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Nine missing in Northern California helicopter crash confirmed dead

Federal officials are investigating the cause of Tuesday's wreck in a remote forested area. Four men survived.

By Maria L. LaGanga, Patrick McGreevy and Joe Mozingo
Los Angeles Times Staff Writers

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WEAVERVILLE, CALIF. -- — The nine people unaccounted for in the Trinity County helicopter crash were confirmed dead Thursday by authorities who painted a picture of a horrific accident in the remote mountains of Northern California.

"Two survivors escaped the aircraft, and when they were able to get out of the aircraft, they were on fire," said Kitty Higgins, a member of the National Transportation Safety Board. "The third escaped under his own power and did go back in to rescue and pull out the fourth survivor."

Higgins said that about 30 firefighters and support personnel watched as the helicopter with 13 occupants and a full tank of fuel took off from a remote "heliport" at about 6,000 feet elevation at 7:45 p.m. Tuesday, traveled about 150 yards and crashed, bursting into flames.

The bodies and wreckage of the Sikorsky S-61, operated by Carson Helicopters, remain at the site.

At an afternoon news conference here, about 35 miles from the crash site, Trinity County Undersheriff Eric Palmer described a confused and difficult aftermath that stretched for hours.

About a half hour after the crash, the U.S. Forest Service called the Sheriff's Department to report the accident, initially saying that 16 people were on board and none had died. "This information later turned out to be inaccurate," Palmer said.

About six hours later, the fire service command team for the Iron Complex fire called, he said, and reported that nine people were unaccounted for. Sheriff's personnel did not get to the site until 10 a.m. on Wednesday.

A federal investigation into the cause of the crash began Thursday, with members of the safety board, Forest Service and Federal Aviation Administration meeting in the morning, along with representatives from Carson Helicopters, Sikorsky Helicopters and General Electric, which manufactured the aircraft's engine.

Higgins said that investigators would look for the helicopter's voice data recorder, but she said she could not guarantee its usefulness because of the extensive fire damage.

One of the survivors, Michael Brown, 20, of Medford, Ore., said in a telephone interview Thursday from his hospital bed in Sacramento that his crew was pulling out of the area at the time of the crash because a lightning storm was fast approaching.

"All I can remember is lining up with my bag in one hand and my chain saw in the other," Brown said, noting that he climbed into the helicopter and took a seat behind the pilot. He believes his spot on the aircraft may have saved his life because the pilot also survived.

"I had flashes of rotors hitting trees and we started to go down," Brown said, but added that he was not certain if the accident actually happened that way or if he imagined it, because his memory is unclear.

"It all happened so fast," said Brown, who suffered broken bones, burns on his face and a bruised liver.

Of his friends who were killed, including one man he'd known since first grade, Brown said: "They are heroes. . . . These guys were all my brothers. I wish they were here with me."

Another survivor, Richard Schroeder, 42, also of Medford, said in a phone interview Wednesday night from his hospital room in Redding that it seemed that the helicopter's rotor hit a tree as it was taking off. He also said he may have been saved by sitting up front.

Ten of the victims, including Schroeder and Brown, worked for the Merlin, Ore.-based Grayback Forestry, one of the largest and longest-established private firefighting contractors.

The company identified six firefighters who died as Shawn Blazer, 30, and Bryan Rich, 29, of Medford; Scott Charleson, 25, of Phoenix, Ore.; Matthew Hammer, 23, of Grants Pass, Ore.; Eirik Gomez, 19, and David Steele, 19, of Ashland, Ore. Officials had not yet released the names of two firefighters, pending notification of their relatives.

Carson Helicopters Inc. said one of its pilots, Roark Schwanenberg, 54, of Lostine, Ore., was among the nine dead.

His wife, Christine, said in a phone interview that her husband knew his job was dangerous but that "it was his passion."

"From losing so many friends in the business, we always just decided each day was a blessing," she said. "Each time we lost a friend, we said, 'There but for the grace of God go I.' "

Among the survivors, Schroeder, Brown and Jonathan Frohreich, 18, of Medford, were recovering well, doctors said.

But pilot Bill Coultas, 44, of Cave Junction, Ore., remained in critical but stable condition at UC Davis Regional Burn Center in Sacramento, with second- and third-degree burns to about a third of his body, officials said.

The firefighters were doing much better.

Brown and Frohreich "have been transferred from ICU to a regular ward," said Dr. John Anderson, who treated the two at UC Davis. Anderson said Frohreich has a fracture to his lower back and burns to his face. Brown has facial burns and multiple facial fractures.

Schroeder had several broken bones, and no burns, and remained in stable condition at the hospital in Redding.

The crew was among 1,200 firefighters, assisted by nine helicopters, who were battling the Iron and Alps complex fires in the Shasta-Trinity National Forest that have burned 86,000 acres. Another firefighter assigned to the fires died late last month when he was hit by a falling tree. The lightning fire started June 21 and is 87% contained.

The Sikorsky S-61 was owned by Carson Helicopters of Grants Pass, Ore., which describes itself as one of the largest firefighting helicopter contractors with the Forest Service and Department of the Interior.

Asked whether the Sikorsky model had a history of safety problems, Higgins said: "There have been issues in the past. We have made some recommendations in the past to Sikorsky. My understanding is that those recommendations have been acted upon favorably."

In April, the FAA issued an "airworthiness directive" regarding Sikorsky S-model helicopters after one developed fatigue failures in the main rotor shaft. Carson Helicopters was among the companies alerted to the problem. The FAA also outlined a list of actions to "prevent structural failure, loss of power to the main rotor, and subsequent loss of control of the helicopter."

However, according to a company spokesman, all of Carson's firefighting helicopters have been fitted with rotors made from a composite material that is not subject to the same structural failure.

maria.laganga@latimes.com

patrick.mcgreevy@latimes.com

joe.mozingo@latimes.com

Times staff writer Julie Cart and researcher Maloy Moore contributed to this story.

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