In Memory of

Kathi Walsleben Beck
Prineville Hotshot, age 24

Tamera Jean Bickett
Prineville Hotshot, age 25

Scott Alan Blecha
Prineville Hotshot, age 27

Levi Brinkley
Prineville Hotshot, age 22

Robert E. Browning, Jr.
Helitack Crew, age 27

Douglas Michael Dunbar
Prineville Hotshot, age 22

Terri Ann Hagan
Prineville Hotshot, age 28

Bonnie Jean Holtby
Prineville Hotshot, age 21

Rob Johnson
Prineville Hotshot, age 26

Jon R. Kelso
Prineville Hotshot, age 27

Don Mackey
Missoula Smoke Jumper, age 34

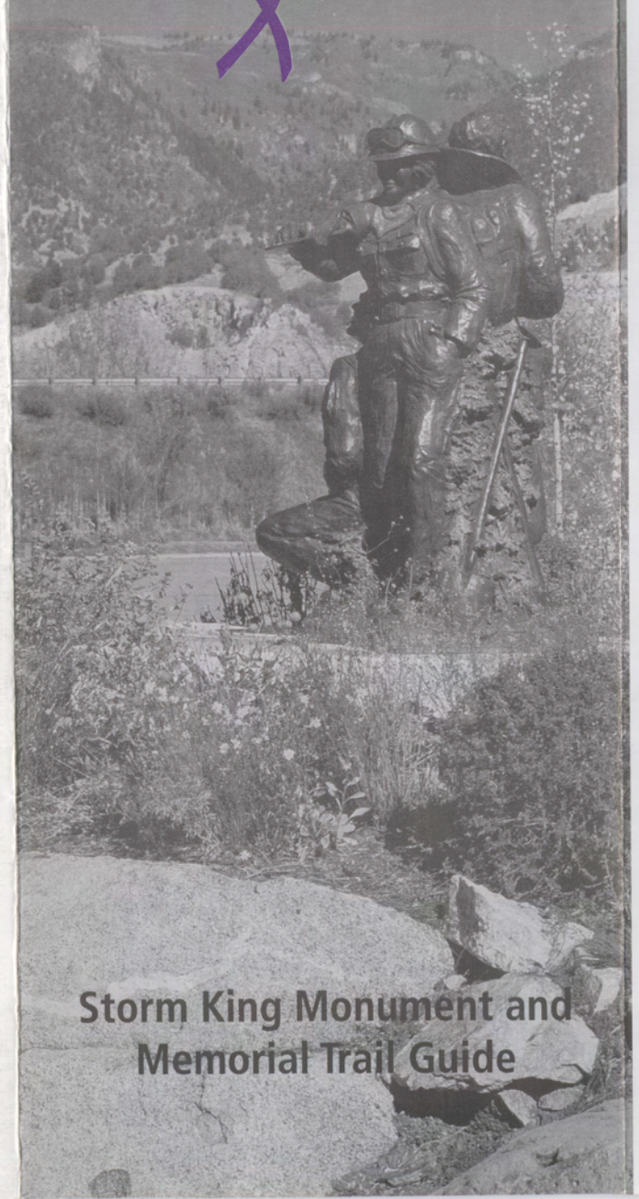
Roger Roth
McCall Smoke Jumper, age 30

Jim Thrash
McCall Smoke Jumper, age 44

Richard Kent Tyler
Helitack Crew, age 33

South Canyon Fire

We will not forget . . .



Storm King Monument and Memorial Trail Guide

History

On July 6, 1994, 14 firefighters perished as a wall of flames swept over them in a matter of seconds. Trapped by steep slopes and dense vegetation, they gave their lives in the line of duty on Storm King Mountain about five miles west of Glenwood Springs, Colorado.

During a year of drought and record high temperatures, a lightning strike ignited a fire on July 2 that was reported to the Bureau of Land Management the next day. The fire began on a ridge in pinyon-juniper and was burning in no more than two trees. It was named the South Canyon fire because of its location near the South Canyon exit on Interstate 70.

Along with the South Canyon fire, there were more than 40 fires reported to the Grand Junction Dispatch at the time with several fires threatening public safety and structures. These were attacked first with available firefighters.

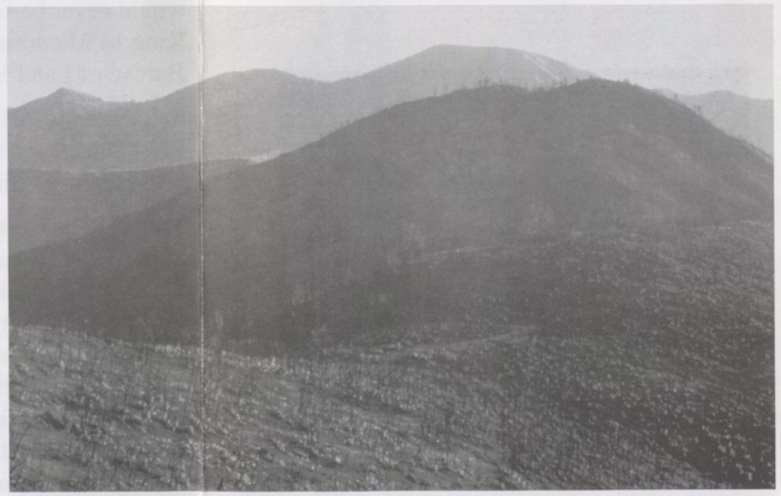
On July 4, five new fires were reported in the area covered by the Grand Junction Dispatch. Two were more than 100 acres and still 31 remained uncontrolled. All fire personnel were committed to the highest priority fires. Around 6:30 p.m., the Forest Service and BLM each had an engine at the base of Storm King Mountain released from other fires and assigned to fight the South Canyon fire. But, they determined they could not reach the fire before dark and decided they would return the next morning. By then, the fire had grown to 11 acres.

The next day seven BLM firefighters hiked 3 ½ hours and built a helispot and began building fireline. They requested a helicopter, a 20-person crew and another engine crew – however none were available.

At 5:45 p.m., eight smokejumpers parachuted to the top of the fire and continued building a fireline. The fire was burning actively and crossed the line constructed by the BLM crew earlier that day. The fire had grown to 50 acres.

On July 6, more firefighters arrived. During the course of the day there were 50 firefighters on the fire. At 4 p.m. explosive conditions were present. A combination of factors existed; the fire had dried vegetation in an already drought ridden area, winds shifted and were gusty, and the temperature due to the fire was extreme. The fire blew up. Between 4:14 and 4:18 p.m. the fire spotted below the crew walking out the west flank of the fireline. The spot reached the ridgeline within two minutes, overtaking 12 firefighters. Two more firefighters who had been working at a helispot attempted to escape but were overcome trying to outrun the fire.

The remaining firefighters survived by escaping out the east drainage or seeking a safety zone and deploying their fire shelters.



Storm King Mountain shortly after the South Canyon fire

A few quotes from the thousands recorded at the trailhead . . .

"They gave all, and we will never forget it!"

"Very emotional and very difficult but worth the view – God bless firefighters."

"A great tribute to our heroes."

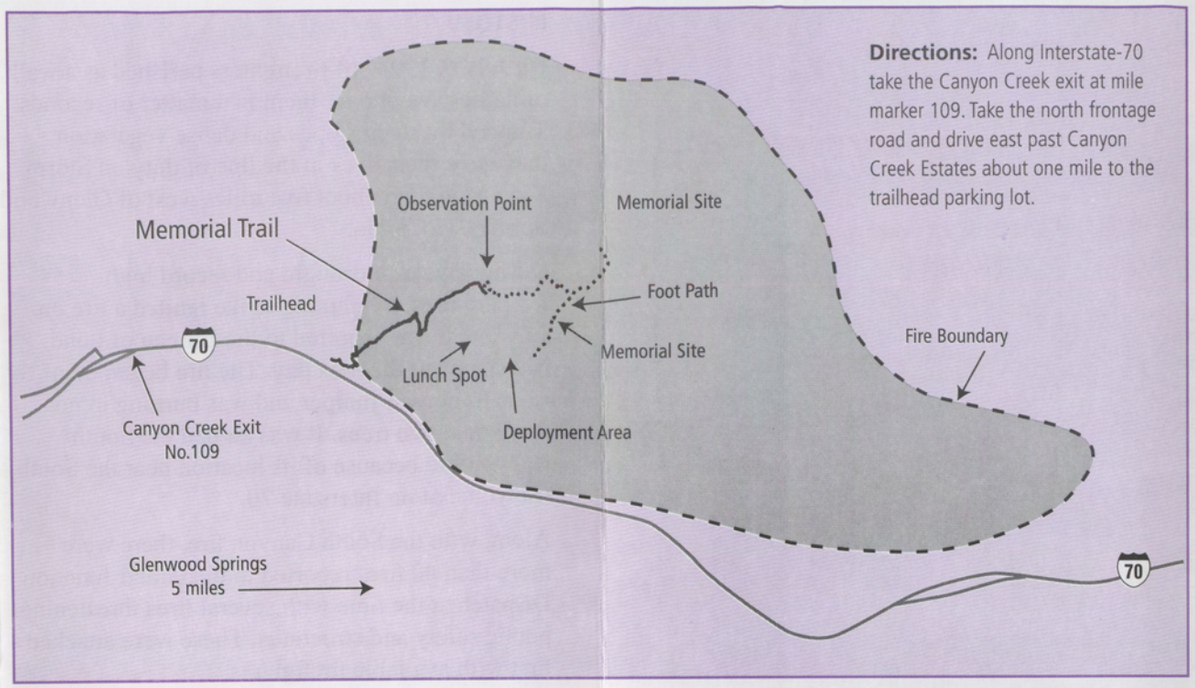
"I am a firefighter in Germany, and it took my breath away to see how dangerous a wildland fire could be. I will always remember."

"Thanks to all who fight forest fires to protect this beautiful country."

"What a great honor to stand where these great men and women gave their lives."

"Back again to pay respect and stand in awe at what these firefighters faced."

Crosses mark the sites of the fallen firefighters.



Storm King Memorial Trail

Tribute

The community of Glenwood Springs was devastated. To ensure that these 14 fallen firefighters would never be forgotten, they formed the Storm King 14 Memorial Committee and worked with the Bureau of Land Management.

Scholarship – They collectively raised more than $224,000. A scholarship fund was established for firefighters and their relatives.

Storm King Statue – In addition, $90,000 was used to erect a memorial to the firefighters at Two Rivers Park in Glenwood Springs. It was dedicated on July 6, 1995, one year after the fatal incident. The monument consists of a bronze statue featuring three firefighters. Around the statue are 14 boulders with the names and biographies of the fallen firefighters. It is a stopping place for firefighter crews passing through Glenwood Springs either enroute to a fire or returning home. It honors all firefighters and allows visitors to reflect on how courageous wildland firefighters are – putting their lives on the line to save others.

Storm King Memorial Trail – In addition, the Storm King 14 Memorial Committee wanted to pay tribute at the site where the firefighters lost their lives. Their goal was to help us understand and reflect upon what happened at Storm King Mountain and to learn from that fateful day.

The trail was left rugged and steep as it was for the firefighters. An observation point was established one mile up the trail giving a complete view of the fire area. From this point, a more primitive trail continues up another steep ¾ of a mile to the sites where the firefighters perished. Visitors return the way they came.

The path is very similar to the one the firefighters took only they carried heavy packs on their backs.

What we learned . . .

The lives of the 14 firefighters on Storm King Mountain serve as a constant reminder for all firefighters today. We learned that human life is more precious than any home, property or landscape and safety should guide all firefighters' decisions.

There are steep slopes and unstable footing – it allows visitors to experience what it is like for a firefighter.

This may not be the kind of hike everyone is used to, but the BLM maintains the path in this condition specifically to pay tribute to the firefighters and acknowledge the conditions they work under.

Your help is needed to protect the fragile slopes and sites here. Please stay on the trails and paths.