



The Oregonian

Firefighters' remains arrive in copter

California ceremony - A quiet crowd mourns the deaths; in Ashland, another service is held

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The Oregonian Staff

WEAVERVILLE, Calif. -- A helicopter cut through an orange-tinged haze of smoke here Sunday evening to deliver remains of the last four of the men killed Tuesday in the crash of a firefighting helicopter in the nearby mountains.

As temperatures hovered in the 90s, the blades of the red, white and blue chopper whipped the air to the accompaniment of a lone bagpiper. The crowd of about 60 remained still.

The craft settled on the helipad shortly after 6 p.m. and then, with a 22-member color guard standing by, deputies from Trinity and Shasta counties helped remove flag-draped containers.

The finality of the moment hung in the late afternoon air at the Trinity Air Service helibase in Weaverville.

The remains were carried between two lines of firefighters and helicopter crews, then gently loaded into the back of the white coroner's van.

The four were the last of nine recovered from the burned remains of a Sikorsky S-61 that crashed about 7:45 p.m. Tuesday while battling the Buckhorn fire, one arm of the 94,000-acre Iron Complex of fires in the Shasta-Trinity National Forest northwest of Redding. Four others were recovered Saturday and one on Friday. Four men survived. Of the 13 on board, 12 were Oregonians.

According to Linda Hecker, a spokeswoman for the U.S. Forest Service, Sunday was reserved for recovery of the remains. None of the National Transportation Safety Board investigators visited the crash site Sunday, she said, meaning today would be the soonest the two engines from the helicopter could be brought down the mountain.

"Their whole emphasis today is to try to collect the four remaining bodies and bring them down," Hecker said before the helicopter arrived.

Earlier Sunday, in the southern Oregon town of Ashland, parishioners packed a Catholic church to quietly honor David Steele, a 19-year-old Ashland man killed in the crash.

The Steele family, which attended the service, long has been active in Our Lady of the Mountain Catholic Church, where David Steele was involved in youth programs and outreach ministries.

"The whole family is always here on Sundays," the Rev. Sean Weeks said. "And being a small town, all of the youth, they all grew up together, went to Ashland High School. So everyone knows each other."

His said his message for the congregation was that God's "going to get us through this."

Back in Weaverville, a short 20 minutes after the helicopter touched down, the honor guard and the rest of the crowd followed the four fallen firefighters out of the helibase. About 20 fire engines, law enforcement

vehicles and ambulances escorted their comrades down the lonely two-lane road into town.

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