

MANN GULCH
75TH ANNIVERSARY
MEMORIAL TRIBUTE

NATIONAL SMOKEJUMPER ASSOCIATION



Leonard L. Piper

Leonard was born July 5, 1926, in Blairsville, Pennsylvania, to Leroy and Fredericka Piper. Leonard was one of nine children, Garvin, Leonard, Linley, Gilbert, Clair, Donald, Thelma, Dorothy, and Marie.

The following information was provided by Leonard's sister, Marie A. Liebel. *"We lived on a farm when we were growing up and there was a lot of work that had to be done. Leonard always helped take care of the animals and worked in the fields along with his brothers. During harvesting time all the neighbors would help each other do the threshing. Threshing was a process of separating the oats and wheat grain from the*

straw. This was done by a large stationary tractor driven machine which was usually contracted and taken from farm to farm. The oat and wheat stalks were hauled from the field to the thrashing machine which took a lot of manual labor and neighbors helped each other. Leonard was always willing to help whenever he was needed."



"The roads were not very good in the winter, and we usually got a lot of snow and cold weather. We lived quite a distance from the main highway where the school bus stopped. My three brothers and I took shortcuts through the neighbors' fields and sometimes the snow was drifted and very deep. Many times, Leonard would carry me on his back through the drifts. He was a loving and caring brother who looked after me, his little sister."

"Leonard attended Sunday school and Hebron Lutheran Church regularly. He had many friends as he was well liked by everyone who knew him. Our family had a lot of good times together and Leonard was always there to enjoy the happy times with all the family, friends, and relatives. Leonard enjoyed playing the guitar and making fudge. We all enjoyed eating the fudge, which I'll admit was pretty good."

"Leonard attended Derry Township high school. In his senior year he was chosen for a part in the senior play. The family was all very proud of his performance."



"He dropped out of high school in 1947 to join the U.S. Navy during World War II. He couldn't finish the school year with his classmates so on graduation day my mother received his diploma for him. Leonard served our country and had two brothers who were also in the service. Garvin was in the Army and Linley was in the Marines."

He served 18 months as a machinist's mate who, at the organizational level, would operate, maintain, and repair ship propulsion machinery, auxiliary equipment, and outside machinery. He attained the rank of Petty Officer First Class.

Leonard had a love for hunting and outdoor activities and decided to further his education by studying forestry. After he was discharged from the Navy, he attended Montana State University in Missoula and completed two years in the Forestry program.



A first-year smokejumper, he became fast friends with a fellow rookie, William Bennett. At the time of his death, he was living with his sister in Missoula while he attended what was to become University of Montana. Leonard was survived by his parents and five brothers and three sisters.

Leonard's sister-in-law, Althea Piper, remembered, *"There was a report on the radio that smokejumpers had died in Montana. My husband and I went to his parents' home that evening. We didn't know if Leonard was one of the jumpers at that time."*

"We still hadn't heard anything by August 7. About 8 a.m. on the eighth, a local forester called and asked to talk to my husband, Garvin. After a moment, I heard my husband say, 'Yes, that's my brother.' We decided not to go to church, but Garvin went into town and left a note on his brother's windshield to stop by after church. His brother, Gilbert, and Leonard's younger sister were all together planning to go to a reunion after church. They all decided to go to their sister Dorothy's next, and then to Grandma and Papa Pipers."

A lot of the families, like the Pipers, did not have a phone at that time. Grandma Piper thought something was wrong when she saw everyone coming. When she was told the news, she said that she didn't want Leonard to be a smokejumper."

"In the summer of 1947, we said goodbye to Leonard when he left for Montana to study at the university in Missoula. Leonard had not come home since entering college. The family would never know that they would not see Leonard again. He became a smoke jumper to help pay for his schooling. We have always and will continue to remember Leonard as a kind and good brother who was still missed very much by all the family."



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.



**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