Survivor tells of helicopter's final moments
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(08-07) 16:24 PDT REDDING - -- Authorities confirmed Thursday that nine people listed as missing in a fiery helicopter crash in the Shasta-Trinity National Forest are dead, and one of four survivors provided chilling details about the horrific moments of the crash.

Firefighter Richard Schroeder told his mother that just before the copter went down, he heard the pilot say: "Duck! We're going down!"

The Trinity County Sheriff's Department confirmed the deaths at a news conference and said families were being notified. The Sheriff's Department is still trying to recover bodies from the crash site.

The accident Tuesday night in a remote forested area about 70 miles northwest of Redding took the life of a pilot of the helicopter and seven firefighters. The identity of the ninth victim was not released, but authorities said he was a U.S. Forest Service employee.

"We are devastated by this," said Mike Wheelock, owner of Grayback Forestry, a private firefighting firm based in Merlin, Ore., that employed the 10 firefighters aboard the copter.

Three of the injured remained at UC Davis Medical Center in Sacramento. One man was in critical condition with burns over a third of his body, and two were upgraded to good condition.

A fourth survivor remained at Mercy Hospital in Redding, where he was listed in fair condition. That man, Grayback employee Schroeder, 42, told his mother a harrowing tale of death and survival in the burning wreckage of the helicopter.

Linda Parks of Medford, Ore., said in an interview that her son told her he had chosen a seat behind the pilot.

It was at the end of a long day cutting firebreaks to try to stop a fire in a remote part of the National Forest.

The helicopter had just returned from ferrying 13 other firefighters back to the base camp, he said.
Schroeder clicked his seat belt, and the helicopter started rising from a clearing.

Somewhere between 200 and 300 feet off the ground, he heard what no air passenger ever wants to hear - the pilot yelling in panic.

Schroeder looked out the window in the split second of freefall and thought he saw the craft crashing through branches. In a second, he was on the ground, trapped under burning metal and a body.

He was injured but was able to push away the body - which was on fire - and wriggle out of his seat belt. The only way out was through a broken window. He smashed the window to make more room and crawled out to escape the flames. Three others made it out.

"Whoever landed on top of him, that's what saved his life," Parks said.

"He didn't hear any sound before it happened - he said the whole thing was over in a flash of an eye," Parks said.

**Doctors call mother**

Doctors called Parks on Tuesday night to report that her son was injured but was going to make it. He suffered a cracked scapula, fractured vertebra, cuts and bruises and would require stitches in his lips.

Parks asked her son how the other three men survived. Schroeder told her he believes they also crawled out the window after he did.

She said her son talked about the copter hitting tree branches during the final moments, but it was unclear whether he thought the helicopter might have struck them on takeoff or during the crash.

On Wednesday, Schroeder's girlfriend and three children - Kayla, 18, Cody, 16 and 3-year-old Ruby - traveled from Medford to Redding to comfort Schroeder.

"He's doing OK," Parks said. "He used to love helicopter rides - he thought they were awesome. I don't think he's going to say that anymore."

At UC Davis Medical Center, Duane Nelson, 53, a 30-year Forest Service veteran, said firefighters from around the state have been going to the hospital to show support for their injured comrades.

"It's hard, grueling work, and when something like this happens, it sucks the life out of it," he said. "But we have to keep doing our job."

The crash occurred at about 7:45 p.m. Tuesday. The heavy firefighting helicopter, a Sikorsky S-61N owned by Carson Helicopters of Grants Pass, Ore., picked up 11 firefighters from a remote clearing deep in the forest and was about to take them at the end of their 12-hour shift to their base camp. Fire officials said
the helicopter took off and then came right back down about 300 yards away.

Bob Madden, spokesman for Carson helicopters, said the chopper's angle changed within moments of takeoff, and it plummeted to earth, turning over as it rolled down the hill and burst into flames after a possible fuel line break.

Crew on ground help

About 20 firefighters still on the ground waiting to be ferried helped the injured firefighters until medical evacuation helicopters could arrive. The remoteness and the difficult terrain prevented a quick evacuation, however, and the injured were not moved until about 9:30 p.m.

Two other Carson helicopters also assigned to the fire responded to the crash and dropped water both on the encroaching wildland fire and the burning Sikorsky. Madden said the water helped cool down the chopper's hull, but the aircraft continued to burn into Thursday morning.

National Transportation Safety Board member Kitty Higgins said a small team of investigators has reached the site and is trying to assess what material, equipment and personnel will be needed to determine the cause of the crash.

One of their first missions will be to find the helicopter's voice recorder, which was stored in the nose of the aircraft. That will tell investigators what the crew said at the time of the accident. The helicopter does not have a data recorder, as do commercial airliners, that would indicate altitude, speed and pitch.

Investigators have begun talking to witnesses and going over records. Higgins said they would put together a timeline for events leading up to the crash and look at the maintenance records for the helicopter.

"We try to go about this very methodically," she said.

Some experts were already calling it the country's worst civilian helicopter crash.

"When you talk about nine people killed and four horribly injured, it's the most horrific non-military crash in U.S. history," said Gary Robb, a Kansas City attorney who has represented victims of helicopter crashes and their families for nearly three decades.

Robb said he had been contacted by some of the families of the crash victims, but he declined to identify them.

Given the pilots' qualifications - the company said they had 25,000 combined hours of operating helicopters - and the fact that weather and visibility did not appear to pose problems, Robb suggested that an equipment failure may have played a role in the crash.

Malfunction indicated

http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2008/08/08/MN4N12709I.DTL&type=printable
"I've been doing this 27 years, and every indication is of an in-flight mechanical malfunction," Robb said. "These are not the kind of pilots who are going to fly this helicopter into the ground. It could have been a tail rotor malfunction, a systems control problem, a linkage problem with the main rotor or engine failure. We're dealing with some kind of in-flight mechanical malfunction because there's no other logical explanation for what happened."

Robb said helicopters account for 10 to 12 percent of all aircraft flights in the United States, yet are responsible for almost 50 percent of all crashes, according to the Federal Aviation Administration.

The crew in Tuesday's crash had been fighting the Buckhorn Fire, part of the Iron Complex fires in the Shasta-Trinity National Forest. The fires, caused by lightning strikes, have been burning since June 21 and are mostly contained. The Buckhorn Fire has burned more than 15,000 acres and is 25 percent contained. Overall, the Iron Complex fires have burned about 87,000 acres and are roughly 80 percent contained. There are three active fires in the complex, and full containment is not expected until Sept. 1.

**The victims**

**INJURED**

William Coultas, 44, Cave Junction, Ore. Pilot for Carson Helicopters of Grants Pass, Ore. Critical condition at UC Davis Medical Center with burns over a third of his body.

Michael Brown, 20, Medford, Ore. Firefighter with Grayback Forestry of Merlin, Ore. Good condition at UC Davis with facial burns and fractures.

Jonathan Frohreich, 18, Medford, Ore. Grayback firefighter. Good condition at UC Davis.


**KILLED**

Shawn Blazer, 30, Medford, Ore.

Scott Charleston, 25, Phoenix, Ore.

Matthew Hammer, 23, Grants Pass, Ore.

Edrik Gomez, 19, Ashland, Ore.

Bryan Rich, 29, Medford, Ore.

David Steele, 19, Ashland, Ore.
Roark Schwanenberg, 54, Carson pilot, Lostine, Ore.

* The first six were Grayback firefighters. The names of one Grayback employee and a U.S. Forest Service employee who were killed have not been released.

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