

# Iron 44 crash remembered: 'You never stop grieving'

By Vickie Aldous of the Mail Tribune Aug 05, 2018 03:00 AM

Today marks the 10-year anniversary of a fiery helicopter crash that killed seven Southern Oregon firefighters who were battling the Iron 44 wildfire complex in California.

The crash also killed two pilots, one from California and the other from Eastern Oregon. Four other people were injured. It was the deadliest helicopter crash involving working firefighters in U.S. history.

Paul and Susanne Steele of Ashland lost their 19-year-old son, David Steele, in the Aug. 5, 2008, crash.

He was an Ashland High School graduate working on a wildland firefighter crew while pursuing his structural firefighter and emergency medical technician education at Central Oregon Community College in Bend.

"I think people think it's an event that happened 10 years ago," Paul said of the crash. "For us, it's an event we live with every day. We miss him more, not less, as time goes by."

Paul said it's hard to think about where his son might be today in his life and career if he had not died. Family members continue to grieve for the days they can't have with him.

"It's an ongoing process. You never stop grieving. You just learn to handle it in a better way," he said.

Paul and Susanne said they think about all who were lost — as well as

firefighters now battling wildfires surrounding the Rogue Valley this summer.

"The smoke in the valley definitely brings a flood of emotions," Paul said. "We feel for all those who are currently fighting fires and hope they stay safe."

Susanne said the firefighters are putting their lives on the line.

A decade ago, a Sikorsky S-61N helicopter that was ferrying firefighters away from an incoming lightning storm crashed soon after takeoff in the rugged Trinity Alps Wilderness Area of the Shasta-Trinity National Forest.

The firefighting crew aboard was with Merlin-based Grayback Forestry.

The [National Transportation Safety Board](#) found the helicopter was more than 3,000 pounds over safe weight limits.

It rose sluggishly into the air, clipped a tree and crashed to the ground, according to a survivor.

The crash triggered a series of criminal convictions and civil lawsuits.

[Steven Metheny](#), vice president of Carson Helicopters, and [Levi Phillips](#), the maintenance director, [falsified records](#) to overstate the carrying abilities of the firm's helicopters in order to win millions of dollars in U.S. Forest Service contracts.

Metheny was sentenced to more than a dozen years in prison, while Phillips received a sentence of more than two years.

In addition to David Steele, other Southern Oregon firefighters killed in the crash were Shawn Blazer, 30, Medford; Scott Charlson, 25, Phoenix; Matthew Hammer, 23, Grants Pass; Edrik Gomez, 19, Ashland; Bryan Rich,

29, Medford; and Steven "Caleb" Renno, 21, Cave Junction.

The two pilots killed in the crash didn't know they were using helicopter specification data that had been falsified by the Carson Helicopter employees. They used the faked data while calculating the helicopter's safe payload capacity, according to prosecutors. In the aftermath of David Steele's death, Paul and Susanne started a scholarship fund to memorialize their son. Since 2011, the fund has awarded a total of \$13,500 to help nine students attend college or trade school.

The fund is for Ashland High School graduating seniors pursuing public service or health care careers, such as firefighter, paramedic, police officer, nurse, corrections officer or dispatcher.

Paul said those careers involve helping and giving back to the community.

"The spirit of David was to provide service to others," he said.

While at Ashland High School, David played football and rugby and was known for being a passionate player and devoted teammate.

A 19-year-old like Steele, Edrik Gomez was working as a firefighter to help cover his tuition as he pursued degrees in communications and political science at Southern Oregon University.

This June, [SOU honored Gomez](#) with a posthumous certificate of achievement to recognize the work he had done toward the degrees.

"The certificate means a lot to me, his mother. It gives me the joy of having something that would show he would have finished college. It's something I can hold in my hand," SanJuanita Gomez said at the time.

Edrik is remembered by friends and family as a person who loved reading,

listening to music, learning and meeting people of all ages and cultures.

At the time of his death, Blazer had been living in Medford to care for his disabled mother. He had worked in other jobs, but felt he had found his true calling battling fires in the woods. Blazer was known for taking photographs of wildfires and also enjoyed hunting and fishing.

Rich, the other firefighter from Medford and a Crater High School graduate, was a skilled framing carpenter who took up firefighting during a construction slump. He loved helping others and ended up passionate about his firefighting job.

An excellent wrestler, Rich also enjoyed watching Denver Broncos football games and fishing.

Scott Charlson, the Phoenix firefighter, was working at the job to help pay for college at SOU, where he was studying sports journalism. But his feet were so blistered after the first few weeks he considered quitting, his family recalled for a 2008 article in the Mail Tribune.

"Then he just grew up and decided, 'I can do this. Other people can do this. I'm not a quitter,'" his father, Rick Charlson, said at the time. "So he stuck it out. I think now, towards the end, it's just what you do. He was very responsible."

While attending SOU, Scott Charlson often wrote sports stories for the Ashland Daily Tidings and also contributed stories to the sports section of the Mail Tribune.

Charlson played lacrosse in college, and had been planning to graduate until he found out he needed one more class. He heard working as a firefighter for Grayback Forestry paid well and landed the job that would have helped him

finish college.

Hammer, the Grants Pass firefighter, had just graduated from Corban College with a business degree and married his college girlfriend. He previously had worked as a wildland firefighter during summers and was known for being unflappable under pressure and for his sense of adventure.

Renno, the firefighter from Cave Junction, was a cross country and long distance track runner while attending Illinois Valley High School. Although he was a naturally gifted runner, he also worked hard to achieve his goals. Renno later took classes at SOU.

To this day, Grayback Forestry maintains online memorials for its fallen firefighters.

President Michael Wheelock said officials informed him about the 2008 crash a few hours after it occurred, but a gag order was in place and he was told only that some people had been seriously injured, Wheelock said.

"All through the night, I kept asking the Forest Service, 'Are those folks OK?' Something told me they weren't," he recalled.

The next morning, Wheelock learned about the large number of fatalities and flew down to California.

Since the crash, he said decision makers on wildfires are more cautious about needlessly subjecting workers to dangerous conditions.

Despite the inherent dangers of using aircraft during battles against wildfires, Wheelock said helicopters always will be an essential tool.

Without the efforts of firefighters and aircraft, the Taylor Creek fire now burning near Merlin and several miles from Grants Pass would have spread

to the more populated town, Wheelock said.

The wildfire has burned more than 33,000 acres, according to the Joint Information Center.

Wheelock said all those who died in the 2008 Iron 44 crash were great human beings who had so much potential.

"I can't even grasp what the parents went through," he said.

Wheelock said he hopes everyone will direct their thoughts and prayers toward the families of the firefighters and pilots killed a decade ago.

"We never forget. They never forget. My heart just bleeds for them," he said.

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