

Incident Summary Page for the Hotshot Crew Line of Duty Death

Name of Hotshots LODD: Michael MacDonald	Incident Name: Walla Valley Fire
	Incident Date & Time: 06/29/2008
Hotshot Crew: Chief Mountain	Incident Location: Flagstaff, Arizona
Personal Information	
<p>Michael MacDonald, 26, a member of the Blackfeet tribe, was born and raised in Browning, Montana. A standout athlete and talented artist in high school, he recently completed his Associates degree in Elementary Health and Physical Education and a Coaching Certificate from Blackfeet Community College. A three year member of the Hotshots, he was survived by his partner, an unborn son and large extended family.</p>	
Brief description	
<p>The Hotshot crew was assigned to the Walla Valley Fire on the North Rim, when on June 27 MacDonald was bitten by a spider. He was transported by fire helicopter to the South Rim Helibase and received initial treatment at the local clinic. While there he experienced an adverse reaction to medication and went into anaphylactic shock. While being flown to Flagstaff Medical Center the helicopter he was in collided with another medical helicopter as they were both on final approach. Both pilots, three medical flight personnel and another patient also died in the accident.</p>	
Links to more information on this incident:	
<p>https://wildfiretoday.com/2008/07/03/chief-mountain-hot-shots-remember-macdonald/ https://www.cutbankpioneerpress.com/glacier_reporter/news/article_9b9b6c68-9642-501f-a493-26d6559901f8.html https://www.bia.gov/sites/default/files/dup/assets/public/pdf/idc012106.pdf https://www.bia.gov/sites/default/files/dup/assets/public/pdf/idc012107.pdf https://wlfalwaysremember.net/2008/06/29/michael-macdonald/</p>	



Michael MacDonald

Crew remembers MacDonald as 'inspiring' firefighter

By ERIC NEWHOUSE
Great Falls Tribune

CUT BANK — Michael MacDonald, a 26-year-old Chief Mountain Hot Shots firefighter, returned to Montana in a wooden coffin aboard a Forest Service smokejumpers' plane Wednesday.

The first member of his group to die in the line of duty, MacDonald was killed Sunday in a helicopter crash as he was being transported to a hospital in Flagstaff, for treatment of a bug bite and an allergic reaction to his treatment.

"Mike was in tremendous condition, but what happened to him was totally out of our control," said Steve Bullshoe, property manager for the Hot Shots crew based in Browning. "We teach them to be professional, to be safe, but there are some things you can't do anything about."

MacDonald's death stunned the close-knit crew because he had been strong, vital and inspirational, crew members said.

"This guy was outstanding," said crew supervisor Lyle St. Goddard. "He was so happy to be doing what he was doing. So this is a hard time for us."

"We've had a good string of luck for 17 years, and finally our tragedy has struck," said St. Goddard, who said firefighting is the seventh-most dangerous job in America, according to statistics he's seen.

Maurice St. Goddard, a friend of MacDonald's since sixth grade, remembers working beside him the day before his death, while fighting a fire on the edge of the Grand Canyon.

"We were working hard to get a (clear fire) line to the top of the ridge and tie it into another line," Maurice St. Goddard said. "He really pulled me up — he told me never to quit."

Maurice St. Goddard said MacDonald drew pictures of horses on his leather gloves and made up a story about how the Blackfeet Tribe had stolen the horses from the Spanish and driven them across the Grand Canyon. The tall tale made his weary crew laugh.

"We were tired, but after we had achieved our objective, (MacDonald) was just skiing down the mountain (on broken rock), having fun, and the firefighters in front of him were trying to get out of his way," Maurice St. Goddard said.

On the day of MacDonald's death, the Hot Shots dug more line through the morning, and then managed to take a break for a hot lunch that was flown in.

"I was sitting all alone, and Mike came and joined me," said Kayla LaPier, the only female on the squad, a basketball cheerleader whom MacDonald recruited to join the Hot Shots crew. "There were flames all over and he said, 'Sit back and enjoy the show.'"

MacDonald was like a big brother to her, LaPier said.

"He took care of me, and he taught me things I didn't know," she said. "He was always there to listen to me and to keep my spirits up."

"We had dug line all day and cleared brush, then we had lunch and Mike left," said Jess Racine, with tears running down his face. "After lunch, we jumped a hot spot and knocked it out. Then we got a call, and they told us Mike had been in a helicopter crash."

MacDonald was one of his sponsors, Racine said, because they played basketball together for years.

"We have all kinds of state champions on this crew from teams in Browning and Heart Butte," Racine said.

"Mike was a great guy," he added. "If someone was hungry, he'd split a sandwich with you or give you his last dollar."

After learning of MacDonald's death, the stunned Chief Mountain Hot Shots decided they needed to come home to Browning to come to terms with the loss.

"He left a little bit of himself with every one of us," said crew-member William Pepion Jr. "His happiness, joy and willingness to work were incredible. He was a strong young man, very safe and very conscious of those around him. He's been run out of a few fires, and he was always watching out for the people around him."

"He was a caretaker for a lot of us," said Chico Reyes, a Hot Shots member. "After we'd been dispatched, I spent most of my money on bills and beer, but Mike took care of me. He took me out to his house a couple of times and fed me."

Loren Bell remembers MacDonald as one of the ringleaders when the fire crew helped him put a new roof on his home in Browning.

"Mike was there the whole time," Bell said. "It was a tremendous help to me and my family. He was one of the most energetic guys I ever knew, and he was always happy."

A 22-year veteran of the fire crew, Mannie Alanvielle said MacDonald had a rare ability to prevent exhausted firefighters from feeling sorry for themselves.

"Mike was one of those guys who could walk into a group of very tired guys and tell them to quit corner-bitching (four people standing in a corner complaining about fatigue)," he said. "And after he was done, there were four guys with good attitudes instead of just one. He was awesome, and we're really going to miss him."

"He was a good guy," crewmember Kevin Heavy Runner said. "He'd always play a lot of jokes on me. He was always teasing me."

All of those memories and more came back as the Chief Mountain Hot Shots made the long drive back to Montana from Arizona.

"We're all like parents, making sure our children are OK and bringing them home safe," said assistant crew superintendent Eli Still Smoking. "So it was a long ride for us because one of our family members was still missing."

When they got back to Browning, the Hot Shots held an emotional prayer service at the Fire Cache.

"I prayed and made an offering," said Joe Fisher, a close friend of MacDonald's for two decades who played with him on the Browning state championship basketball team in 2001. "I was crying so hard, but then I looked up and saw a buck near where I had made my offering."

Fisher immediately remembered visiting MacDonald's house in Missoula a few years earlier and taking pictures of deer in his friend's back yard.

"I stopped crying," Fisher said. "It was like he was right there beside me, telling me goodbye."

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WILLIAM PEPION • Crew member