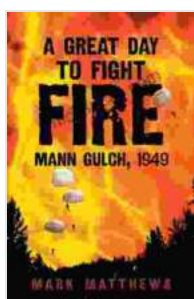


# The Great Day to Fight Fire: The Mann Gulch Disaster of 1949

On August 5, 1949, 16 US Forest Service smokejumpers died fighting a wildfire near Mann Gulch, Montana. The firestorm, fueled by a combination of extreme weather conditions and a series of human errors, left only three survivors.



## A Great Day to Fight Fire: Mann Gulch, 1949

by Mark Matthews

★★★★☆ 4.7 out of 5

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Screen Reader : Supported  
Enhanced typesetting: Enabled  
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Print length : 282 pages



The Mann Gulch fire began as a small lightning strike on the afternoon of August 5. The fire quickly spread through the dry grass and brush, and by nightfall it was burning out of control. The next morning, a crew of 16 smokejumpers was dispatched to fight the fire.

The smokejumpers were led by 34-year-old Wagner Dodge, a veteran firefighter with 14 years of experience. Dodge had a reputation for being a skilled and aggressive firefighter, but he was also known for his impatience and his willingness to take risks.

The smokejumpers arrived at the fire and began to construct a fire line to contain the blaze. However, the fire was burning too hot and too fast, and it quickly outflanked the firefighters. The smokejumpers were forced to retreat, but they were soon trapped by the fire.

The firestorm raged through the gulch, killing 13 of the smokejumpers instantly. The remaining three firefighters, Dodge, Robert Sallee, and Ray Corbridge, managed to survive by finding a small pool of water and hiding beneath a rock outcropping.

The Mann Gulch disaster was one of the deadliest wildfires in US history. It was a tragic day that left 16 families without fathers and husbands. The disaster also led to a number of changes in the way that wildfires are fought, including the development of new safety protocols and the creation of a national smokejumper training program.

## **The Events Leading Up to the Disaster**

There were a number of factors that contributed to the Mann Gulch disaster, including:

- **Extreme weather conditions:** The day of the fire was hot and dry, with temperatures in the 90s and relative humidity in the single digits. The wind was blowing at 20 to 30 miles per hour, and the fire danger rating was extreme.
- **Human error:** The smokejumpers made a number of mistakes that contributed to the disaster, including failing to properly assess the fire danger, failing to establish a safe fire line, and failing to retreat in a timely manner.

- **Lack of communication:** The smokejumpers were not equipped with radios, and they were unable to communicate with each other or with their base camp. This lack of communication made it difficult for the firefighters to coordinate their efforts and to respond to the changing fire conditions.

## **The Heroic Efforts of the Firefighters**

Despite the extreme danger, the smokejumpers fought bravely to contain the fire. They constructed fire lines, used water buckets to extinguish spot fires, and worked to protect the homes and property of nearby residents.

Three of the smokejumpers, Dodge, Sallee, and Corbridge, survived the firestorm by finding a small pool of water and hiding beneath a rock outcropping. They spent the night huddled together, listening to the sound of the fire raging around them.

The next morning, Dodge and Sallee emerged from their hiding place and began to hike out of the gulch. Corbridge was too weak to continue, and he stayed behind. Dodge and Sallee eventually made it back to safety, but Corbridge died of his injuries a few days later.

## **The Lessons Learned from the Disaster**

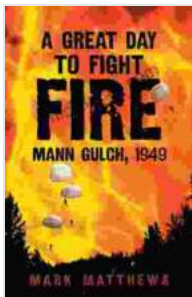
The Mann Gulch disaster was a tragedy that could have been prevented. The following lessons were learned from this horrific event:

- **Firefighters must always be aware of the fire danger and the weather conditions.**
- **Firefighters must always establish a safe fire line before starting to fight a fire.**

- **Firefighters must always retreat in a timely manner if the fire becomes too dangerous.**
- **Firefighters must always be equipped with radios so that they can communicate with each other and with their base camp.**

The Mann Gulch disaster was a tragic day that left 16 families without fathers and husbands. It was also a day that taught us valuable lessons about how to fight wildfires safely and effectively.

The legacy of the Mann Gulch smokejumpers lives on today. Their sacrifice helped to make wildfires safer to fight, and their story continues to inspire firefighters around the world.



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