

Recovery now co-pilot's mission:

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JEFF DUEWEL/Daily Courier



Bill Coultas and his wife Chris describe his painful burns and recovery from the Aug. 4 helicopter crash that killed nine people.

CAVE JUNCTION - Bill Coultas said the nurses pleaded with his doctor to give them a few more days to scrape on his burned skin, hoping it would regenerate and spare him disfiguring grafts to his face.

For that, the skin would have had to be removed down to the flesh.

He was given a raft of painkillers - Diloted, Percoset, Methadone, Fenterol.

"He'd still wake up screaming when they were doing it," said his wife, Chris, who donned a gown and mask and helped with the gory task.

But it was worth it.

Three months after surviving a flaming helicopter crash, the 44-year-old Cave Junction man is missing part of his ear, skin grafts cover a third of his body, and he's struggling to recover. But the skin on his face and neck is healing nicely.

"I'm pretty burned up and beat up and in a lot of pain. It's hard to get out of bed. It's hard to eat. It's been tough," Coultas said. "Just having all these people, my wife, my family, it's helped a lot. But there are nine families out there a lot worse off than me."

The crash on Aug. 5 killed nine men, seven of them from Grayback Forestry in Grants Pass. He was the most seriously hurt of four survivors of the Iron 44 incident, when a Carson Helicopter S-61 went down in the Trinity National Forest during a wildfire.

Coultas was in the co-pilot's seat. He suffered third-degree burns - charred skin - on about 35 percent of his body, and the rest of him was a mass of first- and second-degree burns.

In the intensive care unit at U.C. Davis Medical Center in Sacramento, his left arm looked like a hot dog left on the grill too long. His head was the size of a basketball.

He was spared the sight initially. He was mostly out for 12 days after being sedated in the ICU. All he remembers is "Bill it's Bon-Bon," when sister Bonnie arrived, and being told to cough up fluid. Doctors split the length of his arm open to drain it.

On the 13th day Coultas woke up and saw Chris, who left his side just once in 34 days in the ICU, to go make payroll at their Cave Junction Radio Shack and video business. His sons Matt 15, and Ricci, 22, were also there.

The dreary burn regimen had already begun and his body needed 5,000 calories a day to help healing.

"I drank a lot of 'burn shakes,'" he said. "I was a hurting unit. I couldn't roll over. It hurt to breathe."

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The chopper lifted off on Aug. 5 in the evening, ferrying firefighters back to camp. Pilot Roark Schwanenberg was being evaluated by the Forest Service's Jim Ramage.

"Everything seemed fine," Coultas said. The chopper lifted off, cleared the trees and tilted forward to gain airspeed.

"Then it dipped a little and started to go down," he said. "The aircraft started shuddering violently."

Coultas said he doesn't remember any shouts, or the impact after the 115-foot drop, but he's sure he escaped out the window, on his own, after the chopper rolled onto its side. He doesn't remember unbuckling his belt. He didn't see the other three survivors get out either.

"I'm running, I'm on fire and I'm beating on my legs and rolling around trying to get it out. I finally got my flight suit down to my ankles and put the fire out. I could feel and hear the helicopter burning behind me.

"I looked down at my left hand and my pinkie and finger were just bone. The skin was hanging off my hand."

When help arrived, Coultas told firefighters to get the rest of the guys out of the chopper. Then it exploded.

He started going into shock, and 45 minutes later on the rescue chopper, got his first shot of morphine.

"There are parts I hope I don't remember," he said.

Eventually 75 percent of his skin was either burned or removed to form grafts. His left arm, left hand, both of his legs, and the left side of his torso were the worst. His left leg was burned so badly the Achilles tendon was damaged, affecting nerves to his foot.

After 34 days in the ICU, he came home. Because of the crush of media, hospital staff helped him slip out an employee entrance.

Recovery from burns involves hours of stretching to keep skin from binding and shrinking. The healing skin is now pulling his head down. He does nine sessions of therapy each week, in three four-hour sessions at Impact Therapy in Grants Pass. It helps that his therapist, Danny Craig, also is a burn victim, because it's grueling.

"Just when you think you've got something healed up, the skin pulls back and opens up another wound," he said.

But he can now touch the thumb and pinkie on his left hand, and use all of his fingers.

Once a month he visits the U.C. Davis Medical Center in Sacramento.

He's grateful to the community of Cave Junction, his employees, and to Carson Helicopter for their support. For two weeks his neighbors on Glendon Road brought food. A recent benefit at the Jackson County Expo, with about 300 people, also lifted his spirits.

The recovery could take several more months.

"I can't cut wood, or work on my motorcycle, and I can't even change a light bulb. It's a pretty helpless feeling. But at least now I can put on my clothes, and get in and out of the shower."

"He's gone from not being able to hold a fork to signing his own name," wife Chris said.

Coultas looks forward to Thanksgiving, when seven of his eight siblings and their families will visit. They all saw him in the burn unit, but most had left by the time he was fully conscious.

He's not sure he'll be able to fly again, after working for Carson since 2002, aside from 15 months of active duty with the Army, where he originally learned to fly helicopters.

"I'm not an overly religious person, but I felt something down inside me in the ICU," he said. "It was a comforting, soothing feeling. I knew I was going to be OK."

"I know this accident changed me. I don't take things for granted now ... I'm going to look a little funny, but I'm going to be OK."