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National Smokejumper Association

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Smokejumper Obituary

Dodge, R. Wagner (Missoula 1941)

Pioneer smokejumper Wag Dodge died January 12, 1955. He was in the second smokejumper crew ever to be trained and jumped in 1941 (age 25), 1943-49. Wag is often remembered as the smokejumper foreman at the Mann Gulch Fire August 5, 1949, when 11 smokejumpers lost their lives. He had been a foreman since 1945.

Spotter Earl Cooley (MSO-40) and assistant Jack Nash (MSO-42) dropped 15 jumpers on the fire. Dodge, 33, and rookies Walt Rumsey (MSO-49) and Bob Sallee (MSO-49) were the only survivors from that crew.

Running up the steep hill trying to escape the fire, Dodge stopped and started what later was known as an escape fire. Dodge laid down in the burned off area and survived. Rumsey and Sallee made it to the top of the hill and escaped through an opening the rocks. There has always been a question as to whether or not Wag "invented" the escape fire at this moment.

In an interview with Smokejumper magazine in 2004, Jim "Smokey" Alexander (MSO-40) tells about a conversation he had with Wag on the Dean Creek Fire in 1942.

"After we had the fire knocked in the head, we had time to talk, as guys do. We discussed a number of times emergency exit procedures on fires.

We both decided we could escape from a fire. We talked about going into a burn and scraping a spot down to mineral soil, because there's a lot of oxygen in soil, and you could breathe it, and a fire would burn over you.

"He was a nice, kind person, very unassuming, and he was a good worker, and he was savvy about fire. He knew what he was doing.

"Wag had a soft voice, and even if he was the most knowledgeable guy, he wasn't the sort who would have an authoritative voice. You'd have to listen, want to listen."

Earl Schmidt (MSO-43) in an interview with Smokejumper magazine in 2001, also indicates that Dodge had considered this method of survival as early as 1943.

"You asked me to write you about what Wagner Dodge had said to us about using a small fire in which to stand in the face of a threatening blaze, and the ability to jump inside it. Inside the burned area a person would put his face to the ground where they would have scraped away the embers or ashes and thereby increased the possibility of survival.

"During that summer (1943) we had many conversations regarding firefighting. Wag discussed facing a threatening crown fire. He talked about carefully choosing the line of lightest fuel, running through it, dropping behind the wall of fire, and clearing embers to bare ground to find a small amount of clear air.

"A second approach he discussed was to choose a place of light fuel, light it and run into it after it had burned an area. This is interesting, six years later he would use this idea at the Mann Gulch Fire. I believe Wag would calmly pick the right time and spot and follow his plan without flinching."

Wag lived for five more years after Mann Gulch and died of Hodgkin's disease. He never jumped again after Mann Gulch

(end of excerpt)