

Walter Rumsey's Statement Twelve Years After Mann Gulch

Walter Rumsey's 51-year-old son, Steve, lives in Colville, Washington, where he and his wife run a bookstore and publish a magazine. In February 1961, his Dad wrote the following statement concerning his recollections of the events of that day in 1949. Steve and the family have given permission to print this statement. Walter Rumsey perished in 1980 in a commuter plane crash near Omaha.

The Mann Gulch Fire

On August 5, 1949, 14 [15-Ed.] Forest Service smoke jumpers jumped over Mann Gulch, a small tributary of the Missouri River north of Helena, Montana, to put out a forest fire.

Fighting fire has been one of the important jobs of the Forest Service since its organization in 1905. The smoke jumpers were organized after World War II [actually started in 1940-Ed.] to parachute fire fighters into remote areas before small fires became big ones. Often a small fire got out of control before men going in on foot could get to it. This fire, which was started by lightning, was to become the worst tragedy in the jumpers' history.

We took off from the Missoula airport at 2:00 p.m., in a converted DC-3. There were 15 [16-one jumper became airsick and didn't jump-Ed.] of us plus the spotter, the man who chose the jump spot and told us when to leave the plane.

We arrived over the fire about 3:15 p.m. The air was bumpy and rough. The fire was smoking up and we could see the dull red flames chewing away at the green timber. The fire looked small from the air, maybe 10 or 20 acres. We knew that a smoke chaser had been sent to the fire the day before from a nearby ranger station, but we had no way of knowing where he was.

The plane circled the fire two or three times while the spotter and Wag Dodge (MSO-41), the foreman, discussed the situation and decided on a jump spot. Most of us were airsick from the long flight over, and we could hardly wait to get out of the plane. The jumper next to me (Merle Stratton MSO-47) was so sick the spotter wouldn't let him jump. Considering what happened later, I'm sure he never regretted it. I was next to the door and jumped in the first group of three with Wag Dodge and Bill Hellman (MSO-46). Our target was a large opening in the scattered pine trees that covered the mountain on the north side of Mann Gulch. We knew there was a stiff breeze blowing before we left the plane because of the way the fire was burning and as we drifted down we turned our parachutes so our backs would be to the wind. In this position we could see where we were going to land and guide the parachute accordingly.

We all three landed hard on the rocky ground. We began



Walter Rumsey 1949 (Courtesy Steve Rumsey)

picking up our gear as the other jumpers floated down. After the last man had jumped the spotter began dropping the fire-fighting equipment, water, and supplies. Our jump area was on the north side of Mann Gulch and across the fire, which was burning near the ridge on the other side of the canyon. We gathered up our supplies and piled it together. Each man was assigned tools, and we left the jump area in single file and headed for the fire.

The fire had spread in the hour it had taken us to get organized, and the wind was blowing briskly towards us carrying the smell of smoke and heat. We reached the bottom of the gulch and, while the rest of us waited, Dodge and two others went up near the fire to locate (Jim) Harrison (MSO-47), the smoke chaser who had walked into the fire the day before. Harrison had seen us jump and was making his way down to meet us. After meeting Harrison and getting his report, we regrouped and Dodge led us on a gradual climb back up the north slope of the canyon going west. This gradually brought us out of the canyon and up to where we could see the fire burning on the other side. The fire was burning fiercely and we could hear the roar of the flames.

We were going in a westerly direction down the gulch toward the Missouri River. The plan was to get behind the fire, which seemed to be moving in an easterly direction as the wind gave it momentum. We continued this course for several minutes, but it was rough going with our equipment through the rocks and brush. As we got higher up out of the draw, the brush gave way to a scattered stand of Ponderosa Pine and dry cheat grass.

At this point we could see that the fire was spreading very fast and was becoming dangerous. We continued down the north side of the gulch, hoping to get around behind the fire where it would be safe to go to work. However, it soon became apparent that the fire had jumped across the gulch ahead of us and was now burning on our side of the draw between us and the Missouri River. Dodge immediately told us to drop our tools and gear and to follow him. At this point, some of us were getting a little nervous about the situation.

I pitched the cross-cut saw I was carrying into the brush

and made my way up to the head of the line where I could hear further instructions from Dodge. The wind was increasing and the roar of the fire made it increasingly difficult to hear ordinary conversation. Dodge made a right turn up the mountain toward the ridge and we all followed in single file.

Many of the jumpers were as yet unconcerned and had not discarded their tools as Dodge had instructed. One jumper was taking pictures of the fire with his small camera. Another was carrying a five gallon tin of water on a backpack. I asked him why he didn't put it down so he could travel faster. He said he figured we would need it later. I didn't argue but made my way up to about three or four men behind Dodge. We were all struggling up the steep slope at a fast walk, but there was no panic.

As we worked our way toward the ridge, I noticed Harrison had stopped and was sitting down resting against a tree. Sweat poured from his face. He was still wearing his heavy smoke-chaser's pack. It was the last time I saw him. Diettert (Eldon) (MSO-49) was just ahead of me in the line, carrying a shovel and pulaski. I told him to give me the shovel to carry, as I had discarded my tools. He handed it to me and I leaned it against a large pine tree and hurried on.

The fire was catching up with us. We were all practically exhausted from our hurried climb up the mountain side, but now we increased our pace through fear. I think we all knew the danger we were in now. The fire seemed to be behind us and to the left, and we could smell the smoke and feel the heat. Hot ashes began falling around us. The head of the line had nearly reached the partial protection of the rocky ridge top, but some of the men were still several hundred feet behind.

The fire was upon us now, and Dodge realized we all couldn't make the ridge in time. He motioned and yelled for us to gather around him as he explained his escape plan. I was near enough to see his lips moving, but I couldn't hear his voice as he shouted to make us hear above the terrific roar. He knelt and lit a fire in the tinder-dry cheat grass at his foot. He had stopped in a clearing in the trees, and the fire he lit with his cigarette lighter quickly burned out an area several hundred feet long. His plan was for all of us to get into this burned-out area ahead of the main fire and so save ourselves. His shouted orders were lost in the roar of the fire, even to those of us who were close by.

I remember thinking what a good idea Dodge's escape fire was and I also remembered how a fire often stops, or at least slows down, when it reaches a high ridge. I thought if I could only reach the ridge I would be safe, and if I couldn't reach it,

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Walter Rumsey 1980 (Courtesy Steve Rumsey)

I could always duck back to the left into Dodge's burnt-out area and save myself. I looked back now and saw three men silhouetted against a sheet of red flame. I didn't look back a second time.

There were four of us now, Sallee (Bob) (MSO-49) ahead of me, Diettert on my right and

Hellman on my left. I couldn't see Dodge anymore because of the smoke. We raced for the rocky ridge only a hundred feet away. Diettert fell away to the right and out of sight. Hellman disappeared in the smoke to the left as Sallee and I scrambled to the top of the ridge and down the other side.

It seemed we were covering 15 feet at every step. I tripped and fell headlong into a currant bush, hardly caring whether I got up or not. Sallee paused and looked back for a second and I got to my feet. On we went, only now we were going down hill on the other side of the ridge. The smoke was so thick we could see only a hundred or so feet ahead. The ridge had slowed the fire but only for a minute.

We ran on not knowing where to go or what to do, when suddenly looming ahead of us in the smoke was a rock slide several hundred feet long and perhaps 75 feet wide. We stumbled into it exhausted and gasping for breath. "If this slide isn't big enough to protect us, it's too bad because we can't go another step," I thought to myself. We lay there for two or three minutes watching the fire come towards us. It was nearly 6:00 p.m., and we could see the red circle of the sun through the smoke.

The fire burned towards us from three sides now, which helped explain the amazing speed with which the fire had trapped us. The fire had not just been behind us as we struggled up the hill. Creating its own draft, like a giant furnace, it had swept around us and come in from both sides!

We saw a form staggering through the smoke ahead of the flames. It was a huge buck deer exhausted and with his lungs seared by the hot gases and smoke. He slumped to the ground a short distance from our sanctuary in the rocks and died.

In the meantime, the fire had reached the slide, and we took off our T-shirts and wrapped them around our faces to keep from breathing the smoke. The rock slide was on an open mountain slope, covered mostly with grass and sage brush with only a few scattered pine trees. Due to less fuel, the flames were only 8-10 feet high and, although small, the slide was large enough to protect us. We huddled in the rocks close to the ground as possible until we realized the fire had passed us and we were safe. Although we could feel the hot air from the flames, we had no trouble breathing. The smoke began to clear

and we discussed what we should do next. I'm sure we were both about half hysterical. We decided we would have to let the ashes cool a little before we tried to get back to where Dodge had lit his escape fire. We were sure that some of the other jumpers had made it to Dodge's burned-out area.

As we talked, the fire swept around us and moved north, leaving the scattered trees burning like torches all around us. It was dying down south of us, and we began picking our way back through the burning stumps and ashes. Suddenly, we heard a call from below us on the mountain slope. We yelled back and heard again a weak cry for help. We hurried off in the direction of the sound, but it took us several minutes to locate the caller in the smoke.

It was Bill Hellman. He was alive but badly burned. We laid him on a long flat rock to keep his burns out of the ashes and soot. There wasn't much else we could do. All of our first aid supplies were discarded on our flight up the mountain and we had only a little water. We gave him a drink and made him as comfortable as possible. We couldn't answer his questions as to the fate of the others.

Suddenly another shout and form loomed in the smoke. It was Dodge. He had heard our shouting and had made his way to us. His eyes were red with smoke and he was covered with dirt and ashes. He had laid flat in his burned-out escape fire and the main fire had passed over him. Very few words passed between us as the impact of the tragedy sunk in. Bob went with Wag to look for other survivors and I stayed with Hellman. They soon returned to tell us that the other men were beyond help.

Since Bill wasn't able to walk, we decided that Dodge and Sallee would go for help while I stayed with him. They left us a pint canteen of water and a can of white potatoes, which, was all the food and water we had between the four of us. They had a tough time finding their way down to the Missouri River in the dark. The trip took them several hours, but our luck changed when they reached the river. A fisherman passing by in his boat heard their shouts and took them to Hilger Landing where they telephoned for help.

In the meantime, Hellman and I waited on the mountain. Bill was having a hard time finding a comfortable position. He couldn't stay in one position longer than a few minutes. He was frantically thirsty, but I knew it would be hours before help arrived, and I tried to ration the water to him. It was almost dark when Wag and Bob left, and Bill and I prepared to wait through the night. Sleep was all but impossible for either of us because of the cold. We talked about our families, trying to pass away the time. He told me about his wife and their new baby boy. His burns didn't seem to bother him much, as long as we could find something to talk about. Our water was gone by midnight. Bill asked me to try to find my way back to the supplies and see if there wasn't water there. I hated to go because I was afraid I would lose him in the dark but he insisted, so I started back up the ridge in the general direction of the jump area. It was slow going through the rocks and burning trees and logs. I made my way to the top, hoping I would be able to see about where we had landed. It was no use. All I could see were millions of red pin pricks of fire in the black night as the tree stumps burned themselves out. I knew I could

never find the supplies in the dark and, if I had, we learned later that the water cans had burst from the heat of the fire.

I found my way back to Hellman by shouting and following his answering yells. By now it was two or three in the morning, and I opened the can of potatoes hoping that Bill could drink the salty water they were packed in. He managed to drink most of it and then slept a little. It was a long night.

At the first crack of dawn, I started for the Missouri River with the canteen to get water for Bill. It was rugged going down the steep slopes and over the rocks. I had gone nearly half a mile and was resting on a rock watching the thousands of still burning stumps. As I watched, some of the burning stumps far below me seemed to be moving! They were moving up the hill and they weren't red, they were white! I nearly fell off the rock in excitement and as I shouted, the lights stopped. The rescue party was soon beside me, and I was drinking from a cool water bag. We continued up the slope and found Hellman. A doctor gave first-aid and they carried him down to the river on a stretcher. He was soon in a Helena hospital, but his burns, plus the long night on the mountain without treatment were too much, and he died a few days later. [Both men actually died later the same day—Ed.]

The Mann Gulch Fire burned on for several days and eventually destroyed 5000 acres of forest and rangeland. The summer of 1949 was a bad one for fires, but untold thousands of acres were saved because the jumpers were able to get to the fire before it got out of control. Occasionally, the circumstances associated with forest fires gang up on man's feeble efforts and get the upper hand. Mann Gulch was one of those fires. ♣

My Sunshine

Nothing on this earth compares
To sunlight dancing from your children's hair.

It melts the heart; that incandescence—
The special gift of adolescence.

There's no treasure shared by husband and wife
That could ever surpass the gift of life.

Each child reflects sunshine in their own way,
Fulfilling your life day by day.

Those days in the sun will never fade:
Walking your toddler into first grade.

Or handing your "teen" the keys to the jitney;
Accepting a collect call, "Dad come get me."

Then on to college to do their thing,
Facing the world and trying their wings.

Your love goes with them as life unfolds,
Whether failure or success in reaching their goals.

To enjoy the sun; some head south with their spouse,
Not missis and me, we just tan in our house.

—Hal Meili (Cave Junction '52)