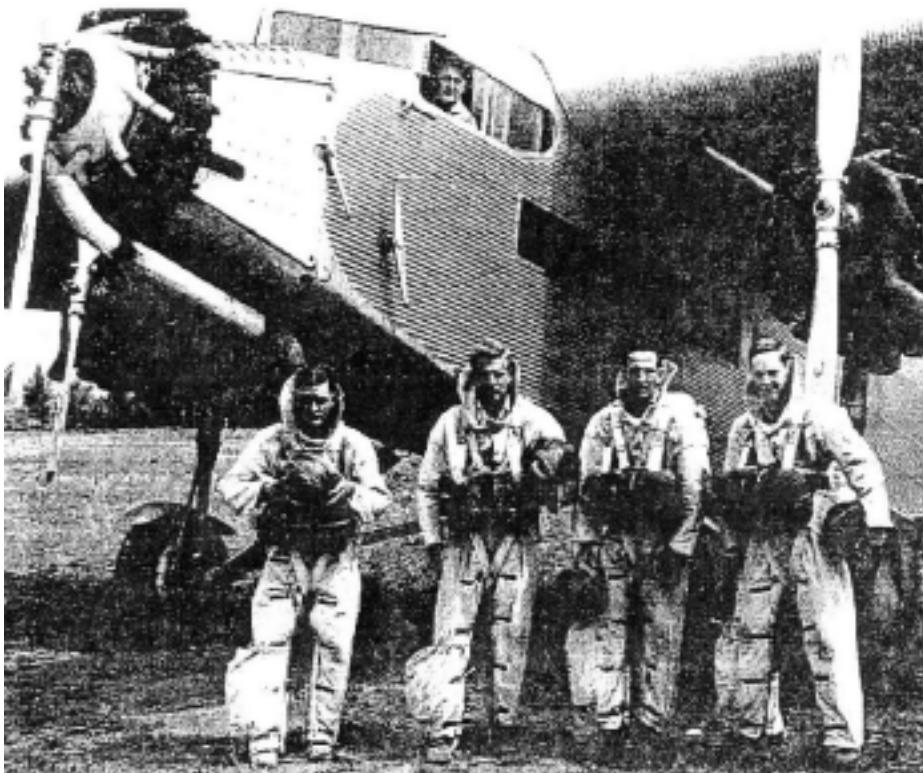


Upon his discharge from the service, he married Geraldine Mather of Kalispell in 1946 and also that year he trained as a smokejumper in Missoula.

Bill's wife Geraldine grew up in the same neighborhood as Henry Thol Jr., who also died at Mann Gulch. She said Bill was a fine young man and came from an excellent family. She went on to say that Bill was a great husband and was sure he would have made a good father. He left behind his wife of three years and young son.



His plans were to become a science and botany teacher. He enrolled in the Montana State University in Missoula and attended there for two years. He then transferred to Northern Montana College in Havre, Montana, and later to Colorado State College of Education in Greeley, Colorado. By the summer of 1949 he had but three months of training to complete before he would have earned his degree.



Bill took part in the Forest Service ceremonial parachute jump in front of the White House in Washington, D.C., on June 28, 1949. He is pictured here second from the right. Bill was one of a select group of four experienced jumper squad leaders.

He had been hesitant to go, as he and his wife were expecting their first child to be born any day. He decided to go as he felt it was a great honor to be asked. His son was born the day before his jump on June 27, 1949. Their child, Gary James, died a few months later, on December

20, 1949, of a ruptured diaphragm.

Bill was the squad leader on the Mann Gulch Fire. His 24th birthday was just two days before. He did not succumb to his injuries at Mann Gulch, but later died of burns in a Helena hospital the day after the fire blew up.



Millie Heister of Kalispell, who is sister of Mann Gulch smokejumper William Hellman, is pictured on the left. After reading the August 5, 1999 feature story in the *Daily Inter Lake* newspaper about the 50th Anniversary of the Mann Gulch wildfire, she felt grateful that the 13 young men who died that day were not being forgotten. The article reported that “her love for her long-dead brother remains palpable.” Mille recalled “This was a really hard time for my family. I want people to know Willie was a good father, a good husband, and a wonderful brother.”



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

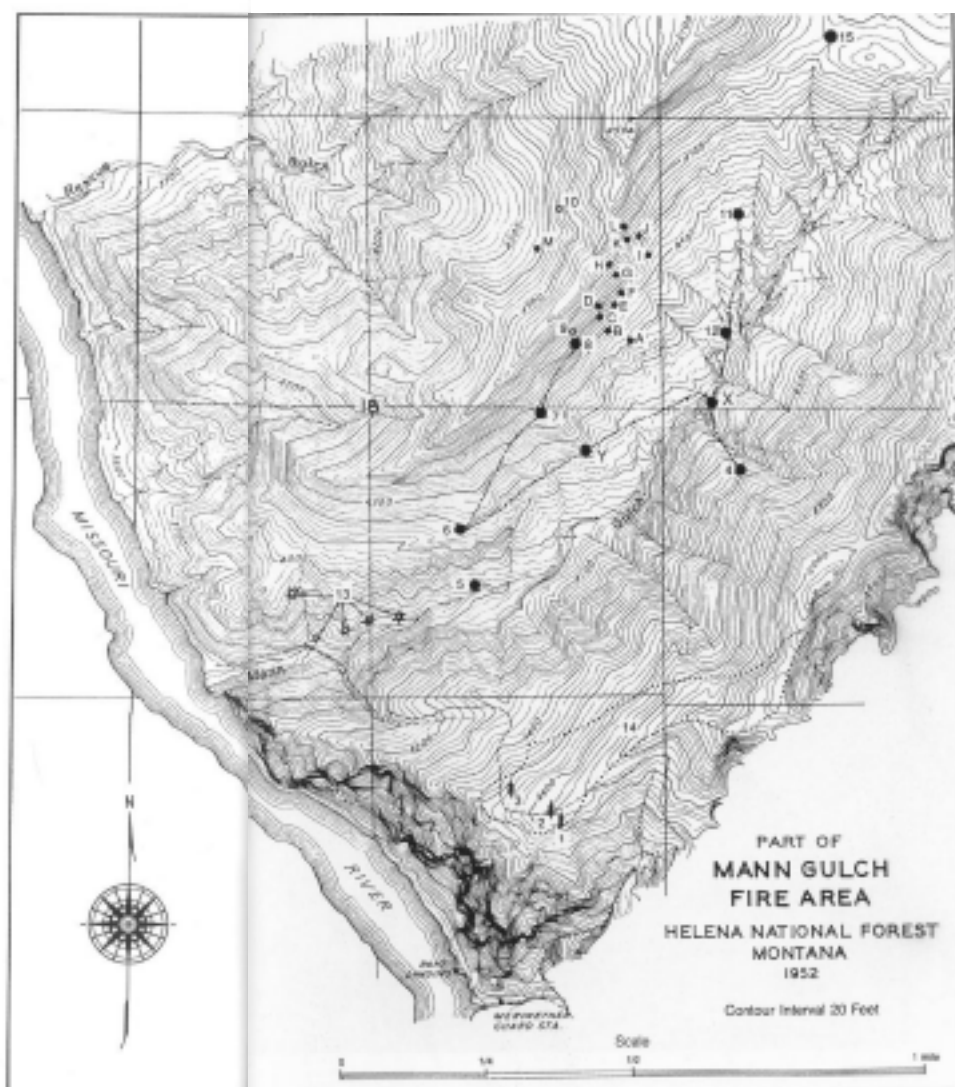
- 1, 2, & 3 Lightning struck trees
- 4—Dodge met Harrison
- X—Dodge ordered crew to north side of gulch*
- Y—Dodge and Harrison rejoined crew; beginning of the crew's race*
- 5—Janson turned back
- 6—Dodge and crew turned back
- 7—Dodge ordered heavy tools dropped
- 8—Dodge set escape fire
- 9—Dodge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