

MANN GULCH
75TH ANNIVERSARY
MEMORIAL TRIBUTE

NATIONAL SMOKEJUMPER ASSOCIATION



Philip Rolla McVey

He was born in Choteau, Montana, April 1, 1927, the son of a U.S. Immigration Service officer, Clarence, assigned to U.S.-Canada border crossings. His mother was Lillian. During Phil's childhood, his family moved to multiple places along the Canadian border. Phil attended junior high and began high school in Northport, Washington. He loved sports and played baseball and basketball. He was a good athlete who played semi-pro baseball as a short stop. He followed Major League Baseball with a keen interest.



The following was written by Clarence Ames who was a boyhood friend. *“One very successful project that Phil initiated at age 14 was to put on a “carnival” at his place. With the help of several friends, he setup a number of carnival booths which included a penny toss, balloons and darts, ball throw at bottles, and bingo. The purpose was to make enough money to buy fireworks for the 4th of July.*

In the summer of 1942, Phil and a friend, Clarence Ames, rode their bicycles with saddle bags and a bed roll, camping as they went from Northport to Grand Coulee to visit Clarence's brother who was working on a farm there. From there they rode to Spokane and then back to Northport. The boys, ages 14 and 13, traveled a distance of 400 miles. In those days, the bikes were neither three nor twenty speeds. He was obviously an adventurer!”

When the war started, Phil was attending high school in Browning, Montana, on the Blackfoot Indian Reservation. He entered Browning High School in the fall of 1943 at the start of his junior year. His class was very small, consisting of only six students.



The school had a dormitory to accommodate students who lived out of town. Since Phil's father worked for the U.S. Immigration Service near the Canadian border, he lived in the dorm. All other students in the dorm were from the Blackfoot Indian tribe. Phil preferred to be called “Flip.” He dropped out of school just before graduating to join the Navy in 1945, so he was an absentee graduate. Phil served as an airman in the Navy.



Fellow smokejumper Jerry Linton (MSO-48) wrote the following and recalled that Phil was a hard worker and always did more than his share. *“We were all in pretty good shape and Phil was exceptional and was proud of his strong, muscular body.”*

“Phil who was from Ronan, Montana trained as a smokejumper at Nine Mile, MT, and was later stationed in Missoula in 1948. There hadn't been much firefighting action that summer. He spent most of that summer clearing roads and cleaning up trails and slash areas that had been logged, and anything that had to be done out of the Castle Creek Ranger station, 13 miles southeast of Grangeville, Idaho.”

Jerry said, *“Phil was truly a good friend. He had a good sense of humor and was easy to get along with and be around. Phil was a hard worker, and he was well liked by his fellow smokejumpers. Phil lived in Babb, Montana, at the time of his death. He was only 22 when he died at Mann Gulch.”*

“Phil McVey and Bill Hellman were close personal friends of mine, and in addition we all attended the University of Montana. During the summer of 1948, I dated Hellman’s sister-in-law, Justine Mather, and as a result I saw a lot of Bill and his wife Gerry on a social basis. McVey and I had a lot of interests in common and spent a lot of spare time talking about what we hoped to accomplish after we graduated from college.”

Beverly Hamel, a neighbor of the McVey family commented, *“Phil and a bunch of his buddies joined the smokejumpers to make money for college. A bunch of the smokejumpers would come home on weekends with Phil so there were enough boys to go around for all the girls. Anyway, Phil and I spent a lot of time together. He was such a sweet, respectful guy with beautiful eyes and a nice smile.”*

“The guys left for Missoula one evening, and I guess it was the next morning they were on their way to Mann Gulch. My brother-in-law, Harold Webbe (MSO-48), was a friend of Phil’s and a smokejumper and was to go to Mann Gulch but was sick the morning they left.”

“I often wondered who it was who went in his place. I was at his brother Bob’s when the news of Mann Gulch came through. It stunned us.”

Phil is buried in Ronan, MT. He was survived by his parents.



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

The Smokejumper Memorial at Mann Gulch
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 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

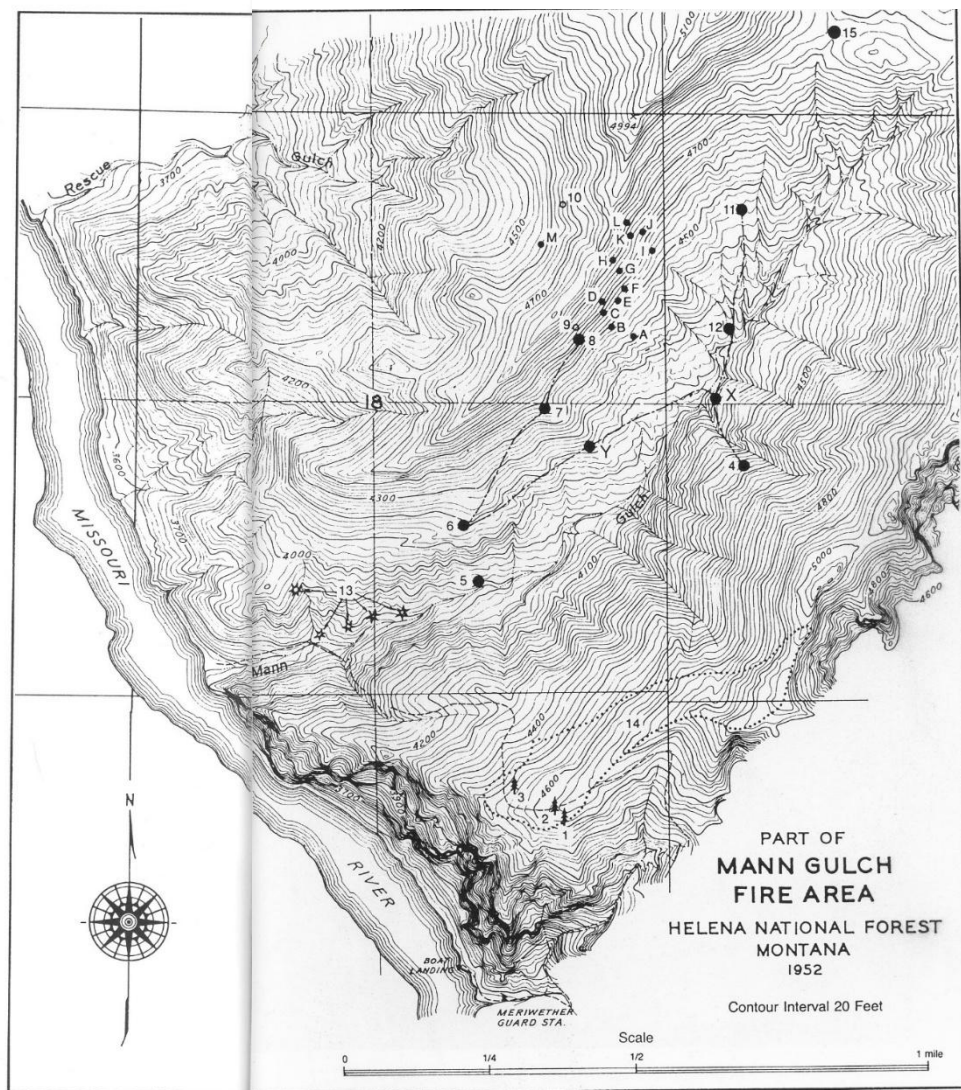
- 1, 2, & 3 Lightning struck trees
- 4—Dodge met Harrison
- X—Dodge ordered crew to north side of gulch*
- Y—Dodge and Harrison rejoined crew; beginning of the crew's race*
- 5—Jansson turned back
- 6—Dodge and crew turned back
- 7—Dodge ordered heavy tools dropped
- 8—Dodge set escape fire
- 9—Dodge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

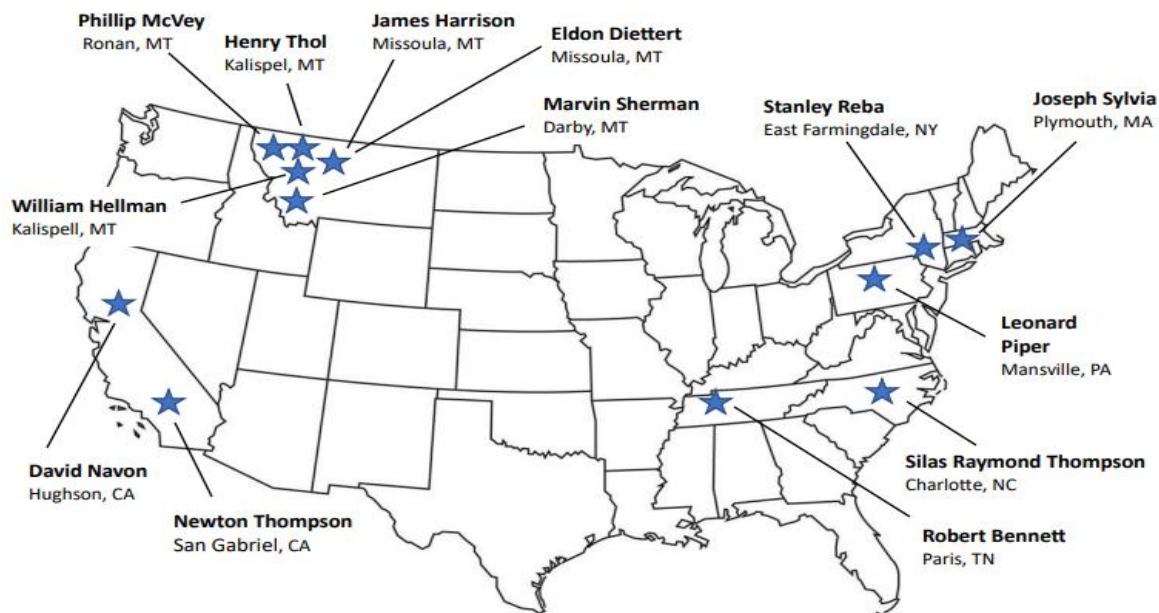
- A—Stanley J. Reba
- B—Silas R. Thompson
- C—Joseph B. Sylvia
- D—James O. Harrison
- E—Robert J. Bennett
- F—Newton R. Thompson
- G—Leonard L. Piper
- H—Eldon E. Diettert
- I—Marvin L. Sherman
- J—David R. Navon
- K—Philip R. McVey
- L—Henry J. Thol, Jr.
- M—William J. Hellman

*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