

The Iron 44 Incident

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On Aug. 5, a Sikorsky S-61N helicopter lifted off from a remote clearing deep in the Shasta-Trinity National Forest near Weaverville, Calif. As it rose, the machine -- loaded with 13 men in the business of fighting fires -- struck a tree and smashed into a hillside. Nine of the men died.

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By Joseph Rose, Stuart Tomlinson And Kimberly A.C. Wilson

REDDING, Calif. - The Sikorsky S-61 helicopter that crashed while shuttling Oregon firefighters from a California mountainside this week reportedly lifted off "slower than normal" before striking trees with its nose and rotor, investigators said Friday.

Witnesses to Tuesday's air disaster, which killed nine people on the front lines of an 83,000-acre wildfire in the Trinity-Shasta National Forest, told National Transportation Safety Board investigators that the aircraft rose only 40 to 50 feet before going down.

After crashing about 150 yards from the helipad, "the helicopter quickly filled with very dense, thick black smoke," said Kitty Higgins, an agency board member.

She said initial reports from Carson Helicopters in Grants Pass that the aircraft rolled 1,000 feet down an embankment after crashing turned out not to be true. Carson officials, who described the accident as taking place at the edge of a 6,000-foot ridge, weren't available Friday to comment.

Though the cause might not be known for weeks, an attorney who has criticized the helicopter manufacturer says the circumstances are eerily similar to four other crashes that killed or seriously injured West Coast logging pilots flying Sikorsky S-61 helicopters in recent years.

In all four cases, the helicopters crashed as they were lifting off, caused by a failure of a clutch mechanism that connects engines to the helicopter's five main rotors, attorneys for the pilots and their families argued in

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courts in Oregon, Tennessee and British Columbia.

"The pattern in this week's crash is the same," said San Francisco attorney Gerald Sterns, who filed two of the lawsuits against Sikorsky Aircraft Corporation, "but, of course, we don't know yet if that was the cause."

The latest crash killed nine people, including seven firefighters from Oregon, a pilot from Lostine and a U.S. Forest Service official. Four men were hospitalized, however, Rick Schroeder was released from the Mercy Medical Center in Redding around 5 p.m. Friday, said U.S. Forest Service spokesman Roland Giller. On Friday, the final two victims were identified.

Grayback Forestry Inc., which is based in Merlin and employed all the dead firefighters, released the name of Steven "Caleb" Renno, 21, of Cave Junction, once his family had been notified. The Forest Service also identified James N. Ramage of Redding as their on-board representative.

Safety inspector

A veteran who had seen a lot of wildfires, Ramage was riding along to assure the flights were adhering to safety guidelines, his supervisor said Friday. He was the "check airman" aboard the helicopter as it shuttled people from one fire camp to another in the rugged area.

"He was on board to check the run, the pilot, the whole mission," said Dennis Hulbert, a Forest Service regional aviation officer.

Renno was part of the second half of a 20-man Grayback Forestry crew to head out from the helipad Tuesday evening.

Outside Grayback's White City office Friday, company president Michael Wheelock, 54, addressed two somber crews of firefighters returning from Northern California.

Dressed in green ripstop workpants, dusty boots and gray company T-shirts and caps, the men listened quietly as Wheelock, a former smoke jumper, told them it was OK to cry.

"Some are angry, some may be sad and break down. Some may not feel anything. They may be numb, and it's OK," Wheelock said afterward. "I'm proud of these firefighters. They're brave, safe, professional and well-trained."

Ed Floate, 61, a longtime Grayback recruiter and trainer, said he was in another remote area with a crew of firefighters when he learned Wednesday morning that a helicopter had crashed.

"They announced that a helicopter had gone down in a morning briefing," he said. "No details about injuries or whose aircraft it was. At that time, I had a real sick feeling I couldn't get rid of."

The first reports from the crash site, Higgins of the NTSB said, were that everyone aboard the Sikorsky had survived. It would be six more hours before officials knew "the magnitude of the accident," she said.

"We can't really say right now why that might have happened," Higgins said of the delay, pointing out that the crash happened just before dark in a remote area with sketchy communications. "It could just be there was a lot of confusion."

Recorder found

An investigation team will examine two engines, the drive shaft and transmission of the helicopter, she said. The voice recorder has been recovered in better shape than expected, but investigators don't know how much useful information they will be able to pull from it until they get it in the lab.

Investigators also are looking at maintenance records for the helicopter, which was manufactured in 1964 but has been owned by Carson Helicopters for about a year.

The aircraft had logged more than 35,000 hours of flight time during its working life, but a recently replaced transmission had logged only 23 hours.

Accounts from witnesses to the crash were consistent, Higgins said. The helicopter "lifted up more slowly and moved forward more slowly" than normal, she said.

After the nose of the helicopter apparently struck a tree, the rotor struck several trees, she said. The aircraft came to rest on its left side and quickly filled with smoke, according to witnesses.

"Obviously," Higgins said, "a helicopter has to gain a certain amount of height and then move forward. It seemed to be slower than it normally was. What that means, why that might have happened, we're still putting those pieces together."

Sterns, the San Francisco attorney who has fought Sikorsky in court after the deaths of four pilots since 2002, said investigators should look hard at one part of the helicopter in particular.

He said research for the cases showed the maximum strain on the Sikorsky helicopters is when it lifts off. "That's exactly when it happens to be lifting its maximum deadweight" and the clutch assembly is prone to fail, he said.

In at least four cases against Sikorsky - and defendants that included either the engine or transmission manufacturer - the company settled the suits out of court, Sterns said.

Sterns, who specializes in representing victims of helicopter and airplane crashes, compared the "fairly simple system" that transfers power from the engines to the rotors to the mechanism that connects a household drill to a bit. If the bit loses its connection, it stops spinning.

When that happens and the Sikorsky S-61's engines are not engaged, the pilot can't make a controlled descent during an emergency. "The blades just windmill," Sterns said.

Sikorsky could not be reached Friday for comment on the S-61.

Outside the Grayback offices, blame didn't appear on anybody's mind. The ragged fire crew was just hurting.

It was nearly 24 hours after the crash before Grayback veteran Floate learned that his sick feeling about the downed helicopter was right: It was filled with many young men he had hired.

"I'm more like their grandfather than their father," Floate said. "You counsel them, try to nurture them along, encourage them in good directions. The loss is great."

Six years ago, the company rallied after a fatal van crash in Colorado killed five of its employees.

"We all hoped it would never happen again," he said. "Now, this."

Michelle Roberts, Helen Jung and Lynne Palombo of The Oregonian contributed to this report.

Iron 44 remembered

From The Oregonian of Saturday, Aug. 16, 2008 -- **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
By Kimberly A.C. Wilson

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."

Honor guard receives final remains at helicopter base in Weaverville, Calif.

Honor guard receives final remains

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