

MANN GULCH
75TH ANNIVERSARY
MEMORIAL TRIBUTE

NATIONAL SMOKEJUMPER ASSOCIATION



David Richard Navon

He was born in Bueno Aires, Argentina, December 19, 1920. His father sold farm machinery for International Harvester out of Chicago. The family returned to the U.S. and bought farmland in the central valley of California, where David was raised. After his father lost the farm during the Depression, in 1935, they moved to Modesto, California, where David finished high school in 1938.



The following is from letters by David's sister Anita Navon. *"After high school, David saw the world while working for a year aboard a Swedish freighter. He returned in 1939 and entered Modesto Junior College and joined the Army National Guard to have some work income and gain military training."*



"When President Roosevelt responded to Hitler's rampages in Europe by mobilizing the National Guard in 1941, David was taken into the Army. The war soon came."

"He completed Officer Candidate School as a Second Lieutenant and completed airborne training. He then volunteered for the 82nd Airborne Division and was sent to England. The 82nd Airborne Division jumped into Holland in the fall of 1944 at Nijmegen, Holland as described in the book A Bridge Too Far. For his performance in combat, David was awarded the Bronze Star for valor."



"He was wounded in that battle and evacuated back to England just before the Battle of the Bulge. Upon recovery, he was assigned to the Army of Occupation in Berlin attached to the 101st Airborne Division where he was awarded the Army Occupation Medal."



"When he was honorably discharged in March 1946. After five years in military service, he held the rank of First Lieutenant."

"After the war David spent the 1947-48 school year at the University of Aberdeen School of Forestry in Scotland. He then returned to California and enrolled in the Forestry School at the University of California, Berkeley where he completed his degree in June 1949. He loved the outdoor life and was serious about establishing himself."



"Our last meeting as a brother and sister was an outing to San Francisco's De Young Art Museum. David was a museum and book lover. As long as I can remember, he and my father kept a stamp collection. His letters home, from wherever he was in the world, usually had some beautiful stamps."

"His letters were enthusiastic about parts of the Montana country he had seen, and about the fact that he had been given some real forest work to do, cruising timber."



"I can't help but be grateful to Maclean for writing his book and helping me and millions of others to be 'inside our loved ones' shoes' out on that mountain."

Starr Jenkins wrote, *"One episode of the summer of 1949 showed how serious Dave was about learning his forestry. Short Hall, of Colorado A&M (Fort Collins), had a war surplus Jeep he had just bought and was refurbishing it in the evenings around camp."*



"On a weekend he invited two other forestry-student jumpers, Dave Navon and Jock Fleming (MSO-49), and me to ride with him out to the Powell Ranger Station on the west side of the Bitterroot Divide just into Idaho. That was before the Lewis and Clark Highway had been completed down the Lochsa, cutting through a vast area of wilderness."

"Short Hall, as always, wanted to see some new, nearly untouched country; but he and the other two foresters also wanted to make that 100-mile drive to get into a watershed they had never seen before to get their first real look at a Western White Pine,

the great wood for matches and toothpicks, important items for macho western men."

"I was along to enjoy the country, too, and to witness these three budding foresters' great enthusiasm when they spotted their first one. 'There it is!' and 'Yeah. Hey, ain't that neat!' The Western White Pine was a marvelous lumber tree that is getting harder and harder to find in our nation's dwindling forests."



"I believe Dave told me he was planning to return to California to get a master's degree in range management to strengthen his qualifications for a Forest Service or other land-management career. Yet one of his more wild dreams was to persuade the wealthy owner of some large California coast island to let him manage that island as a big game hunting preserve, where exotic species would be introduced and where well-off hunters could come 'on safari' to hunt lions, tigers, Kodiak bears, rhinos, and whatever he could get the owners to introduce and maintain on such a miniature wild world."

"Luckily, perhaps, the National Park Service and the Nature Conservancy beat him to it with better ideas. But imagine—hunting Bengal tigers just 30 minutes from downtown Los Angeles. The company would have never run out of customers."



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 family, 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

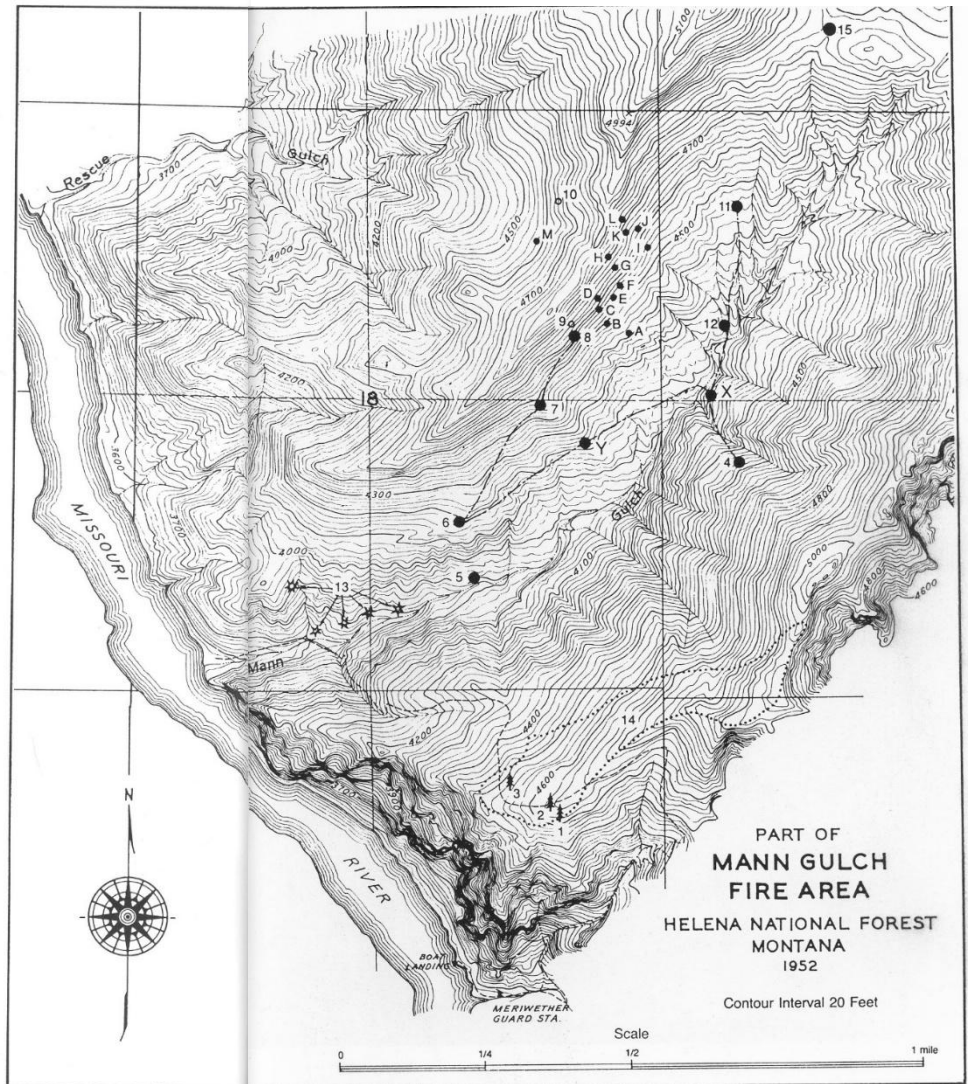
- 1, 2, & 3 Lightning struck trees
- 4—Dodge met Harrison
- X—Dodge ordered crew to north side of gulch*
- Y—Dodge and Harrison rejoined crew; beginning of the crew's race*
- 5—Jansson turned back
- 6—Dodge and crew turned back
- 7—Dodge ordered heavy tools dropped
- 8—Dodge set escape fire
- 9—Dodge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

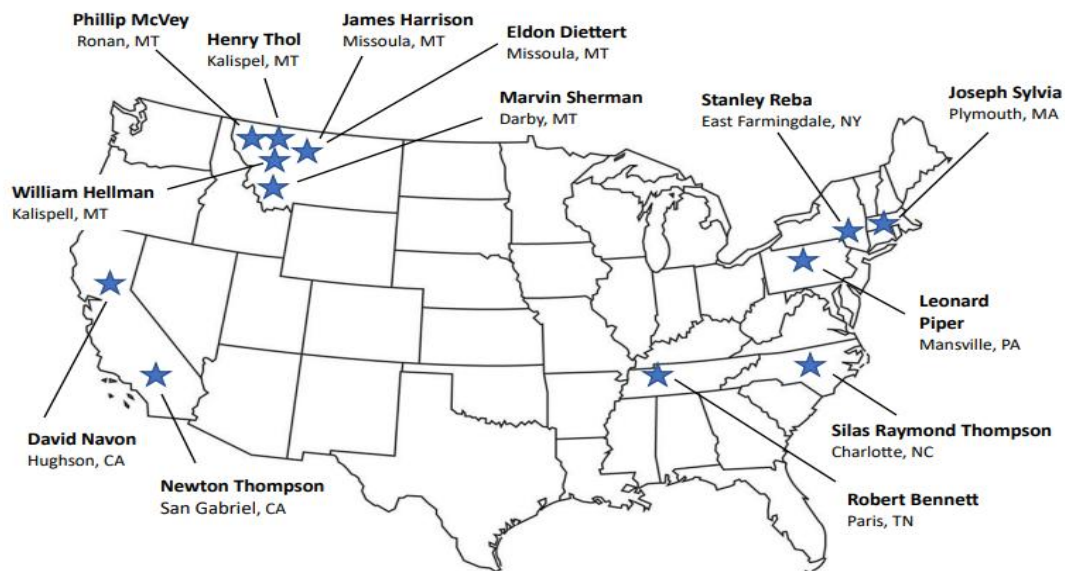
- A—Stanley J. Reba
- B—Silas R. Thompson
- C—Joseph B. Sylvia
- D—James O. Harrison
- E—Robert J. Bennett
- F—Newton R. Thompson
- G—Leonard L. Piper
- H—Eldon E. Diettert
- I—Marvin L. Sherman
- J—David R. Navon
- K—Philip R. McVey
- L—Henry J. Thol, Jr.
- M—William J. Hellman

*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