

## COMING HOME

# Families of seven firefighters receive their remains in Medford Tuesday

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MEDFORD — The remains of seven young firefighters were returned home Tuesday afternoon to be laid to rest.

Shawn Blazer, 30, and Bryan Rich, 29, of Medford; Scott Charlson, 25, Edrik Gomez, 19, and David Steele, 19, all of Ashland; Matthew Hammer, 23, of Grants Pass; and Steven Renno, 21, of Cave Junction died in a helicopter crash Aug. 5. Their bodies were flown to the Medford airport from Weaverville, Calif.

The Grayback Forestry Inc. firefighters died when a Merlin-based Carson Helicopter Inc.'s Sikorsky-61 crashed and burned on the Buckhorn fire of the Iron 44 Complex in the Trinity Alps Wilderness some 35 miles northwest of Redding. The firefighters, all part of a crew from Grayback's White City base, were among nine killed. Four others were injured.

After receiving the remains from the Forrest Funeral Home in Weaverville, Grayback President Mike Wheelock flew with them to Medford, where five of them were given to family members.

The remains of Charlson were then flown on to Eugene, where Wheelock presented them to the firefighter's parents. The last leg of the journey ended in North Bend, where Gomez' parents were presented with the remains of their son.

Each of the firefighter's remains was contained in a bronze box six inches wide, six inches deep and seven inches long. Each box had a plaque attached with the appropriate name inscribed on it.

During the quiet ceremony in Medford, loved ones were presented with the remains, an American flag that had covered the remains at the crash site and a death certificate. Firefighters lined up to honor their fallen comrades.

"What we are doing today is a very personal moment between us and their families — we are bringing them home," Wheelock said in a prepared statement.

A public tribute for the fallen firefighters on Aug. 15 at the Jackson County Fairgrounds and Exposition Park in Central Point drew some 3,500 people.

In addition to those of the firefighters, the remains of veteran pilot Roark Schwanenberg, 54, of Lostine, also were flown to Medford Tuesday. A Carson Helicopter crew was expected to fly his remains to his home in northeastern Oregon.

The remains of U.S. Forest Service aviation inspector Jim Ramage, 63, of Redding, Calif., were returned to his family in Redding by the Forrest Funeral Home.

The three Grayback firefighters who survived the crash — Michael Brown, 20, Jonathan Frohreich, 18, and Rick Schroeder, 42 — are recovering in their homes in the Medford area. Pilot William "Bill" Coultas, 44, of Cave Junction, who was severely burned in the accident, is in fair condition in the UC Davis Medical Center in Sacramento.

The Grayback firefighters not involved in the crash immediately stood down following the accident, but most are now back fighting fires throughout the West.

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