

## GUIDED TOUR NARRATIVE – THE JUMP

The flight from Missoula to Helena was a hint of things to come later that afternoon. The skies over western Montana still harbored the leftovers from the previous day's thunderstorms. Even for the big, twin-engine C-47 with its load of 16 smokejumpers, the air was rough and turbulent. The plane bounced and bucked the entire forty-minute flight. One of the 16 smokejumpers (Merle Stratton) on board became airsick and chose not to jump.

But at 3:10 PM, the aircraft crossed over the Missouri River and the fire below was spotted. The pilot banked the plane and spotter (Earl Cooley) and the smokejumper crew foreman, R. Wagner "Wag" Dodge dropped to the floor of the plane and cautiously peered out the open rear door. They saw that the fire was still burning on the ridgeline between Meriwether Canyon and Mann Gulch, as it had been when the district ranger observed it almost three hours earlier. But now, the fire was starting to creep down off the ridge to the north, south and west towards the river. Cooley and Dodge estimated the blaze had now grown to somewhere between 40 and 60 acres.

Together the two men decided on the jump spot for the crew and tools. They chose a spot at the head of the gulch, just shy of a saddle, where there were very few trees or large boulders to complicate the jump. This jump zone was nearly a half a mile from the fire, five-hundred feet lower than the fire, and off to the fire's northern flank.

The C-47 made another lazy circle in the sky over Mann Gulch and then the pilot nosed the aircraft into the wind and came in parallel with the drainage bottom. The first four jumpers stepped one after the other into space. Their parachutes popped open and they drifted with the wind back to the east, towards the saddle, and settled into the drop zone. The plane made another circle over the gulch and four more jumpers exited the aircraft. Two more turns and the remaining seven parachutes guided into the upper end of the gulch. Everyone but the crew foreman, Wag Dodge, landed safely. Dodge cut his forearm near the elbow in the landing. Nevertheless, Dodge and the crew laid out two parachutes on the ground to form a double "L" as a sign to the spotter that everyone had landed safely.

As the crew gathered in their parachutes and climbed out of their padded smokejumping suits, the C-47 made another turn and began the process of dropping the supply packs. These packs contained the tools, radio, water, rations and other items the smokejumpers would need to battle the fire until they controlled it or they were relieved by ground forces.

Typically, the pilot would slow the aircraft and come in about 500 feet over the crew's heads to drop the supply packs. That way, when Cooley and his assistant pushed them out of the door of the plane, the parachutes would pop open and in a matter of seconds the packs would be on the ground. Dropping the supply packs in this way meant the crew didn't waste a lot of time and energy chasing after the equipment. But on this ill-fated mission, the pilot was reluctant to drop the plane down into the gulch because of the

turbulent air and he was forced to maintain the same altitude from which he had just dropped the smokejumpers. As a result many of the supply packs missed the drop zone and were scattered widely in the upper end of the gulch.

As fate would have it, the parachute on the supply pack containing the crew's only two-way radio failed to open, and that pack and all its contents, including the radio, were destroyed when it exploded on impact in the bottom of the gulch. Now the crew was without a means to communicate with the outside world.

By 4:08 PM all the men and their supplies were on the ground. Spotter Cooley watched the men gathering up the supply packs and their parachutes, and told the pilot to head west for home and the next mission.