

Aboard the crashed Sikorsky

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THOSE WHO DIED

Matt Hammer

A 14-day tour

This summer was full of endings and beginnings for Matt Hammer.

The 23-year-old from Grants Pass graduated in May with a business degree from Corban College, a small Christian school in Salem. In late June he married his college girlfriend, Monica Crumley -- and left soon thereafter for what was supposed to be his final summer fighting fires.

Hammer was one of nine men who died Tuesday when a firefighting helicopter crashed in the mountains of Northern California.

Friends say Hammer joined a crew the past few summers, often with buddies. He was tall and muscular and unflappable under pressure. "At the end of the day, he loved the adventure and loved being with the guys," says Katie Dennis, a college friend.

Hammer grew up in Northern California and moved to Grants Pass as a teenager, friends say. He graduated from Grants Pass High School in 2003 and was close with his parents and three sisters.

At Corban, he developed a reputation as a fierce member of intramural football and basketball teams. The faculty squad dreaded having to play him.

Friends say Hammer was quiet -- not one to be the center of attention. But he was fun-loving, too, always up for a prank or snowball fight. He enjoyed doing anything outdoors, and he had eclectic interests.

"We talked about stuff from accounting to girls to cars to forest fires," says Rick Kappler, a close friend from college.

Hammer was well known at Corban, which has fewer than 1,000 students.

"He was friendly with everybody," Dennis says. "People kind of fell in love with him, even if they didn't know him."

Word of the crash spread quickly this week, says Bryce Bernard, dean of the business school.

He remembers Hammer as a good student. Hammer wanted to start his own company someday, but he hadn't decided exactly what or where he might work first. As a senior, Bernard says, Hammer talked about two passions: getting married and fighting forest fires again.

"He did that every summer," Bernard says, "and he loved doing it."

The night before his wedding, Hammer ate a picnic dinner with family and friends at a park in Gold Beach,



along Oregon's southern coast. He and his buddies built a huge bonfire at the beach.

The next morning, Hammer was up early for breakfast and boyish fun with his groomsmen, using small explosives to blow up bottles in the country. They barely made it to the wedding in time, Kappler remembers, but Hammer was characteristically calm.

He and Crumley exchanged vows outside her parents' home, on a deck built for the ceremony. In pictures, Hammer is beaming, his light-brown hair neatly trimmed.

The newlyweds spent their honeymoon in Hawaii, then headed back to Oregon. Hammer had lined up another fire-fighting stint with Grayback Forestry Inc. As Kappler understood it, the mission was supposed to last 14 days.

It's hard to accept the realization things didn't turn out that way, Kappler says. But his faith, he said, helps him cope.

"I will see Matt Hammer again," he said.

-- *Laura Oppenheimer*

Shawn Patrick Blazer

Saw the beauty in fires

Shawn Patrick Blazer, 30, had worked other jobs, but when he started fighting fires last year, he discovered his calling.

"He found something he adored doing," said Carole Holman, his aunt. "The fires were so exciting to him. He loved to take pictures of the wonder and the beauty of them.

"I'm sure," she said, "the camera went down with him."

Blazer grew up in southern Oregon, attending high school in Talent. Holman described her 6-foot-1, 195-pound nephew as a shy, redheaded, late bloomer who "turned into the incredibly tall, gorgeous hunk that he was."



He loved to hunt and fish, play online computer games, spend time with friends -- "just be full of life and ready to go," Holman said.

Blazer spent part of his teen years with foster parents who cared for boys in the juvenile justice system. Rosanna Hicks, his former foster mother, remembered him Thursday as strong, serious-minded and dedicated to whatever he was doing. "When he came here," said Hicks, who lives in Drain, "he made up his mind to follow all the P's and Q's."

At the time of his death, Blazer lived in Medford, where he cared for his disabled mother, Verna Blazer. His father, Steve, and sister, Jamie Nodwell, live in California.

Working on his mother's car this summer, Blazer suffered a nasty cut on his thumb, causing him to miss fighting one or more fires.

"He just couldn't wait," Holman said, "to get back in the action."

-- *Katy Muldoon*

Scott Charlson

A budding journalist

Scott Charlson, 25, was a student at Southern Oregon University with a strong interest in becoming a journalist.

He was majoring in communications and two years ago was the sports editor of the student newspaper, *The Siskiyou*, said D.L. Richardson, chairman of the communications department at the university. Charlson, who would have been a senior in the fall, also worked in the university's sports information office.

Richardson recalled one instance when the accuracy of a quote in one of Charlson's stories was challenged. He said the student-journalist responded by producing a tape recording of the conversation verifying the quote.

"That's how good he is," Richardson said. "He backed up his tracks. He had a great future ahead of him as a journalist."

Richardson said Charlson, whose family lives in Eugene, brought the same commitment to his studies.

"He's one of those kids who could challenge you in class, and it would provide a great dialogue for the whole class," Richardson said. "You didn't feel challenged or threatened. You felt, 'Gosh, I'm glad you brought that statement in.'"

-- *Edward Walsh and Wade Nkrumah*

Edrik Gomez

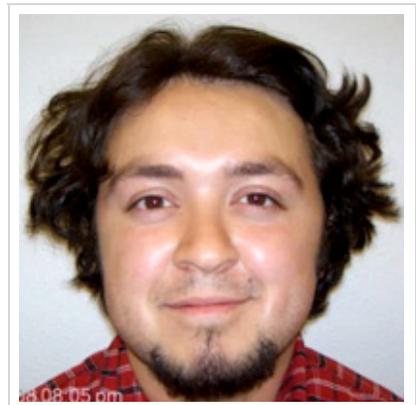
Emerging as a leader

Edrik Gomez was spending his first year as a firefighter, said Lauri Red, a next-door neighbor.

He would have been a junior this fall pursuing double majors in communications and political science at Southern Oregon University. He had been living with two of his four brothers on campus in Ashland.

"He was just a really good soul," Red said, wiping her face. "He always had a smile. If the lawn needed mowing, he'd mow it."

Christine Florence, executive director of marketing at Southern Oregon, said Gomez went to Coquille High School and arrived at the university after transferring from Southwestern Oregon Community College in Coos Bay.



D.L. Richardson, chairman of the communications department at Southern Oregon, said Gomez impressed him as having "a compassion for his fellow man."

"He was one of those students who would go out... and pour out his heart to help people," Richardson said. "You could see it in class... he was an insightful student, very dedicated to his studies."

Outside the classroom, Richardson said, Gomez was very involved with Latino Student Union.

"I think he was a driving force behind really helping bring the Latino Student Union to the forefront and helping the different groups of the multicultural coalition come together, be a united force and do great things in the community," Richardson said.

In that respect, Gomez was emerging as a leader, he added.

-- *Wade Nkrumah*

Bryan Rich

Football and nature

Bryan Rich loved the outdoors. He felt blessed to have lived around southern Oregon's forests and rivers his whole life. Rich grew up in Gold Beach and graduated from Crater High School in Central Point in 1997.

"Nature gives me peace of mind," he wrote on his MySpace page. He loved to get out of the rat race and go to the river, he said.

Rich loved football, too. The backdrop of his page is the Denver Broncos' logo, and he lists John Elway as his hero. He excelled in wrestling, though, said Katie O'Donnell, his fiancée and lifelong friend.

His friend Justin Miller said they spent a lot of time on the river, fishing for salmon. Miller also praised his friend's professional skills. "Bryan probably was one of the best framing carpenters in this town," Miller said.

Rich had taken up work as a firefighter because the slumping construction industry made it hard to find work framing houses. But he loved fighting fires.

O'Donnell said Rich loved helping others, which is what motivated him to try fighting fires for the first time just a few months ago. He discovered a passion for the new job. "The experience motivated him to become a career firefighter," O'Donnell said. "He planned to sign up when he returned from California."

Miller spent time with Rich at a barbecue just before Rich left to fight the Iron Complex fire in Northern California.

"He was excited," Miller said about his friend. "He was ready to go down there."

-- *Jacques Van Lunen*



Roark Schwanenberg

Pilot lived for family

Veteran firefighting helicopter pilot Roark Schwanenberg died the way he would have preferred, said his wife, Christine.

"He was flying," she said. "It would be the way he would want to enter heaven."

Schwanenberg, 54, was at the controls of the Sikorsky S-61N firefighting helicopter that crashed in Northern California's rugged Shasta-Trinity National Forest late Tuesday.

When Christine, 55, got the call notifying her of her husband's death, she was by the phone, "waiting for him to call," she said Thursday from the couple's living room. With her were daughters Deena Tsiatsos, 22, and Margo Schwanenberg, 17. A son, Chris, Deena's twin, was en route from a forestry job in Montana.



She'd spoken to her husband shortly before the crash, and that last telephone conversation "was a true gift," Christine said. "He knew the last time he went up in the air that he was loved."

The 6-foot, 250-pound Schwanenberg had been in California less than a week, battling a 27-square-mile wildfire. He told her little about the fire when she talked to him, and he was still grieving the death of his younger brother, Jon, 48, of Klamath Falls, about a month earlier, she said.

"Everybody's heart is just broken and bleeding," she said.

Roark Schwanenberg graduated from high school in Klamath Falls and learned to fly helicopters in the Army. He discovered northeastern Oregon's picturesque Wallowa County while fighting wildfires. Later, he and Christine, a Lostine native, met and married.

"He basically lived for his family," she said. But when he had free time, he enjoyed riding a Harley-Davidson motorcycle, target shooting and playing with their three big dogs, Beau, Wriggley and Dante .

Sometimes, when off on a fire, he even left whimsical phone messages for the dogs, Christine said.

"They would perk up their ears and their heads would lift," she said.

-- *Richard Cockle*

David Steele

'He was our hero'

Manning the line for his varsity football team, David Steele was a passionate player, a hard worker and a devoted teammate.

"He absolutely wanted no honor or glory for himself," said Ashland High School Principal Jeff Schlecht. "It was about what he could do for the team."



That instinct to help others led Steele, 19, to set his sights early on to become a firefighter.

"I think he thought the job was honorable," said his mother, Susanne.



After graduating high school in 2007, David Steele headed to Bend, studying at Central Oregon Community College to become a firefighter and emergency medical technician.

Last summer he battled forest fires to pay for his education. This year he signed up with Grayback Forestry again. He was fighting his first fire of the summer in Northern California when his helicopter crashed, killing him and eight others aboard.

"He died doing what he wanted to do," said his father, Paul.

On Thursday his family and friends also remembered Steele as a beloved older brother, a solid student, and a fun-loving friend. They marveled at his dedication to making a difference, rereading the motto on his MySpace page: "Live for something or die for nothing, it's your choice."

"He was the only guy I can say unconditionally loved me through thick and thin," said Tysin Senestraro, his best friend. "I know I have someone watching over me now."

"He was a big, strong boy with a heart of gold," said his father. "He was our hero. He put himself at risk to protect others. Most of us don't have that in us."

-- *Arthur Gregg Sulzberger*

James N. Ramage

A lifetime in helicopters

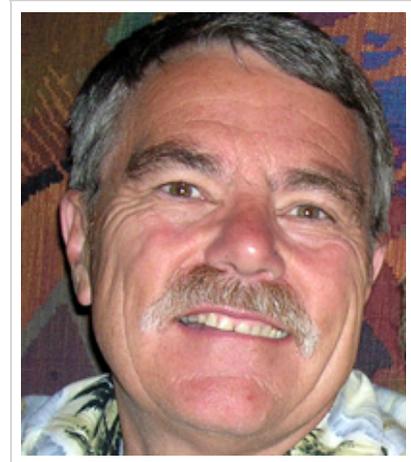
James N. Ramage spent more than four decades inside helicopters.

On Tuesday, he died in one making sure others were safe.

The 63-year-old Redding man was a helicopter inspector pilot for the U.S. Forest Service, a position he took 11 days after retiring from a long career with CAL Fire, California's state fire agency.

His job was to make sure pilots followed safety guidelines. "He was on board to check the run, the pilot, the whole mission," Forest Service Regional Aviation Officer Dennis Hulbert said.

Ramage's life with helicopters began in 1966 when he started flying for the U.S. Army. He served until 1970, completing one tour of duty in Vietnam. Ramage continued flying in Southeast Asia after his time in the service as a pilot for Air America until 1974.



Upon his return stateside, the veteran pilot worked for aviation companies in Northern California, often contracting out to the forest service.

He joined CAL Fire in 1984 as its first forestry pilot, carrying a badge that bore the number "1."

He retired from CAL Fire in 2003, having moved up to aviation safety officer. Unable to stay away from flying, he took the inspector position with the U.S. Forest Service days later.

Ramage is survived by his wife of 38 years, Diane, and their 28-year-old daughter, Ginger.

"The U.S. Forest Service was very fortunate to have Jim as part of our workforce and family," Pacific Southwest Regional Forester Randy Moore said.

-- *Jacques Von Lunen*

Steven "Caleb" Renno

Never-ending runner's high

Steven "Caleb" Renno, 21, lived as if he was on a never-ending runner's high.

Running was his passion during four years at Illinois Valley High School.

Pope got to know Renno -- who went by Caleb -- as an assistant coach for the track and field team.

"He always had a smile on his face," Pope said. "He would always lend a helping hand; hardly ever saw him in a bad mood."

She said Renno competed in cross country in fall and ran track -- the 800-, 1,500- and 3,000-meter distance races -- in spring.



"He had a lot of natural ability, and he was fast," Pope said. "But he also worked very hard to achieve those goals that he set for himself."

Renno attended Southern Oregon University in Ashland from fall 2005 through winter 2007. Crash victims Edrick Gomez, 19, a Coquille High School graduate, and Scott Charlson, 25, of Phoenix, were current communications majors at Southern Oregon.

Bethany described Renno as "extremely respectful to other kids, and to staff and teachers."

Easy going. Outgoing. Personable. All of those fit, too.

"He would come into my office and just visit; talk about what he was thinking and what he wanted to do," Bethany said.

Renno was among many of the school's grads who worked for Grayback fighting fires during summers, she said.

"They feel important, and it's an important job," Bethany said.

THE SURVIVORS

[View a video of the survivors](#)

William Coultas

Recognized across town

William Coultas has a high profile in Cave Junction.

He and his wife, Chris, are graduates of the city's high school, Illinois Valley.

In addition, Coultas, 44, is recognizable as co-owner with his wife of the Radio Shack, a pilot and a coach for the high school's softball team.

Coultas was the first to arrive at the University of California-Davis Medical Center. He came in after midnight -- and in the worst condition.

Coultas, who was co-piloting the Sikorsky S-61 when it crashed, had third-degree burns on at least one-third of his body -- from his hands, arms and legs to his face. A breathing tube to keep his esophagus from swelling shut remained in place as of Friday night.

"He's is on the more severe end," Dr. Tina Palmieri, director of the hospital's burn unit, said Friday.

Coultas underwent more than three hours of surgery Thursday to graft skin from his abdomen and thighs onto the areas where his skin had been burned off and would not regenerate.

Coultas will remain hospitalized for at least 35 days and undergo intensive rehabilitation, Palmieri said.

"This is a tremendous stress on the family," Palmieri said. "And (Coultas) has got a very supportive family here."

Pope, the high school's office manager, said Coultas is an all-around good guy.

"He always volunteered with a lot of things. Whatever his kids were involved in, he was involved in," Pope said.

Cougar Booster Club. Fundraisers. Coaching.

"Whatever he could do," Pope said. "We're a small community so we need all that kind of help."

Pope said she met Coultas and his wife through their shared involvement with the Cougars' softball team, on which her daughter and Coultas' daughter, Ricci, were members.

The Coultas' son, Matt, is a sophomore at Illinois Valley, Pope said. Ricci is a junior communication major at Southern Oregon University.

Pope said people around Cave Junction still are reeling from news of the crash.

"I think in a small community it's always shocking because you get to know everybody, and everyone knew Bill because they own the Radio Shack and he also spent so much time in the valley helping others."

The initial shock of the news about Coultas gave way to a collective sigh of relief with news that he had survived.

"Hopefully he's going to be okay and doctors can fix him up," Pope said.

-- *Wade Nkrumah*

Jonathan Frohreich

"A typical teenager"

Leora Frohreich said her grandson, Jonathan Frohreich is "a typical" teenager, earnest and polite, with good friends, who always helps her with chores.

Frohreich, 18, of Medford, is a recent graduate of South Medford High School and his grandmother said he is hoping to attend a mechanical program run by Boeing, which sponsors the Manufacturing Engineering Technology program at the Oregon Institute of Technology.

She said this was her grandson's second fire after taking a job with Grayback Forestry this summer. The first was in southern Oregon, where he was on a tanker truck spraying water on hot spots.

For that reason, the family always felt that he would be safe.

Frohreich arrived about 4 a.m. Wednesday at the hospital in Davis, Calif.. He was sent immediately to the burn unit, where he was treated for second-degree burns to the face and a fractured lower back.

Frohreich was released from intensive care Thursday and in "good condition," sitting up, watching TV and eating as of Friday, said Carole Gan, spokeswoman for the U.C.-Davis Health Systems. He is expected to be released in the coming days, Gan said.

Leora Frohreich said the accident has convinced her grandson to pursue education beyond high school.

-- *The Oregonian*

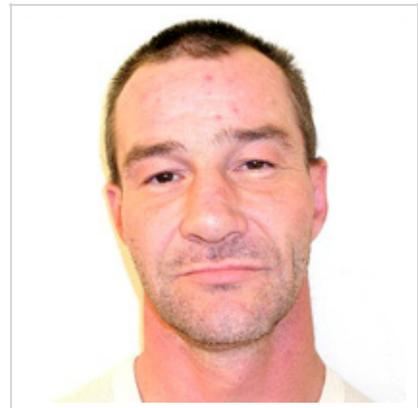
**Richard Schroeder Jr.**

Getting another chance

Ricky Schroeder, 42, of Medford knows a thing or two about second chances. After a two-decade struggle with drug addiction, the Medford man found redemption in a job at Grayback Forestry Inc.

"Fighting wildfires was something he'd wanted to do for a long time," said Linda Parks, 60, Schroeder's mother, " but he didn't have his life straightened up."

Two years ago, inspired by his now-3½-year-old daughter, Ruby, Schroeder got help. Once stable, his mother said, he started looking for work that would take him into the woods. He heard about fighting wildfires -- and how much it paid. "He was sold on doing it," Parks said. "But he knew it was dangerous."



Last summer was Schroeder's first wildfire season. Parks said her son, who also has two teenage children, returned home in the fall, exhausted but exhilarated. "He said it was awesome but dangerous and scary," his mother recalls.

Parks said that she isn't surprised her son got out of the crash with the least severe injuries of anyone. "He finally got his second chance at life," she said. "And he didn't want to lose it."

Parks said her son told her he'd whispered one thing over and over again as he struggled to escape the broken, blazing helicopter.

"I'm not dying. I'm not dying. I'm not dying."

-- *Michelle Roberts*

Michael Brown

Childhood dream achieved

Michael Brown realized a childhood dream when he signed on to fight wildfires.

"He told me he saw guys fight a fire behind his house when he was 12, and that he's wanted to be one of those guys ever since," said Jesse Wright, a friend who works with Brown at Grayback Forestry.

Michael Brown arrived at the hospital at about 4 a.m. Wednesday. Brown suffered from facial burns and fractured facial bones.

On Thursday, he was released from intensive care and in "good condition." He was sitting up, watching TV and eating as of Friday, said Carole Gan, spokeswoman for the U.C.-Davis Health Systems. Brown is expected to be released soon, Gan said.



While still in high school, Brown started volunteering for the Rogue River Fire Department, said Mary Turnham, the mother of Brown's best friend.

After he graduated from Rogue River High School in 2006, he took a couple of jobs at local stores, where he met Wright.

When Wright told him about his work at Grayback, Brown jumped at the chance to get to the fire line.

"He really enjoys it," Wright said. "He's going to do it for the rest of his life."

The two became fast friends through the hard work.

"We were on a squad together for the last tour before this one," Wright said. "Michael was a motivation for me and the other guys on that job. He would always say, 'I want to work; I don't want to be lazy.'"

Brown, 20, brings the same energy as he fixes up vintage cars to show quality, Turnham said. His latest project was a 1972 El Camino.

"I called him in the hospital and he said he doesn't care about whatever money he might get for this accident," Wright said. "He's going to go back."

-- *Jacques Von Lunen*

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