

GUIDED TOUR NARRATIVE – THIRTEEN FATALITIES

After Dodge had ignited his escape fire and Sallee, Rumsey, Diettert and Hellman made their individual runs for the ridgetop, the remainder of the crew set their own separate paths to what they mistakenly thought was safety. The fire, however, had a different outcome in mind.

The fire took taking advantage of the flashy fuels (mostly dried grass), the steep slope (76%) and the winds behind it (gusting from 24 to 40 mph) to rush across the hillside at speeds no man, even a well-trained and conditioned smokejumper, could attain on flat ground, let alone the rugged north side of Mann Gulch. Moving at speeds approaching 600 to 750 feet per minute and casting a wall of super-heated air before it that would ignite even the leather on their boots, the fire quickly overtook the remaining men at approximately 5:56 PM. While some would run an amazing distance up the gulch before they were finally caught - nearly 375 yards beyond where Dodge had set his fire - ultimately all the smokejumpers fell before the advancing wall of fire.

Bill Hellman, in his attempt to reach the ridgeline and a safe haven above Dodge's escape fire, reached the rimrocks, but was caught by the flames right at the top of the ridge. Though he was severely burned and in shock, Hellman nevertheless managed to stumble and crawl his way another 200 yards down off the ridgeline into Rescue Gulch before he collapsed. Sallee and Rumsee would later find him by a large boulder, conscious, but burned over 80% of his body. Though he would survive the night, he would die from his burns the following day in the hospital in Helena.

Likewise, smokejumper Joe Sylvia was found terribly burned over in Mann Gulch by Wag Dodge after he (Dodge) survived the burn-over. Like Hellman, Joe Sylvia survived the burn-over only to die the following day in Helena. With Sylvia's passing the final death toll would reach thirteen; 12 smokejumpers and one recreation/fire guard lost their lives.

The Mann Gulch Fire continued to burn for nine more days consuming nearly 5,000 acres of National Forest and private land before it was brought under control by the 450 men who battled it from five different fire camps.

The Mann Gulch Fire of August 5, 1949, was the largest single loss of lives the smokejumping program has suffered in its 63-year history.