



The Oregonian

Crowd gathers to mourn Iron 44 Incident dead

Family, friends, crew members and others honor the nine firefighters who died in a helicopter crash while fighting a fire in Northern California

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CENTRAL POINT -- Sean Hendrix arrived early Friday at the Jackson County Fairgrounds, taking his place in the middle of two somber lines of firefighters, many newly descended from burning hilltops across the Northwest.

Gray-shirted, in the worn boots and heavy ripstop pants that are the uniform of Grayback Forestry firefighters, they waited together as the sun and temperatures climbed. Shoulder to shoulder, they welcomed families of the victims of Iron 44 Incident -- the Aug. 5 helicopter crash that became this generation of firefighters' deadliest wildland aviation accident.

"You hear it all the time because it's true: The whole firefighting community is just like a family," said Hendrix, who at 38 has spent more than half his life suppressing fires. "Once you fight fire, you share a bond."

Those bonds have been tested since word from deep in the Shasta-Trinity National Forest near Weaverville, Calif., that a Sikorsky S-61N helicopter, just refueled and lifting off from a remote clearing, had struck a tree and smashed into a hillside, killing nine of the 13 men on board.

Crowds of mourners Friday filled the 5,800-seat amphitheater at the fairgrounds. They honored men remembered for their love of family and the outdoors, for their love of the fraternity they belonged to and for their love of the work they died performing.

One by one, they were recognized.

There was 21-year-old Steven "Caleb" Renno, whose mother grieves the loss of "a prophet who wanted to save the world." Edrik Gomez, at 19, "a linguist, scholar and philosopher" who kept his fellow firefighters laughing. And Scott Charlson, 25, a journalist who dreamed of writing a book about life on the fire lines.

There was Shawn Blazer, 30, who discovered his calling only last year and found wonder and beauty in life amid conflagration. At 23, the unflappable Matt Hammer was newly wed and wrapping up what was to have been his final summer fighting fires. Bryan Rich, 19, a skilled journeyman carpenter who loved stray dogs and the Denver Broncos, was most passionate about his childhood sweetheart.

Mourners also remembered David Steele, who at 19 planned to spend his life as a firefighter and emergency medical technician. Jim Ramage, a 63-year-old U.S. Forest Service helicopter inspector pilot, who had retired from California's state fire agency after a long career -- one that was so long he carried badge number "1" as the agency's first forestry pilot. And Roark Schwanenberg, a 54-year-old second-generation pilot, who "died the way he would have wanted to enter heaven."

Beneath dark sunglasses against the blinding sky, few eyes were dry.

Over nearly two hours, the sounds shifted from mournful bagpipe music and the Marshall Tucker Band's strangely jaunty anthem "Fire on the Mountain" to the sad twangy voice of bluesman Jonny Lang, whose recorded lyrics melted in the warm air: "Forever changed, never to return to the people we were before that great day."

"Firefighters know why they do what they do," Abigail Kimbell, chief of the U.S. Forest Service, told the crowd. "The risks are in the back of their minds, but adventure, service and camaraderie gets in the blood."

"We are all profoundly affected," she said

As the tribute came to an end, nine firefighters from Grayback, the contractor that lost seven firefighters to the crash, handed folded flags to grieving loved ones. Among the presenters were three of the four survivors: Rick Schroeder, 42, wearing a neck brace; Jonathan Frohreich, 18, his boyish face raw with scars; and a red-eyed Michael Brown, 20, who suffered broken bones and burns.

Only pilot William Coultas, 44, remains hospitalized. On Friday, his condition was upgraded to fair at U.C. Davis Medical Center in Sacramento, where he underwent skin grafts for severe burns.

It was thoughts of Coultas, the other survivors and the dead, that carried Bryan Loun and a few dozen other members of the Patriot Guard Riders on the five-hour ride from Portland to Central Point.

"We care," he said simply, reaching for a box of cigars from his Harley-Davidson's saddlebag.

He was wearing leather chaps. All around, firefighters from across the region wore emblems of their trade: the tan pleated shirts of the Oregon Department of Forestry, the caramel-colored T-shirts of Montana's Northern Rockies Wildland Fire Training program, the black dress uniforms of Portland Fire & Rescue's honor guard, the golden shirts of Abraham Contracting from nearby Grants Pass.

Forrest Gale, 20, wore a grimy Grayback T-shirt. In his arms, he cuddled baby daughter Arrabella.

Gale was lucky. He was aboard the last helicopter moving firefighters before the crash. He returned home the day following the crash and expects to return to the fires Monday.

In the meantime, he said, "there is a lot of recovering to do."

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