

MANN GULCH MEMORIAL

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The first week of August, my son, Nick, and I had the opportunity to venture to Helena, MT, for the Mann Gulch Memorial. A couple of years ago, after visiting Gates of the Mountains on Upper Holter Lake in the Big Belt Mountains north of Helena, I visited the start of Mann Gulch, where it joined the lake. Seeing the Mann Gulch drainage from the lake was incredible. It was then I decided I wanted to make the hike to the area where our brothers died. When the notices started arriving regarding the 75th memorial for Mann Gulch, I decided it was time to start thinking seriously about the journey to Helena and hiking Mann Gulch. So, after a few grueling months of getting these old, pushing 80, overweight, arthritic bones into hiking condition, it was time to head to Helena. Finally, the first of August got here, and it was time to load up the motorhome, tow my Ranger, and head to Helena.

I left home, Rochester, WA, on Thursday, Aug.1st. I took my time getting into Helena and arriving Friday midday. Son Nick flew into Helena late Friday night, so it gave me a chance to sample a few of the microbreweries of Helena. They are a friendly, friendly bunch. One of the breweries, Ten-Mile Creek Brewery, was one of the main sponsors of the Memorial. A couple of great beers at Ten-Mile are Smokejumper, an Amber Ale, and Mann Gulch, a Pale Ale.

The Mann Gulch Memorial activities began Saturday evening with an AARP-sponsored viewing of a Montana PBS special, "Higgins Ridge." The Higgins Ridge Fire was in 1961 on the Nez Perce National Forest, Idaho. There were 20 jumpers on the fire from Missoula and Grangeville. Higgins Ridge was hauntingly similar to Mann Gulch but with an entirely different outcome. With firefighting knowledge gained from Mann Gulch and the heroics of a lone helicopter pilot (Rod Snider, NCSB '51), all 20 jumpers were saved. Great movie and had great speakers afterward. Available on YouTube.

On Sunday morning, there was a gathering of former smokejumpers and families and Forest Services personnel for breakfast in Helena. I do have to commend Steve's Café for their hospitality and for giving us all such a hearty

welcome; thank you. Later Sunday, at the Walking Mall in Old Town Helena, the Montana Discovery Foundation and Ten Mile Creek Brewery presented the commemorative Mann Gulch beer. Also at the Walking Mall was a street fair of sorts with kiosks and booths: Missoula Smokejumper Base, National Smokejumper Association, Wild Montana, various firefighting organizations, a wreath-making area for wreaths to be placed at the cross area in Mann Gulch, plus others vendors. There was also an area demonstrating types of fire behavior and ways of protecting various properties from wildfire.

Finally, Monday and our hike into Mann Gulch arrived. We met the boat from Gates of the Mountains at 7:30 and took the 30-minute ride to the mouth of Mann Gulch. And the fun began. The first half mile was fairly easy, in a draw with considerable shade and a defined trail, and then the side hill/switchbacks started. Switchbacks is a term I use loosely. From here, we were on a grassy side slope with no shade and temp. Getting warmer. The side-hill/switchback trail for the remainder of the hike was a game trail on a scree field. Slow and easy was the name of the game.

There were three cross areas where the jumper's bodies were found and crosses placed. Nick and I made it to the first and second sets of crosses, but I am sorry to say I didn't make it to the last of the crosses further up the Gulch. The remaining 500 – 600 ft. was an 80% slope. Too much for these old bones, and the temperature was bumping 100. The ticker and lungs were good to go, but the pins didn't have it, and we still had to head down and out to the pick-up point at an assigned time.

One of the most memorable points on the hike was when "Miss Montana," the fully restored DC-3, which dropped the 15 jumpers into Mann Gulch in 1949, did three fly-over passes over the Gulch. On board were some members of the families of the jumpers lost. Miss Montana was available to visit during the Memorial at the Helena airport. Her permanent home is at the Museum of Mountain Flying in Missoula.

Rounding out Monday's activities was a special event on the lawn of the Capitol. The event was hosted by many of the organizers of the Memorial. The evening's speakers included U.S. Forest Service leadership, Montana Governor Greg Gianforte, National Smokejumper Association President Mike Bina, and a

touching Honor Guard. The evening's keynote speaker was John N. Maclean (son of Norman Maclean, who wrote Young Men and Fire and A River Runs Through It). Concluding the evening ceremony was James Keelaghan, singer/songwriter who sang his song about the Mann Gulch fire, Cold Missouri Waters. Throughout the evening, I had the opportunity to meet and talk with Mann Gulch jumper's family members who were present for the Memorial.

Before I bring my ramblings to a close, I want to do a special shout-out to a young lady who did a most incredible mural on the walls of an underpass of one of Helena's streets. Her name is Elise Perpignano from Helena. The mural was of the Mann Gulch Fire, smokejumpers, Johnson Aviation's Miss Montana, and the fire's surrounding landscape. It was beautiful.

This was a most memorable weekend and tribute to those lost in Mann Gulch, not just for the many activities but also the chance for my son Nick to see and hear what "the old man" did in a former life. A lot of jump stories floated around.

I'd like to express my hearty congratulations and thank you to all who organized and sponsored the **Mann Gulch 75th Anniversary Memorial Tribute**.