



Today's discussion is from "This Day in Wildland Fire History"

"Lessons Learned" serve as brief summaries of powerful learning opportunities. You can use these summaries as a foundation and launch point for further dialogue and discussion. Apply these lessons learned to yourself, your crew, and your unit.

Take a virtual Staff Ride of Mann Gulch @ http://nifc.gov/safety/mann_gulch/index.htm

60th Anniversary of the Mann Gulch Fire – August 5, 1949

Incident Summary

On August 4, 1949, lightning starts several fires on the Helena National Forest, including a fire near the top of a ridge between Meriwether and Mann gulches. By 12:55 p.m. August 5th, this fire has grown to six acres. At 1:30 p.m., the call goes out for smokejumpers from the Missoula jump base. By the time the jump plane flies over the site at 3 p.m., the fire is 60 acres.

The crew jumps and gathers at the bottom of the gulch, up-canyon of the fire. The jumper foreman scouts the fire and meets up with a fire guard working alone near the head of the fire. Observing increased fire activity, the decision is made to start hand line from the fire's toe. While hiking to the toe, the foreman observes that the fire is now below them in the gulch—it has also crossed to the other side of the canyon, blocking the crew's ability to escape to the river.

The foreman and crew reverse direction and head uphill toward the ridgetop. The fire is 500 feet behind them, crowning in timber and dog-hair thickets—burning toward them. The foreman realizes that they cannot outrun the fire. In a grassy area, he stops and starts to burn off the grass as a "refuge". He gives the order for his crew to come into this burned, black area with him (note: burning out was not taught or common practice at this time). The foreman lies in this black and survives the passing fire front.

It is not clear how many of the crew hear—or understand—his orders. All crew members continue running up the steep slope for the ridge top. Two make it to safety in rocks at the top. 5:56 p.m. marks the time on one firefighter's watch that stopped when the 15 Missoula Smokejumpers and one Meriwether Fire Guard are burned over. 11 firefighters do not survive the blow up and 2 more will die from their burns the next day.

Lessons Learned Discussion Points

On this day when the Mann Gulch Fire fatalities occur, predicted Fire Danger is "low", but readings from a nearby Ranger Station are: RH= 22%, fuel sticks= 5%, and wind=16 mph—all indicating more severe fire danger. No weather was recorded at the fire, but steady SW winds were observed at the time of the jump. Mann Gulch runs SW down to the Missouri River. During the jump, a thunder cell was close enough to scatter the jumpers.

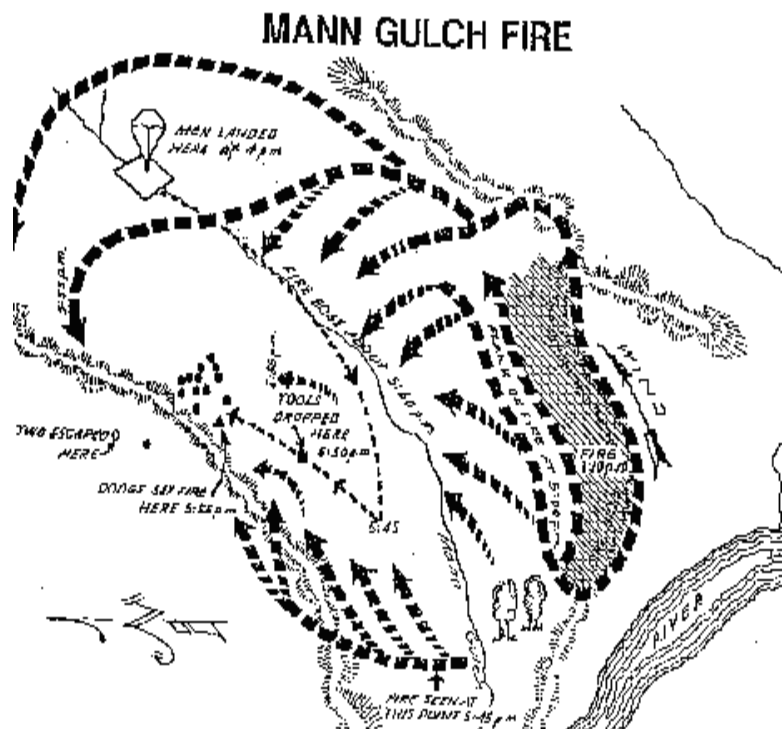
*Open your IRPG to pg 1. Based on the above information, coupled with the increase in fire size, use the Risk Management Process and the map (right) to discuss some of the actions **you** will take to ensure crew safety: as the FFT2, squad boss, crew boss, etc.*

Based on initial aerial size-up, the strategy was to hold the fire on the ridge by anchoring the head of the fire and flanking down both sides to the toe. The fire was noted as "appearing relatively quiet".

Discuss other tactics that your crew could use if presented with a similar situation. Look at the different options available at different steps of the initial attack.

Though his ability as a firefighter was well respected by his peers, the jump foreman was not known by this young group of smokejumpers.

When we find ourselves in this position (such as a crew boss assignment) what can we do to create and encourage crew cohesion?



References: Mann Gulch Fire Reports. <http://iirdb.wildfirelessons.net/main/ReviewsDetails.aspx?ID=135>
Incident Response Pocket Guide

"This Day in Wildland Fire History" is a collaborative project between "6 Minutes for Safety" and the Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center.