

Incident Summary Page for the Smokejumper Line of Duty Death

Name of Smokejumper LODD:		Incident Name:
Robert James Bennett	David Richard Navon	Mann Gulch Fire
Eldon Eugene Diettert	Leonard L Piper	Incident Date & Time: August 05, 1949
William James Hellman	Stanley Joseph Reba	
Philip Rolla McVey	Marvin L. "Dick" Sherman	
Joseph Baron Sylvia	Henry James Thol	
Newton Robert Thompson	Silas Raymond Thompson Jr	
David Richard Navon	James Oliver Harrison	
Smokejumper Base:		Incident Location:
Missoula		Helena National Forest near Gates of the Mountain in Montana
Personal Information		
12 Smokejumpers were killed that day were:		
<p>Robert J Bennett (MSO'49), 22, was born March 18, 1927 in Paris, Tennessee. After graduating high school, he joined the US Army serving in the Medical Corps and was stationed in occupied Japan and later in Korea. He attended Montana State University in Missoula under the GI Bill majoring in Forestry. A rookie in his first season smokejumping he made a positive impact amongst his fellow smokejumpers, including Leonard Piper a best friend. He was survived by his parents, a brother and two sisters.</p>		
<p>Eldon E Diettert (MSO'49), had just turned 19 and was in the midst of his birthday luncheon when he was called to respond to the Mann Gulch fire, his first fire jump. Born in Moscow, Idaho, his family moved to Iowa and then to Missoula where he grew up and his father was a member of the Botany Department at Montana State University. An honor student majoring in forestry at the University, Eldon had worked the three previous summers for the Forest Service in the Blister Rust Control program at "Camp Nowhere" in northern Idaho. He was survived by his parents and a brother and sister.</p>		
<p>William J Hellman (MSO'46), 24, was a squadleader on the Mann Gulch fire and son of a Forest Service employee. Born August 3, 1925 in Kalispell, Montana, Bill dropped out of high school at 17 to join the US Navy. He later transferred to the Marine Corps where he served as a combat medic, taking part in the Pacific island-hopping invasions and later in occupied Japan. With a goal to become a botany and science teacher he attended Montana State University in Missoula, Northern Montana College in Havre and Greeley State Teachers College in Greeley, Colorado and was three months away from completing his degree. Bill was a part of the group of smokejumpers that made the July 1949 ceremonial parachute jump on to the White House lawn, his only child was born the day before. Bill survived the fire but was mortally burned and died the following day at the hospital in Helena. He left behind his wife of three years and young son.</p>		
<p>Philip R McVey (MSO'48), 22, was a second year smokejumper, having rookied in 1948 and spent most of that summer clearing trails and forest slash out of the Castle Creek Ranger station, near Grangeville, Idaho. Born in Choteau, Montana April 1, 1927, the son of a U.S. Immigration Service employee. The family moved often, and Phil was attending high school in Browning, Montana when he dropped out in 1945 to join the US Navy. A hard worker and good athlete who had played shortstop in semi-pro baseball, he was well liked by his fellow smokejumpers. He was survived by his parents.</p>		
<p>David Ri Navon (MSO'49), 28, although a rookie in 1949 was older than his fellow Mann Gulch jumpers. Born in Argentina on December 10 1920 to a father employed by International Harvester the family returned to the US and David completed high school in Modesto, California. He then saw the world working aboard a Swedish freighter returning a year later to Junior College and joining the National Guard. Mobilizing for World War II he entered the US Army in 1941. Completing Officer Candidate School as a 2nd Lieutenant, he volunteered for the 82nd Airborne Division where he was wounded in battle at Nijmegen, Holland. Upon recovery he was assigned to the Army of Occupation in Berlin attached to the 101st Airborne Division and discharged March 1946. He then enrolled in Forestry school at the University of California Berkeley, completing his degree, after a year at the University of Aberdeen School of Forestry in Scotland, in June 1949. He was survived by his parents and family.</p>		
<p>Leonard L Piper (MSO'49), 23, born July 5, 1926 in Blairsville, Pennsylvania was one of nine children. He dropped out of high school in 1947 to join the US Navy, serving 18 months. He then attended Montana State University in Missoula and completed two years in the Forestry program. A first year smokejumper, he became fast friends with fellow rookie William Bennett. He was survived by his parents and five brothers and three sisters.</p>		
<p>Stanley J Reba (MSO'48), 25, the son of Polish immigrants was born October 15, 1923 and raised in Brooklyn, New York. Following high school, he received a football scholarship to Holy Cross College in Massachusetts and stayed one year before joining the Army Air Corp. He held the rank of 2nd Lieutenant while serving in the Pacific theatre where he received a Purple Heart. Stan continued his college education at the University of Minnesota School of Forestry and while in Minnesota he met his future wife, Julie. He started smokejumping in 1948 and prior to his return for the 1949 fire season he completed his ROTC training at Fort Eustis in Virginia, earning his 1st Lieutenant commission. He and his good friend Joe Sylvia then left Minnesota together driving to Missoula to complete</p>		

Incident Summary Page for the Smokejumper Line of Duty Death

smokejumper refresher training, arriving only days before the Mann Gulch fire. He was survived by his wife of nine months Julie, his parents and two sisters.

Marvin L. "Dick" Sherman (MSO'49), 25, worked for the Forest Service serving as the Mormon Peak Lookout on the Lolo National Forest prior to becoming a smokejumper in 1949. Born in Darby, Montana on January 25, 1928 he later moved and lived in Missoula. Dick served in the US Navy 1945 - 1947. Well-liked by co-workers and friends, he was survived by his family and finance.

Joseph B Sylvia (MSO'48), 24, was born October 10, 1924 in Plymouth, Massachusetts. Following high school, he enlisted in the Marine Corps and served in the South Pacific from August 1942 to October 1945, achieving the rank of Corporal. He was a forestry student at the University of Minnesota, with fellow jumper Stan Reba, his good friend. A second year smokejumper, Joe survived the fire but succumbed to his burn injuries the following day at the hospital in Helena. He was survived by his parents and three brothers and three sisters.

Henry J Thol (MSO'49), 19, the son of a retired Forest Service District Ranger was born in Kalispell, Montana on April 17, 1930, and graduated from Flathead High School. He worked the summer of 1947 as a Fire Guard at the Condon Work Center and was a member of the Missoula rookie smokejumper class of 1949 the following summer. He had planned to enter Montana State University in Missoula in the fall. He was survived by his parents and family.

Newton R Thompson (MSO'49), 22, was born in Los Angeles, California on August 22, 1926 and graduated from Alhambra High School. A veteran of the US Army Air Corps, he completed one year of college at Pomona College prior to becoming a smokejumper with the 1949 Missoula rookie class. He was survived by his parents and family.

Silas Raymond Thompson Jr. (MSO'48), 21, a second year smokejumper, was born March 11, 1928 in Charlotte, North Carolina where he grew up. As a forestry major at North Carolina State, he secured a fire lookout position during the summer of 1946 in Washington state atop Copper Butte Mountain. He joined the US Army following that summer and served as a paratrooper in the 11 Airborne in occupied Japan. After discharge he enrolled in Forestry school at Montana State University in Missoula in March 1948, joining the smokejumpers that summer. His return to the smokejumpers the following summer was delayed six weeks due to his commitment to training with the US Army. He arrived back in Missoula for refresher training in late July 1949. He was survived by his parents and younger sister.

Also killed that day was **James O Harrison (MSO'47)**, 20, a former smokejumper who took a "ground job", at the request of his mother. He was working that summer as the Recreation Guard stationed at Meriwether Campground, just south of Mann Gulch. He was born in Spokane, Washington on January 8, 1949 and grew up in Missoula, friends with the Diettert family. A chemistry major at Montana State University in Missoula he would have been entering his senior year. He was survived by his parents and two brothers.

Brief description

On August 5th 1949 a lightning fire in Mann Gulch Helena National Forest was attacked by smokejumpers from the Missoula Smokejumper Base and the local Helena Ranger District Fire/Recreation guard. The fire quickly raced up the steep dry slope above the Missouri River and entrapped them. The resulting fire blow-up caused the deaths of 12 smokejumpers and the fire guard, a former Smokejumper.

Three Smokejumpers survived, Foreman "Wag" Dodge, Walt Rumsey and Bob Sallee.

The deaths of these young men became a national tragedy and not only impacted their families and friends but led to changes in the way the Forest Service viewed firefighter safety and conducted fire training. In the years following the accident the "Ten Standard Firefighting Orders" and "Eighteen Situations That Shout Watch Out" were developed and are now incorporated into Forest Service firefighter training. The agency would also place more emphasis on fire research and the science of fire behavior, creating world class research facilities in Montana, California and Georgia resulting in improved firefighting training, techniques and equipment.

Links to more information on this incident:

<https://wffoundation.org/100fires>

<https://wlfalwaysremember.net/1949/08/05/mann-gulch/>

<https://www.nwcg.gov/6mfs/day-in-history/mann-gulch-montana-august-5-1949>

<https://www.nwcg.gov/wfldp/toolbox/staff-ride/library/mann-gulch-fire/collection-of-historical-photographs-mann-gulch-fire>

<https://www.fs.usda.gov/science-technology/fire/smokejumpers/missoula/history/mann-gulch>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mann_Gulch_fire

Incident Summary Page for the Smokejumper Line of Duty Death

Survivors of the Fire

Walter B Rumsey (MSO'49), 21, a first year smokejumper, was born in Larned, Kansas November 18, 1927. An Eagle Scout, he earned his pilot's license before dropping out of high school to join the US Navy, where he completed his GED. Post Navy, he worked a summer on a lookout and then as a station fireman in Superior. During his junior year in college he joined the 1949 Missoula smokejumper class, his first fire jump was Mann Gulch. In 1951 he completed his college studies graduating from Utah State University with a double major in Range Management and Watershed. After trying farming, he began a 28 year career with the Soil Conservation Service. Walt was 52 when he died in an Air Wisconsin commuter airline crash outside of Omaha, Nebraska on 12 June 1980. He was married to Mary Williford and had three children.

Robert W Sallee (MSO'49), Bob was 17 years old the day of the Mann Gulch Fire. Born August 18, 1931 in Willow Creek, Montana he graduated high school in Sandpoint, Idaho in 1949. During his sophomore and junior high school years he worked for the Forest Service in the White Pine Blister Rust program. He jumped two seasons, 1949 where his first fire jump was at Mann Gulch and returned again in 1950. Completing a degree in Business from Eastern Washington University he entered the paper industry where he spent his career, traveling the world setting up paper operations and consulting. Married for 39 years to his late wife Alberta he had two sons. A later marriage to his second wife Bertie blessed him with three stepchildren. An avid outdoorsman and private pilot he died May 26, 2014, at the age of 82.

Robert W Dodge (MSO'41), "Wag" the foreman of the Mann Gulch crew, was a pioneer smokejumper having completed training in 1941, the second smokejumper class. Born November 16, 1915 in Hiawatha, Michigan he was a veteran of the US Coast Guard. A skilled woodsman he had worked for the Forest Service for nine years and had been a smokejumper foreman since 1945. He never jumped again after Mann Gulch, continuing on with the Forest Service at the Powell Ranger District on the Bitterroot Divide between Montana and Idaho. He died a little over five years later, on January 12, 1955 at the age of 39, of non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma. He was survived by his wife Patricia.

