

Jumper Recounts Yellowstone Quake Rescue in 1959

by Bob Nicol (Missoula  ™52) April 2000

Source: The National Smokejumper Association

On Aug. 17, 1959, the most powerful earthquake in Montana's recorded history battered the Madison River Canyon near the town of West Yellowstone. The quake, measuring 7.8 on the Richter Scale, triggered the largest landslide ever recorded in North America. An estimated 80 million tons of earth and rock fell from the side of a mountain into the Madison River, forming a dam and creating what is now known as Quake Lake. It's estimated that 28 people were killed.

The initial large shock occurred near midnight, sending waves surging down Hebgen Lake and over the top of Hebgen Dam. A 20-foot wall of water, sloshing as if it were in a giant dishpan, swept down the narrow Madison Canyon. From the dam to the mouth of the canyon, a distance of seven miles, there were three Forest Service campgrounds and a couple of dude ranches. Those facilities were packed with campers, most of whom were in bed. About the time the surge reached the canyon mouth, half of a 7600-foot mountain crashed into the river.

Forty years later, on Aug. 18, 1999, the Gallatin National Forest hosted a memorial at the site of the disaster where many of the survivors, their families and other participants gathered to remember. Eight smokejumpers from the Missoula base, including Al Hammond and I, were among the many involved in the rescue effort who attended the memorial event.

I was called out to the Aerial Fire Depot in the early morning of that day 40 years ago, assuming it was going to be for a fire mission, but the base was gearing up for a rescue. The plan was to load the airplane with emergency medical technicians, but since most jumpers were out on fires, all available overhead were suited up, and the remainder of the load was filled from the jump list.

In the meantime, we were hearing rumors about an earthquake, a landslide, a flood and a dam break. Nobody really seemed to know what was going on, as usual. We loaded up on the DC-2 with Cookie Calloway as the pilot, Joe Roemer and Randy Hurst as spotters. The jumpers were Al Hammond, foreman in charge,   Andy   Andersen, Jim Burleigh, Lowell Hansen, Bill McLaughlin, Pat Scheid, Dick Tracy and me. We figured that the West Yellowstone jumpers would be going also but it turned out their airplane was broke or gone or something.

When we flew into Madison canyon from the west it looked like half the mountain on the south side of the canyon had been cut in half and

dumped into the river. We could see that a portion of the highway was under the slide and that there were lots of vehicles and people trapped between there and Hebgen lake, a few miles upstream. Several dust plumes were coming off the main slide, which turned out to be mini-landslides caused by aftershocks

We made a couple of passes up and down the canyon trying to sort things out, then we got word that the Hebgen Dam had been cracked and could break at any time. Hammond said weâ€™d better get those people to higher ground as quickly as possible.

Survivors had laid out a white SOS near the dam. Near it was a bunch of people, and another large group was about halfway down the canyon at a place now known as Refuge Point.

We decided to split the load. Al and three guys jumped by the dam and then Andersen and the rest of us took the lower spot. The air was kind of rough and it had started to rain. I was holding into the wind but was going downhill and backward a lot faster than I wanted to. There were some real impressive parachute landing falls made right among the rescues that day. As I was thrashing around trying to get myself untangled several folks ran up and asked if I was OK. Seemed a little ironic somehow.

We found a lot of hurt people and a few fatalities. Others were missing. There was a lot of confusion too, but folks were helping each other as best they could and had mostly done what could be done at that point. We did a little first aid work while trying to get everybody to move up the hill. That was the hard part. They just didnâ€™t want to leave their vehicles, their tents or any belongings down by the river. We got most of them moved up a ways but not near far enough as far as I was concerned. Turned out they were right. The dam was cracked sure enough, but it never did break.

As I said, it was raining a little, and a couple of ladies asked â€œBig Andyâ€ if they could use his parachute for a tent. He couldn't refuse, of course but was not too happy when later he saw that they had cut off all the lines right at the skirt.

It seemed like the air in that canyon was full of little airplanes, mostly news media and sightseers, I suppose. There was probably some officialdom up there but they had no radio contact or control of any kind. Cookie, the DC-2 pilot, told me later that trying to drop our cargo in that sort of deal was something he didnâ€™t want to do ever again.

About noon, helicopters started coming in bringing some real medical types and the law. They started moving injured people out and things started to settle down. Later in the day they got the road open. The jumpers started working along the river and the rapidly rising Quake Lake searching for survivors and victims. We looked in vehicles,

campers and trailers and took the license plates off everything that was or would be under water. There are probably a lot of once-new rigs that are under the surface of that lake today. We continued searching until later the following day when most of us were demobed back to Missoula. Al Hammond stayed on to help explain things to the fact-finding officials.

Many changes have been made in Madison Canyon since the quake, including a new highway above the new lake, lots of roadside markers referring to the event and a visitorsâ€™ center right on top of the landslide.

The commemorative program began with people gathering in a meadow near Refuge Point. Shortly thereafter the West Yellowstone Twin Otter showed up and dropped Greg Anderson and eight of his folks on a proficiency jump. Everybody got right into the spot and was soon mixing with the crowd answering the usual questions. It turned into a nice show-and-tell thing. From there, everybody moved up to a viewpoint above the visitorsâ€™ center where a local pastor delivered a service reciting the names of each person who had died there, many of whom were entombed in the landslide below.

The folks on the Gallatin Forest and volunteers at the visitorsâ€™ center did a great job of putting the memorial together and contacting survivors or their families who are scattered all over the country. And, the West Yellowstone jumpers helped lighten the mood of what otherwise might have been a somber event.

Robert H. Nicol rookied at Nine Mile in 1952 and jumped eight seasons, six of them on the New Mexico detail. His last jump season was 1961. Bob started flying for a living in 1962 with Johnson Flying Service and has also flown for Intermountain, Southern Air Transport, Interior Airways, Evergreen International, the US Forest Service, Empire and Leading Edge. He served 2-1/2 years in the Marine Corps. Bobâ€™s still flying and he lives near Hamilton, Mont.

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