

# 'Ultimate betrayal'



The vice president of a defunct Grants Pass helicopter company was sentenced to 12½ years in federal prison Tuesday morning for lying about the carrying capacities of Carson's helicopters, including the overloaded airship that crashed at a Northern California fire in 2008, killing nine people.

In a courtroom packed with family and friends of the victims, U.S. Chief District Judge Ann Aiken said Steven Metheny's repeated fraud at Carson Helicopter Inc. and subsequent attempt at a cover-up in the Iron 44 fire crash merited the stiff sentence for his guilty plea to one count each of filing a false statement and of conspiracy to defraud the Forest Service out of a contract ultimately worth up to \$51.7 million.

Aiken read in court the Boy Scout oath to Metheny, then spent almost 20 minutes chiding him for giving the government and Carson's own pilots doctored helicopter weights and measurements, a fraud that investigators said ultimately contributed to what became the worst fatal crash involving active wildland firefighters in U.S. history.

"What you did in this case was the ultimate betrayal of every oath you've ever taken," Aiken said. "And for what? To win a contract when you weren't really even qualified to respond.

"There were so many decision places where you could've done the right thing," she said. "I kept thinking, 'What were you thinking?'"

Aiken then gave Metheny, 45, of Medford, 151 months in prison to think about his actions, followed by three years' probation. His attorney, Steven Myers, had argued for three years of house arrest and probation but no prison time.

Aiken said the sentence was as much to punish the crime and protect society as it was to send a message to those working in trusted positions to resist cutting corners that could end up in life-or-death circumstances for innocent people.

"Everybody in this industry should take a look at what's going on," she said.

Prosecutors hoped for a sentence of nearly 16 years in prison for Metheny. Aiken's computation of a complicated sentencing formula hammered Metheny on most counts but softened the severity on a few categories enough to lead to the slightly lighter sentence.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Byron Chatfield said outside of court that he believed the sentence was "the right conclusion" in a lengthy and difficult case that exhausted federal investigators and the emotions of the mostly Southern Oregon family members of the victims.

Catherine Renno, whose 21-year-old son, Steven "Caleb" Renno of Cave Junction, died in the wreck, said Metheny's sentence holds him accountable and puts the others on notice not to fudge data that puts people like wildland firefighters in more danger than they already are when on the lines.

"I think it's as close to justice as I could have gotten," Renno said outside of court.

Renno also took comfort in Aiken's comments that Metheny's crimes caused a rippling effect of grief in the community and that "grief is the price of love."

"My son got the death sentence by fire," Renno said. "I got a life sentence. But it (Metheny's sentence) feels just. I can live with it."

The federal sentencing formula was more kind to co-defendant Levi Phillips, Carson's maintenance director who was sentenced Tuesday to 25 months in federal prison for helping defraud the Forest Service but who ultimately aided investigators in unraveling the case against Metheny.

Phillips, 48, of Grants Pass, devised a formula to fraudulently compute helicopter weights that didn't match the machines' true weights and carrying capacities but created the bogus numbers used by Carson to land the lucrative firefighting contact for which the company otherwise would not have been qualified even to bid.

Metheny used Phillips' formula for computing the fake data that prosecutors said contributed to the Iron 44 crash, because pilots and safety experts never would have let the helicopter launch if they had known the machine's true specifications, court documents state.

After a string of friends and family members testified to what a stand-up and community guy Phillips is, Aiken said she was sentencing Phillips as a man who committed the crime.

Aiken told Phillips that he could have stood up and stopped Metheny in this deadly conspiracy, but acquiesced and then "put the mask of the good guy back on" at home.

"You'd be a model citizen in this community but for the egregious actions that got you here today," Aiken said.

"When did everybody become 'yes people'?" Aiken said. "Courage is a little used virtue anymore."

Phillips earlier pleaded guilty to one count of conspiracy to commit wire and mail fraud. His sentence landed in the middle of the 21- to 27-month range advised under federal sentencing guidelines.

Chatfield said outside of court that, though Phillips helped unravel the conspiracy, the government would have gone through with prosecuting the case but that his aid "made it much more quickly resolved."

Phillips and Metheny were each given until Aug. 17 to report to federal prison. Both requested housing in the correctional facility in Sheridan.

The crash occurred Aug. 5, 2008, on a nearly 6,000-foot-high mountaintop near Weaverville, Calif., while the Sikorsky S-61N helicopter was ferrying out firefighters battling the Iron 44 fire in the Shasta-Trinity National Forest.

Seven of the nine killed were Southern Oregon firefighters. The crash also killed two pilots and injured four others.

Along with Renno, those who died in the crash were check pilot Jim Ramage, 63, Redding, Calif.; command pilot Roark Schwanenberg, 54, Lostine; firefighter David Steele, 19, Ashland; firefighter Shawn Blazer, 30, Medford; firefighter Scott Charlson, 25, Phoenix; firefighter Matthew Hammer, 23, Grants Pass; firefighter Edrik Gomez, 19, Ashland; and firefighter Bryan Rich, 29, Medford.

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