

Leadership Under Fire:
*A Case Study in High Performing &
“Fire Proof” Teams*

**Expanding Our Experience and Expertise: Implementing
Effective Teenage Pregnancy Prevention Programs**

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Baltimore, MD

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Disclaimer

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What you can expect to take away:

- Identify how effective team leaders prepare in advance to deal with stress and crisis;
- Identify how team leadership failures can make the difference in a time of stress and crisis;
- Identify at least three ways effective team leaders can lead in the midst of stress and crisis; and
- Identify at least 6 characteristics of high performance/effective teams.

U.S. Forest Service & Smokejumpers

- 1905 – Established by President Theodore Roosevelt
- 1925 – Aerial surveillance used to spot forest fires and direct ground-based firefighters
- 1939 – Experimented with using “smokejumpers”
- 1940 – Began officially using smokejumpers
- 1939-1949 – 52,000 fires – no loss of smokejumpers

What is Mann Gulch?



- Mann Gulch, 20 mi. north of Helena, MT (2009 photo)
 - This is the story of August 5, 1949 when 13 smokejumpers died in a “10 o’-clock fire”

August 4, 1949

- Lightening strike in a late afternoon thunderstorm sets a forest fire in Mann Gulch



August 5, 1949

- 97 degrees in Helena, MT with gusty winds and relative humidity at 3%
- Fire potential at 74 on a scale of 100 by U.S. Forest Service
- 12:25 pm - Mann Gulch fires spotted
- 1:50 pm – Fire reported requesting 25 smokejumpers
- 2:30 pm – Smokejumper crew in Missoula, MT took off on the c-47 seen here



August 5, 1949



Mann Gulch Smokejumper Team



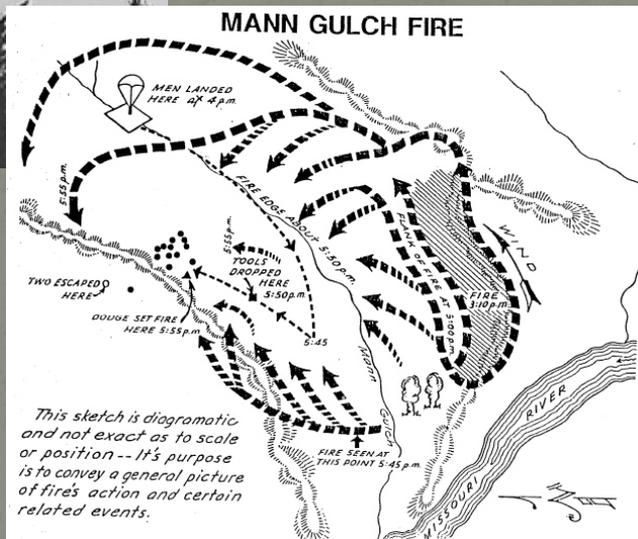
- Wagner Dodge, 33
(Leader)
- Robert Sallee, 21 (17)
- Walter Rumsey, 21
- Robert Bennett, 22
- Eldon Diettert, 19th B-day
- James Harrison, 20
- William Hellman, 24
- Phillip McVey, 22
- David Navon, 28
- Leonard Piper, 23
- Stanley Reba
- Marvin Sherman, 21
- Joseph Sylvia, 24
- Henry Thol, 19
- Newton Thompson, 23
- Silas Thompson, 21

August 5, 1949



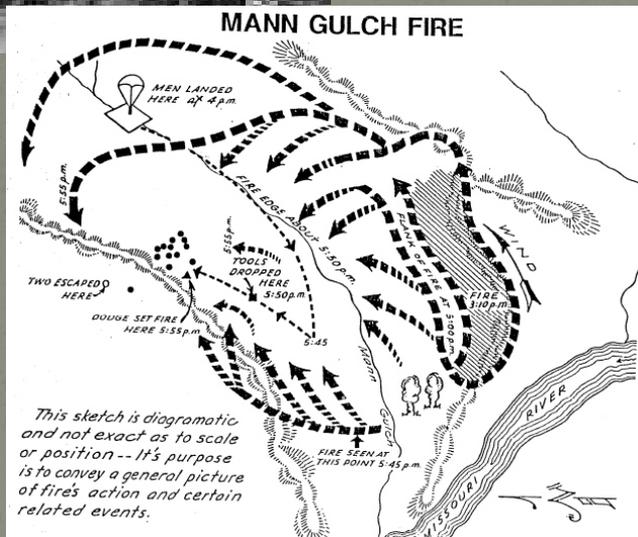
- Smokejumpers on the Mann Gulch run expected to deal with a “10 o’ clock fire”
- Heat thermals + high winds = rough flight
- One smokejumper becomes air sick and stays with the plane

August 5, 1949



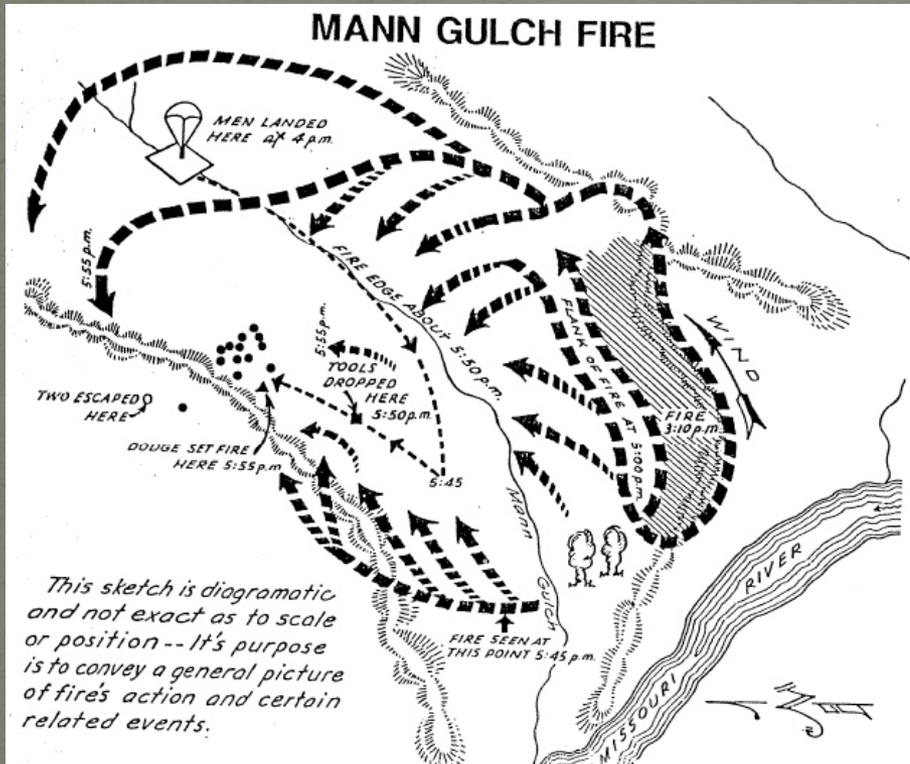
- 3:10 pm – Plane arrives, circles at 1,200 feet while Cooley & Dodge choose drop site well above the fire line
- Because of high wind and downdrafts, plane ascends to 2,000 feet before starting drops
- Five passes to drop men (3 at a time)

August 5, 1949



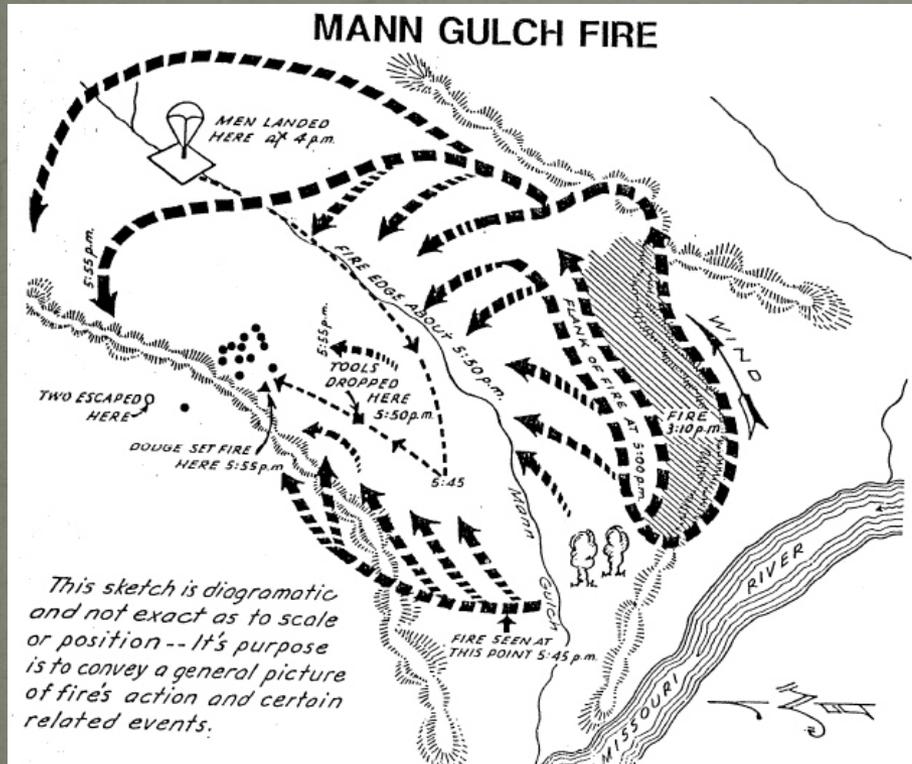
- 3:50 pm – All smokejumpers on the ground
- Dodge landed on a grass covered rock, bruising his knees and elbows
- Team members saw him limping as a result

August 5, 1949



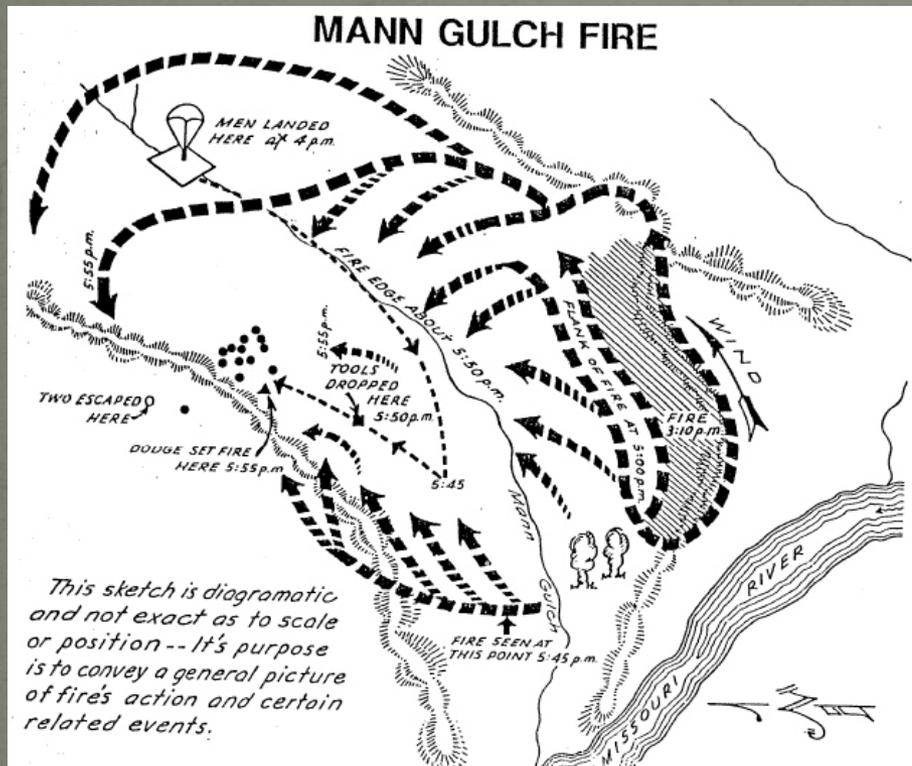
- 4:10 pm – All of the equipment was on the ground
- The radio was damaged in the drop and was not usable to the team
- The team discovered it also didn't have a map
- The team landed about a mile from the river, downwind and to the left of the fire

August 5, 1949



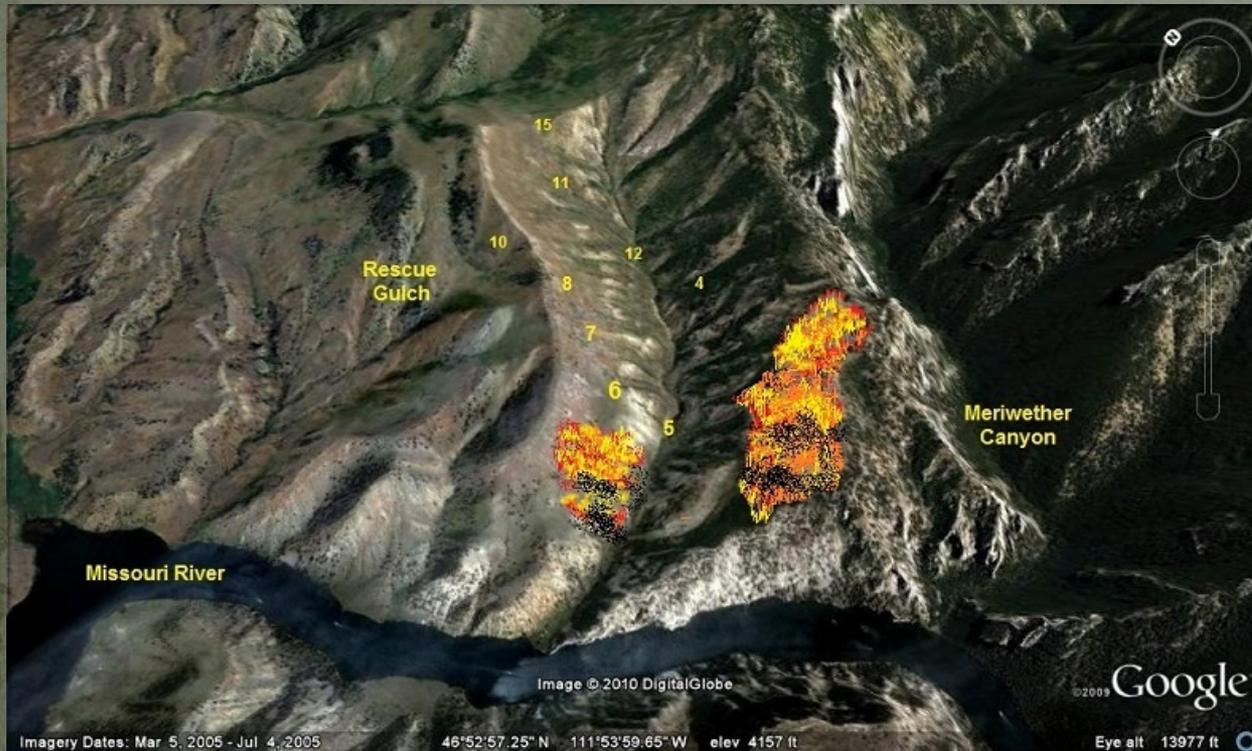
- 5:00 pm – The team has regrouped
- The team opens rations and begins to eat
- Dodge goes to meet Harrison and assess the fire
- Dodge tells Hellman to follow him with the team after all have eaten

August 5, 1949



- The team meets up with Dodge and Harrison
- Dodge looks “shook up” by the fire
- Dodge sends Hellman and the team down the gulch to the Missouri river
- Dodge and Harrison return to the drop site

August 5, 1949



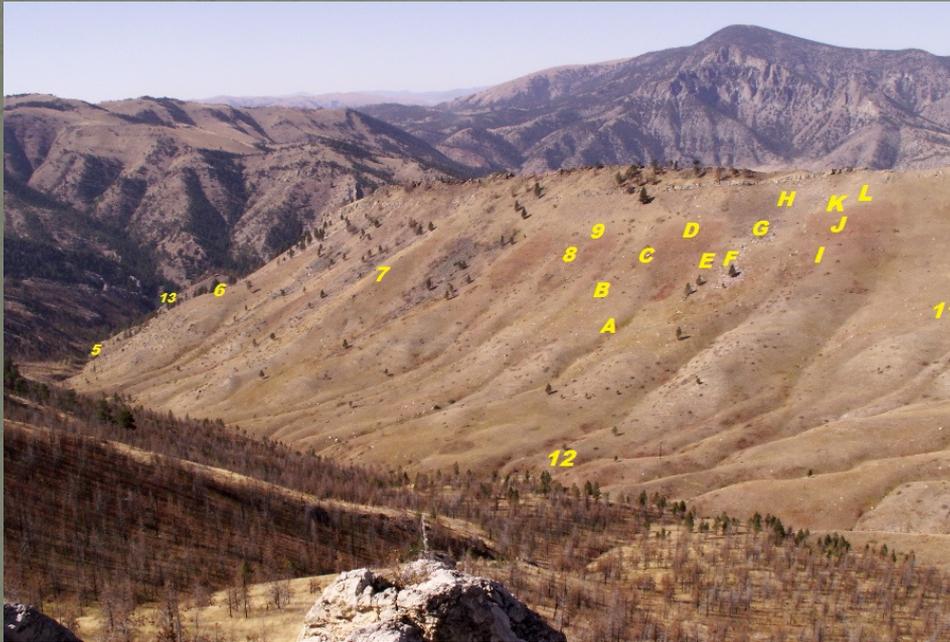
- 5:30 pm – Spot fires appear at mouth of the gulch
- 5:40 pm – Dodge & Harrison catch up with team
- 5:45 pm – Dodge sees spot fires and orders the team to reverse direction back up the gulch

August 5, 1949



- 5:53 pm – Dodge orders the men to drop all of their equipment and run (7)
- Navon is seen taking a picture of the fire before running

August 5, 1949



- 5:55 pm – Dodge stops, bends down and lights a back fire (8)
- Dodge calls and waves for the men to follow him
- He crosses his arms over his face, steps across the burning perimeter and slides 30 feet downhill into a burned out area

August 5, 1949



- “The hell with this; I’m getting out of here”

- Sallee, Rumsey, & Diettert run to the left toward the ridge (9)
- Dodge can see the others run past him on up the mountain

August 5, 1949



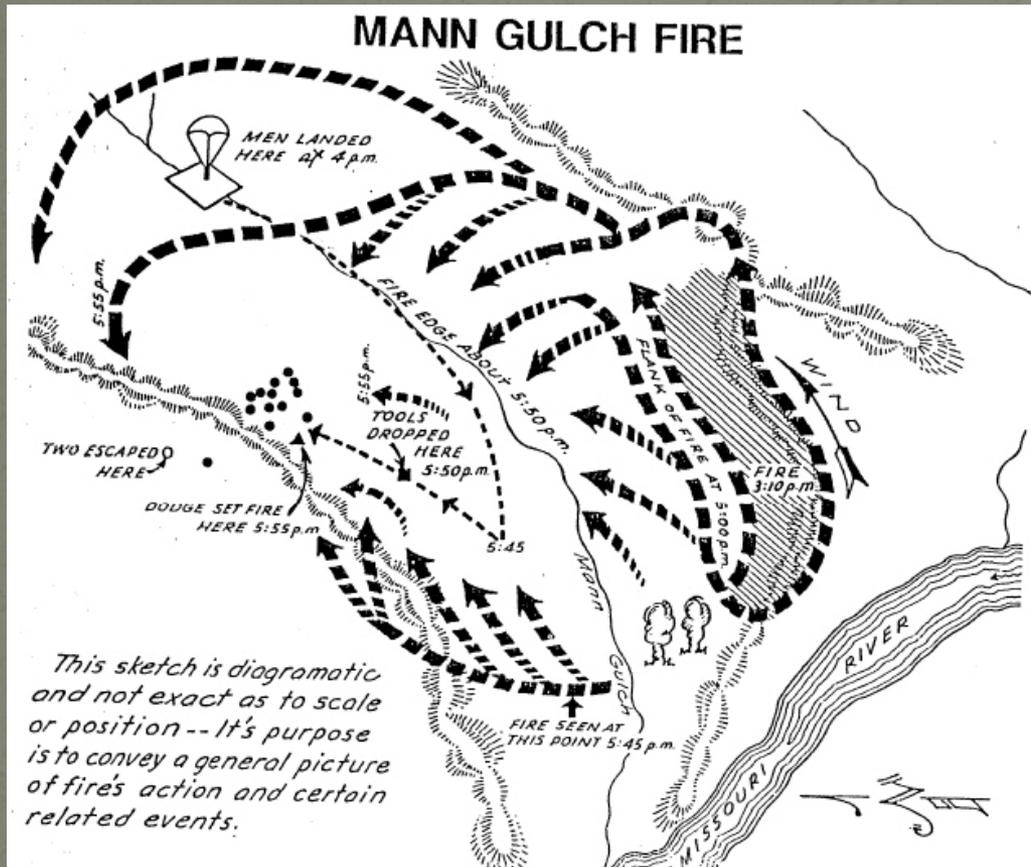
- 5:56 pm – The slowest of the men are caught by the fire and die
- 5:57 pm – The fastest of the men are caught
- 11 men die from suffocation in the fire
- 2 (Harrison & Sylvia) die the next day in the hospital from shock and burns

The Survivors



- R. Wagner Dodge
- Walter Rumsey
- Robert Sallee

Clarifying Questions



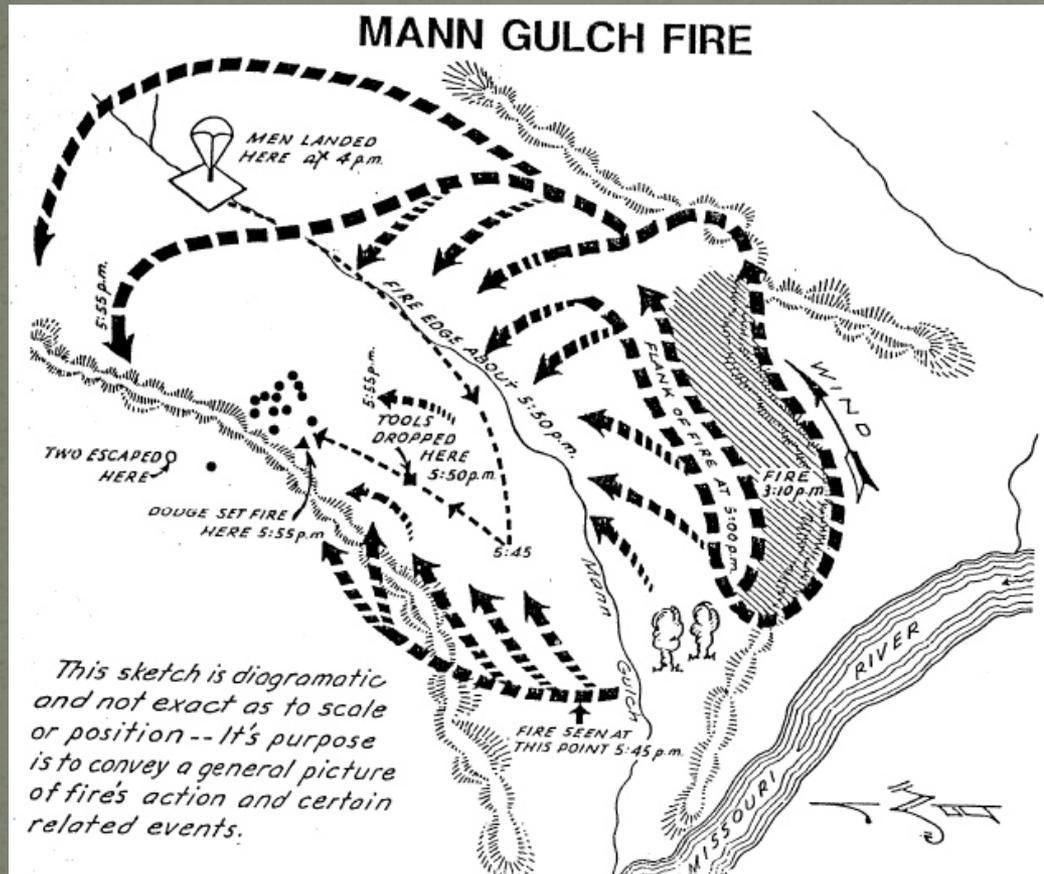
- What questions do you have about the events of August 5, 1949 in Mann Gulch?
- What else are you curious about?
- What else do you need to know to understand what went wrong?

As a crew member...

- If you had been Rumsey or Sallee, what would you have done when you saw Dodge telling you to join him?
- Why or why not?
- If you were one of the other crew members, would you have followed Rumsey & Sallee or Dodge?



Other Options



- From a leader's perspective, what could have been done differently or better at Mann Gulch?

Crew Risk Factors: Confusion Points



- Not a 10 o'clock fire
- The boss is eating dinner – how bad can it be?
- Who IS in charge?
- “Smile for the Camera!”
- Crew sees safety of river, but boss abruptly turns around and starts back up the mountain

Crew Risk Factors: Confusion Points



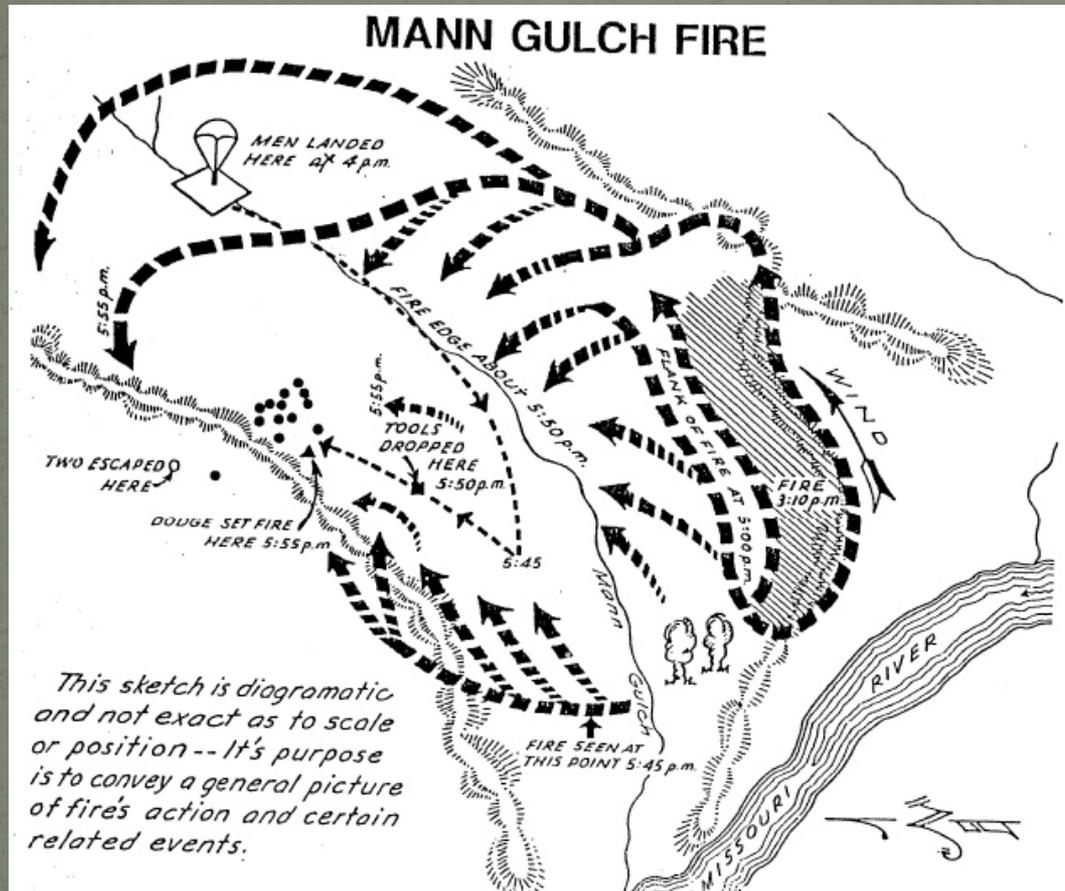
- “Drop your tools!” (But how will we fight the fire?)
- The boss lights a fire right in the middle of the only escape route
- He points to that fire and yells, “Follow me!”
- Each person thinks, “I want to follow the orders but I don’t know what they mean; I’m losing the race with the fire; I must be on my own”

The Ten Standard Fire Orders

- Fight fire aggressively but provide for safety first
- Initiate all actions based on current and expected fire behavior
- Recognize current weather conditions and obtain forecasts
- Ensure instructions are given and understood
- Obtain current information on fire status
- Remain in communication with crew members, your supervisors, and adjoining forces
- Determine safety zones and escape routes
- Establish lookouts in potentially hazardous situations
- Retain control at all times
- Stay alert, keep calm, think clearly, act decisively

How would you translate these orders for your work team?

Lessons Learned



- What are some of the lessons learned from Mann Gulch that you can use as a leader today when your team or staff facing crisis?

Essentials of Team Dynamics

- Five dynamics contribute to creating and supporting effective teams:
 - Attributes or behaviors of *individual team members*
 - Dimensions, strengths, & weaknesses of the *team working* relationship
 - *Problem solving* behaviors of teams
 - Behaviors of *team leaders*
 - *Organizational processes and practices* that impact team success

(Lafasto & Larson, 2001)

Team Characteristics

Good Team Members

- Work Knowledge Factors
 - Experience
 - Problem-Solving Ability
- Teamwork Factors
 - Openness
 - Supportiveness
 - Action Orientation
 - Personal Style

Good Team Leaders

- Goal focused
- Ensures a collaborative climate
- Builds confidence
- Demonstrates adequate technical “know how”
- Sets priorities
- Manages performance

Possible Crises

- “Smoldering” Crises
 - Lie below the surface, largely unseen
 - You may “sense” they are there but you have no concrete evidence
- “Slow Burn” Crises
 - A nagging situation that pops up and yet doesn’t quite feel like a real crisis
 - But it doesn’t go away and it slowly heats up to an explosion point
- “Flash Fire” Crises
 - The explosive situation that is typically consider a “real” crisis

Mann Gulch Leadership Lessons

- If you've made several problematic decisions in a row, be prepared to have your leadership questioned.
- If you want trust and compliance when the need for them cannot be fully explained, explain yourself early.
- If you expect those who work for you to exercise their own judgment, provide them with the decision-making experience now.

Mann Gulch Leadership Lessons

- If you have difficult decisions to make and insufficient time to explain them, a key to implementation may be loyal allies who are sure to execute them through thick or thin.
- In periods of anxiety and stress, it is your least experienced associates who will reach the panic zone first.
- If your organization is facing a period of uncertainty, change, or stress, now is the time to build a strong culture with good lines of interior communication, mutual understanding, and shared obligation.

-- Useem (1999)

Epilogue

- Questions?
- Comments?
- Take aways?

To Learn More

- Mclean, N. (1992). *Young Men and Fire*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
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For more about this presentation...

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