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Smokejumper Obituary: Wood, William Clayton "Bill" (Missoula 1943)

National Smokejumper Association

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Smokejumper Obituary

Wood, William Clayton "Bill" (Missoula 1943)

Bill died December 17, 2001 in Tigard, Oregon at the age of 79.

He was born August 16, 1922, in Missoula, Montana. He attended Roosevelt Grade School and graduated from Missoula County High School in 1940. He played basketball in high school and attended the University of Montana for two years, majoring in wildlife. He was deferred from military service.

In 1942, Bill was working for the U.S. Department of Justice, Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) at Fort Missoula. From 1941 to 1943, 1,200 people of Italian descent were detained at Fort Missoula. Bill would have been one of the INS employees processing and guarding the detainees. In late 1942, Bill started working for the Forest Service and in 1943 he was a smokejumper in Missoula, training at Nine Mile and Seely Lake. In 1943 he was promoted to squadleader, training conscientious objector smokejumper recruits in the techniques of firefighting and serving as a spotter for their jumps.

Bill continued smokejumping through 1953 and was one of the primary Missoula smokejumpers making rescue jumps. Bill was the "Rescue Foreman"• at Missoula. During his 11 years as a smokejumper he made nine documented rescue jumps, rescuing, and rendering first aid to people who had been injured, usually hunters, in the back country.

On some rescues, Dr. Amos P. Little, a Helena Montana physician who trained in the smokejumping program in 1945, jumped to administer first aid to the most seriously injured. In addition, Bill had at least 18 fire jumps.

Bill was part of a search party to locate a crashed Army B-25 bomber 12 miles southeast of Missoula. The plane crashed on November 30 on Miller Ridge, 1.5 miles east of Miller Peak on the Lolo National Forest. The pilot and two crew members were killed instantly. The pilot, a Missoula native, was coming home on leave and tried to land at Hale field. A low ceiling was reported at the time of the crash. Making the rescue jump with Bill was Dr. Amos Little from the Second Air Force Search and Rescue Division, Great Falls, Montana and Wag Dodge.

All smokejumpers and Forest Service employees were saddened by the loss of life on the Mann Gulch Fire in 1949. Bill was not directly involved in the fire. However, he asked Smokejumper Foreman Fred Brauer if he should prepare for a rescue mission to Mann Gulch. Fred told Bill that a rescue mission would not be needed.

In 1954, Bill began a career as an Equipment Development Specialist, developing and improving firefighter equipment for the Forest Service and other wildland firefighting organizations. He started in Missoula and in 1962 he transferred to Washington, D.C. In 1966 he finished his career with a move to Portland, Oregon, where he retired in 1975. Equipment Bill worked on included designing a contoured pack frame to fit a person's back, improving the smokejumper protective suit with lighter and stronger materials, and designing a wilderness rescue stretcher using a standard Navy Stokes litter mounted on a low-pressure airplane tail-wheel. Other equipment included a communication signaling system for a smokejumper spotter and the pilot in an airplane, a new fabric sleeping bag, and use of a liquid fertilizer as a fire retardant.

Perhaps most noteworthy was his participation in the development of the fire shelter that saw its first use in the late 1960s. In retirement, Bill was watching a television program that was explaining how a fire shelter had saved a fire crew's life from a wildfire. He reminisced to family and friends how he believed the fire shelter had saved his life, when he was inside, in a test fire during its development.

Another noteworthy development was the design by him and his son, Gary, of the first fiberglass bucket for helicopter water drops.

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Bill retired in 1975 due to Parkinson's disease.

(end of excerpt)