

MANN GULCH
75TH ANNIVERSARY
MEMORIAL TRIBUTE

NATIONAL SMOKEJUMPER ASSOCIATION



Stanley Joseph Reba

Stanley was born October 15, 1923, in Elizabeth, New Jersey. Stan had an older sister Catherine and a younger sister Adeline. He graduated from Brooklyn High School, an all-boys Christian Brothers school in New York City.

He received a football scholarship to Holy Cross College in Worcester, Massachusetts, where he went his freshman year. He apparently joined the Army R.O.T.C. there and that summer attended advanced training at Fort Eustis, Virginia. Upon graduation he was commissioned a 2nd Lieutenant and joined the Army Air Corps.



Stanley fought in the Pacific and was on Saipan, possibly in the 1944 Battle of Saipan. He was wounded and received the Purple Heart, but no details are known.

He was also awarded the American Defense Service Medal, the Asiatic-Pacific Campaign Medal, and the World War II Victory Medal. Stan left the service as a 1st Lieutenant.

After the war, Stanley resumed his studies attending the University of Minnesota school of forestry on the GI Bill. He worked summers for the Forest Service and began smokejumping with his good friend Joe Sylvia the summer of 1948.

In the fall of 1948, Stanley married Juline Marie Nagel at St. Olaf's Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Their married life was a brief nine months. Since Stanley was going to school, the couple had little money. Stan worked odd jobs and for the Post Office during Christmas vacation.

The following memories were written by Julie's sister, Andre Anderson, in 1993. *"I Remember visiting them, Stan and Julie, at Easter time, during my break from school. Stan was very busy at school but took the time to take me to the Como Park Zoo in St. Paul. He also during that visit, drove me a good distance, during an early spring snowstorm, to a Catholic Church so that I could attend Good Friday services."*

"I remember later that spring, when I was very sick, Stan drove Julie to Pierz, a 2½-hour drive, so they could see me. This he did in spite of having a heavy load of tests to prepare for that week."

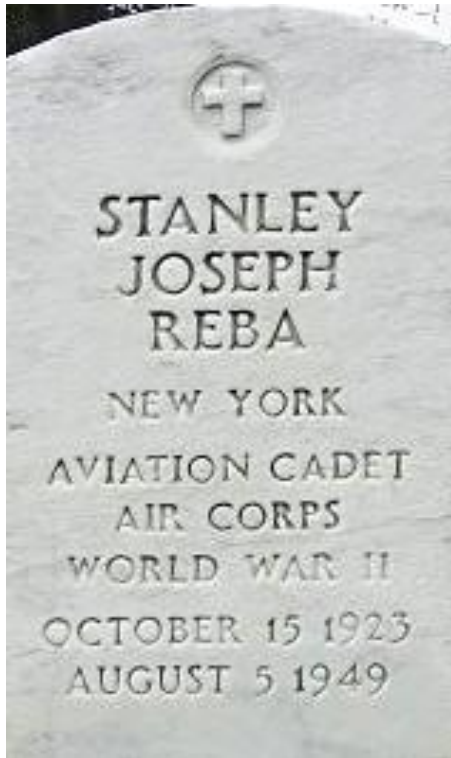
"Stan also taught me to eat the skin of a baked potato because he said that was the most nutritious part."

"Stan loved to listen to Tex Ritter and had one of his albums, with which he teased Julie by playing it over and over. She was not a Ritter fan, preferring classical and standard hits, rather than country. But Stan loved to listen to my mother's records of string quartets, so he enjoyed some of the classics too."

"Stan Reba, that burly, football playing, smokejumping man, also love poetry. One of his favorites, "Crossing the Bar" by Alfred, Lord Tennyson, was used on his prayer card when he was buried, at my sister's request."



"I also remember that Stan wrote beautiful letters to my sister. I, of course, never read them, but I remember she read parts of his letters to me, years later, when I was first considering marriage to someone."



"After Stan's death, my sister was never the same, she never remarried and ten years later she took her own life. Tragic events affect so many and have such long-lasting consequences."

"As I write this, I can't help but think of how much richer our lives would have been had Stan lived, not only my sister's life, but our entire family's life."

"Writing this has brought into focus, once again, the impact of that very tragic Mann Gulch Fire, August 5th, 1949."



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 Smokejumper Memorial at Mann Gulch

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 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

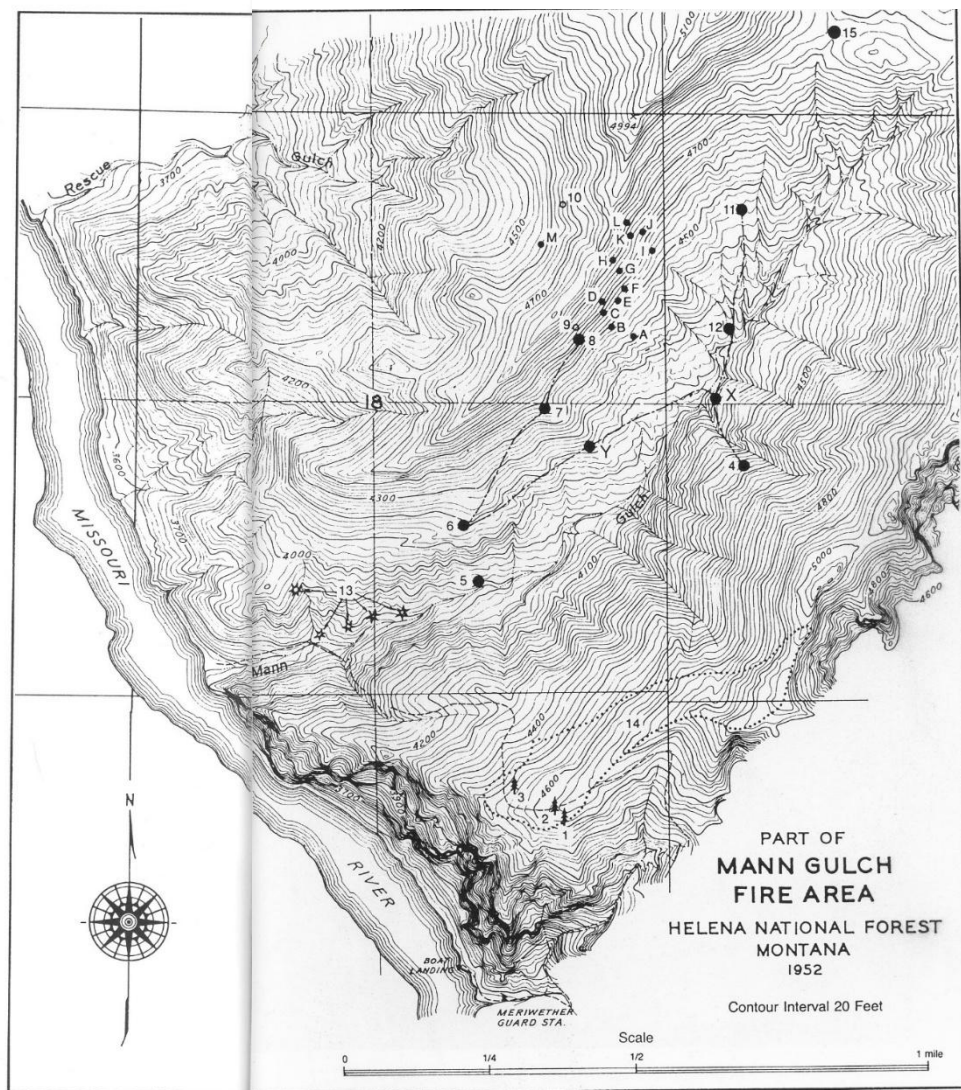
- 1, 2, & 3 Lightning struck trees
- 4—Dodge met Harrison
- X—Dodge ordered crew to north side of gulch*
- Y—Dodge and Harrison rejoined crew; beginning of the crew's race*
- 5—Jansson turned back
- 6—Dodge and crew turned back
- 7—Dodge ordered heavy tools dropped
- 8—Dodge set escape fire
- 9—Dodge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

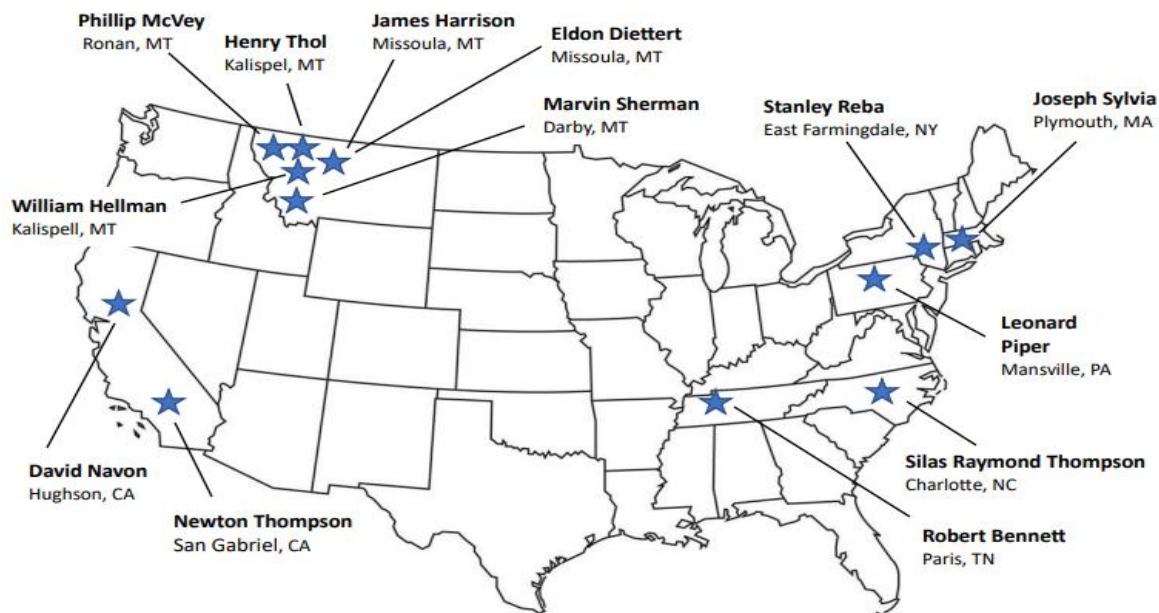
- A—Stanley J. Reba
- B—Silas R. Thompson
- C—Joseph B. Sylvia
- D—James O. Harrison
- E—Robert J. Bennett
- F—Newton R. Thompson
- G—Leonard L. Piper
- H—Eldon E. Diettert
- I—Marvin L. Sherman
- J—David R. Navon
- K—Philip R. McVey
- L—Henry J. Thol, Jr.
- M—William J. Hellman

*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