

MANN GULCH
75TH ANNIVERSARY
MEMORIAL TRIBUTE

NATIONAL SMOKEJUMPER ASSOCIATION



Raymond was born March 11, 1928 in Charlotte, North Carolina to Dr. Silas Raymond Thompson and Mary Enwistle Thompson. Ray had a younger sister named Johan.

Raymond attended Central High School in Charlotte and immediately after graduation he entered North Carolina State College in Raleigh where he was a student in the Forestry School until June of 1946. That summer he got a job through the college working for the Forest

Service as a fire lookout atop Copper Butte Mountain in Washington.



According to his sister Johan, *"Here is where he wanted the wilds of the west and to attend the Forestry School at Montana State College in Missoula, Montana."*

In September of 1946, Raymond enlisted in the U.S. Army and was trained at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. There he completed paratrooper training and was assigned to the 11th Airborne Division, nicknamed "The Angels." He was sent to occupied Japan with the 11th Airborne which was selected by General MacArthur to lead the American forces that would [occupy Japan](#) at the end of the war.



The 11th Airborne Division landed at Atsugi Airdrome, near Tokyo, on Aug. 30, 1945, and occupied an initial area in and around Yokohama. They remained there until mid-September 1945, when they moved to northern Japan and established camps along the coast of Honshu and on the island of Hokkaido. Occupation duties in Japan continued until May 1949, when the 11th Airborne was relieved and recalled to the United States.

The division had been transported to Japan along with the 27th Infantry Division which was a unit of the New York [Army National Guard](#). The move was a sizable airlift using the C-54 Skymaster of the Army Air Corps.



Silas Raymond Thompson Jr. was honorably discharged from the Army in February 1948. Using the G.I. Bill, he entered the forestry program at Montana State University in Missoula, Montana, which in 1965 became the University of Montana.

of Missoula, Montana.

That September he returned to his studies at the university. Following the 1949 school year, Raymond attended six weeks of training with the U.S. Army. His sister Johan





referred to this as “Army camp.” This is what the Army Reserve calls their annual training and since Raymond was discharged from active duty in 1948, it could very well be that he had joined the Army Reserve.



Following training, he rejoined the smokejumpers at the end of July and completed refresher training. He was on call at the Missoula jump base when the Mann Gulch Fire started. At age 21, on August 5th he was among the load that jumped that fateful day.

His sister commented: *“Raymond always loved the outdoors. He enjoyed hunting, fishing, trapping, camping, hiking, and skiing. He was a total non-conformist, a risk taker, who had a love of life and living, and was very in touch with nature. He enjoyed life as he lived it.”*

Silas Raymond Thompson Jr was survived by his parents and his younger sister Johan.



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