

LIFE

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A PRACTICE JUMP INTO A "SET" FIRE IS GRADUATION EXERCISE FOR A FOREST SERVICE SMOKEJUMPER. REAL DROPS ARE NOT MADE THIS CLOSE TO A FIRE

SMOKEJUMPERS SUFFER ORDEAL BY FIRE

High in the Rockies, at Missoula, Mont., is the headquarters of Region One of the U.S. Forest Service, whose lonely lookouts stand guard over eight million rugged, roadless acres where forest fires annually threaten disaster. Ten years ago, seeking new ways to protect its timbered domain, the Forest Service began to experiment with parachuting men and equipment to help its ground forces fight fires. Today its tested squads of smokejumpers, most of them based in Montana, spend in

minutes to hours in forest fires that would take precious hours or days to reach overland. Scoffed at as show-offs a decade ago, the jumpers are respected now; by their efforts they regularly save many times the cost of their service. Fire fighting is seasonal work, and most of the young smokejumpers are college forestry students getting in lacks of practical experience, at \$229 a month base pay, for their careers. Many made their first jumps as wartime paratroopers. They are 18 to 28 years old,

must have a season of Forest Service work behind them, take a month of instruction in fire fighting and make at least seven practice jumps before going out on their first real fire. On the afternoon of Aug. 5 a team of jumpers at the Missoula base was called to its first big test, and before the fire was out 13 men were dead, first to lose their lives in the distinguished history of the smokejumpers' service. On the following pages LIFE tells the heroic—but tragic—story of Montana's Mann Gulch fire.



MARYIN SHERMAN

HENRY THOL JR.

DAVID NAVON
NEWTON THOMPSON

PLANELOAD OF JUMPERS, photographed in Missoula before their final practice drop early in July, were among 250 young smokejumpers trained for 1949 forest

fire season. Four in this group (indicated on picture) died in Mann Gulch blaze. All but Thol, 19, were veterans. Navon, 20, had been with U.S. Army paratroops at Bastogne.

ACTUAL PHOTOS OF FATAL JUMP



1



2



3



4

FILM shot for training purposes on Mann Gulch flight became a record of smokejumping tragedy. Forest Service photographer got crew loading (1), good view of fire and river (2), and men hailing out (3 and 4) on last jumps.

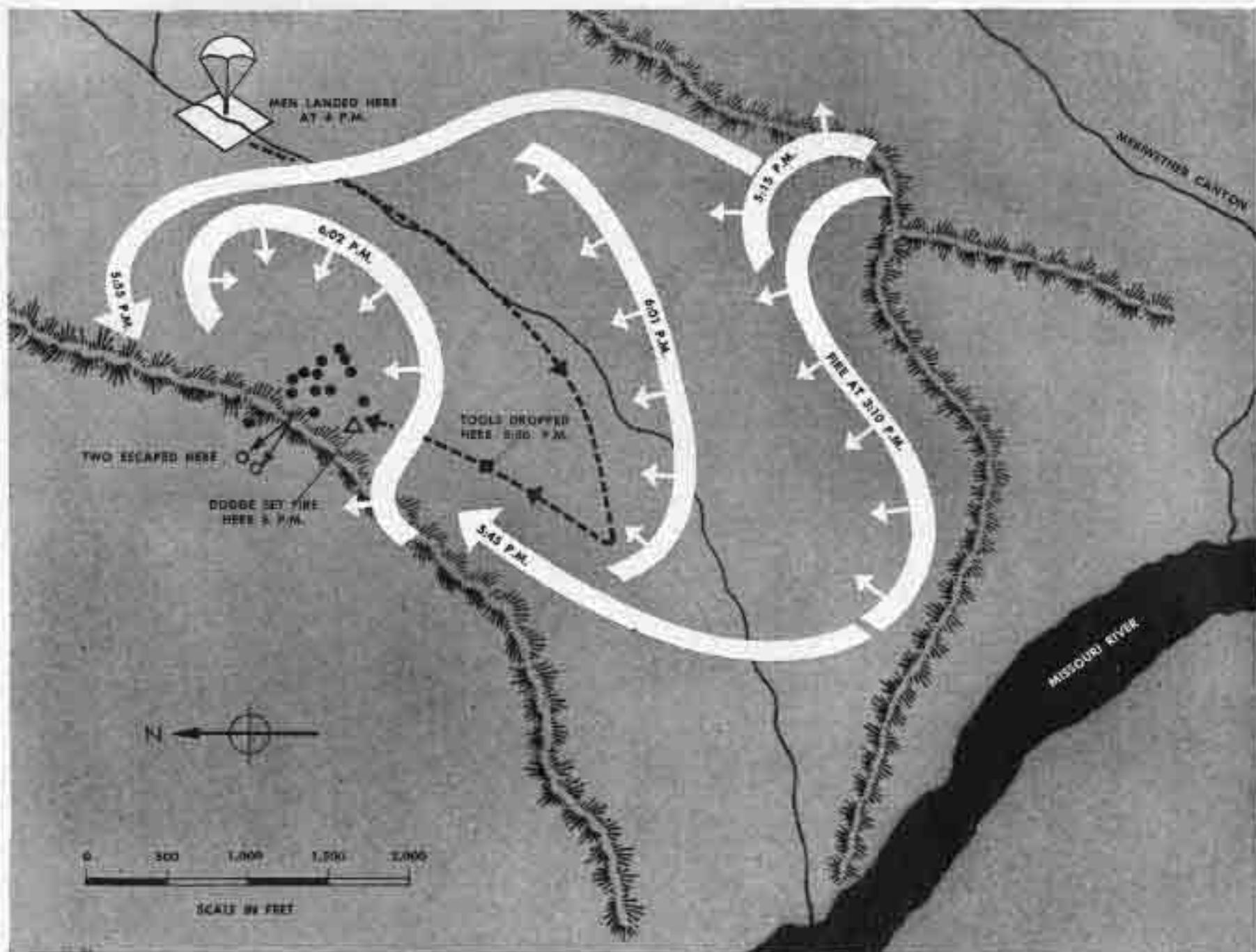


FANNED BY TREACHEROUS WINDS, FIRE GREEDILY EATS ITS WAY THROUGH HELENA NATIONAL FOREST LANDS

HOW 13 FIRE FIGHTERS DIED IN MANN GULCH

It started with a lightning storm in Montana's Gates of the Mountains area, a wilderness traversed by Lewis and Clark in 1806. A lazy column of smoke curled up from desolate Mann Gulch, which is studded with fir and pine and carpeted with dry "cheat grass." A crew of smokejumpers piled into a C-47 at Missoula and headed east. Soon they were over the fire, and Foreman H. Wagner Dodge picked his jump spot near the head of the gulch. "Wag" Dodge jumped first. The landing was routine, and the men signaled that they were safe and set up a cargo camp. At 5 p.m. they headed down the gulch toward the Missouri to fight the fire, joined by Jim Harrison, fire guard from nearby Meriwether Canyon. By now the fire was "heating up," sending up black smoke and gusts that exploded high in the air. At 5:45 Dodge saw that it had struck across the gulch and was climbing toward them, cutting off access to the

river. Dodge shouted to his men to drop their heavy equipment and retreat. But another pincer of fire had crossed the canyon above them. Advancing like a force of massed flamethrowers, the enemy was rapidly shrinking their grassy pocket, and Dodge saw they could not get out. He lit a grass fire to burn out a small safety zone (map), stepped into it and yelled to his men to follow. Instead they fled up the slope, and he heard one say, "The hell with this, I'm getting out of here!" Then the whole superheated canyon seemed to explode. Flat on his burned ground, Dodge felt himself "in a big vacuum. . . I felt suddenly buoyant." In a few minutes it was over: Two of his men had scaled the ridge above to safety; two were alive but fatally burned; 11 lay dead where the fire had overtaken them, their clothes burned off and their canteens melted. The Mann Gulch fire raced on, to sear 5,000 acres before it was controlled.



MAP OF FIRE, prepared by Forest Service, shows how flames first sent pincers above and below the smokejumpers, then swept across (from right) to envelop them. When the men landed, the fire was burning on the ridge opposite them (upper right). As they headed down Mann Gulch (dotted line), one pincer (curved band starting at right) snared down toward the river, crossed the gulch and advanced toward them. When they turned and headed for

higher ground (left), another pincer of fire struck across the gulch above them. The violent updraft from both pincers sucked the air from the slopes between, and the fire poured into the vacuum. Black dots show where men fell.

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AT LANDING AREA, a first-aid kit, left by jumpers and scorched by fire, is examined by Forest Service man.



SHOVELS AND "PULASKIS," combined ax and hoe tools, were abandoned (map) in jumpers' flight up slope.



ROCKY BARRIER was passed by William Hellman (most advanced black dot) only after being fatally burned.

Smokejumpers CONTINUED



BODY is brought to Helges Landing, on nearby Missouri River, in sling attached to fuselage of helicopter. Its pilot made 11 trips from Mann Gulch to river with bodies.



VICTIMS' CASKETS await shipment from Helena to their widely scattered homes. Survivors Robert Sallee and Walter Rumsey (below) await orders to jump again.



CLUTCHING A HANDKERCHIEF, FOREMAN "WAG" DODGE (RIGHT) LEAVES FUNERAL SERVICES FOR PHILIP McVEY

THE SERVICE BURIES DEAD AND AWAITS NEW CALL

The blasted rocks of Mann Gulch were not yet cooled, and its dead were not yet buried, when another crew of Missoula smokejumpers was called out on another lightning blaze in Idaho's Nezperce National Forest. One group went to the funeral of one of their mates (below), then hurried back to Missoula. Others stood by at Camp Menard, Mont., as another outbreak of fires threatened. It was all in a summer's work; so far this season in the pursuit of their hazardous job the Forest Service para-

chutists have made 337 jumps to fight 89 fires. This year, one of the driest in the recorded history of the West, will keep the smokejumpers on the jump until the rains come. In vast forest areas fire conditions are critical this month and protection agencies fear that the worst is yet to come. Every tourist and camper can help by being extra-careful in the explosive woods, and by remembering that lives, as well as trees, are endangered whenever a burning cigaret is tossed away or a campfire left undoused.



SALUTE is paid by an honor guard at grave of Smoke-jumper Philip R. McVey, 22, of Babb, Mont., a former

Navy aviator, in wooded cemetery near Roman, Mont. Among mourners were three of McVey's fellow jumpers.