

# CAL FIRE Angels

## Remembering the crew of Air Attack 410

By Becki Redwine, fire prevention specialist II, Tulare Unit

On the morning of September 6, 2006 CAL FIRE's Air Attack 410 surveyed the area near Mountain Home State Forest where a fire occurred earlier that morning. This was the fourth fire to occur in this drainage and there were concerns that there may be other fires still burning. The flight seemed like any other. The OV-10A Bronco spotter plane out of Porterville Air Attack Base was piloted by DynCorp pilot "Sandy" Willett. Battalion Chief Rob Stone was in the observer's seat to survey the area for the safety of the ground troops and determine the best tactics for suppression. After a quick air-to-ground conversation with those on the fire, AA 410 continued up the drainage into the blue sky and clouds.

A San Joaquin Valley local, 52-year-old Sandy Willett flew planes all his life in one capacity or another – crop dusting, drug eradication, and eventually fighting fires for the last four years. He also enjoyed motorcycles, vintage Firebirds and TransAms. Obviously, he enjoyed the wind in his hair and he understood the risks involved with his job. Sandy's passenger that day was Rob Stone who moved to Three Rivers in Tulare County when he was just a youngster. Stone wanted to be a firefighter ever since he could remember. And he made a fine one, real early.

After serving as a Paid Call Firefighter with Tulare County Fire at the age of 18 and then as a seasonal firefighter with CAL FIRE for 3 years, he became one of the youngest firefighters to reach the Engineer level in CAL FIRE. He served his entire 18 year career in the Tulare Unit. But Rob had an identity problem – he loved cow-

*Online condolences and memories are still posted at [www.virtual-condolences.com](http://www.virtual-condolences.com)*

boyin' as much as he loved firefighting. He couldn't decide what he wanted to do most! So he did them both – with gusto. Roping and branding calves was his



*Fire apparatus place decals on equipment to show respect.*

other job. Just being outside in nature was his passion. A crowning day in his career was July 1, 2006 when, at age 36, he made Battalion Chief at the Porterville Air Attack Base. He'd been gone most of the summer on numerous fires and mentioned how he loved this fast-paced duty and how excited he was about doing some great things for his wife and two kids with his overtime. One of his many respected traits was that he demanded the same performance of everyone he worked with as he did of himself.

Obviously, there was a greater purpose for these two men, as their plane crashed that day and left hundreds of family members, friends and



*Above, firefighters from across the state salute the procession for Chief Rob Stone.*



*Right, hundreds gather to pay their respects for the two fallen firefighters.*

Photos by Wes Schultz.

colleagues mourning their loss. Understanding that “Greater Purpose” is the tough part for those left behind. Memorial services were difficult for many to attend, but so beautiful, touching and appropriate. Nearly 2,000 people crowded into a Visalia church at Rob’s service where 70 fire trucks lined the streets. A memorial service for Sandy Willet was held the following

day in Hanford, CA. Trust funds were established for both men’s families. Online condolences and memories are still posted at: [www.virtual-condolences.com](http://www.virtual-condolences.com). The Tulare Unit did everything possible to honor these men as they deserved.

A Serious Accident Investigation Team and the National Transportation Safety Board are conducting an extensive inves-

tigation into the exact cause of the accident. CAL FIRE investigators have arrested the person who allegedly is responsible for the four fires that occurred in the Bear Creek Drainage. He is currently in custody awaiting trial on charges of homicide and arson.

Chief Stone and Pilot Willett will forever be missed but not forgotten.

## *CAL FIRE mourns fellow firefighters*

On October 26, 2006, five firefighters of the United States Forest Service lost their lives during the Esperanza Fire in Southern California. On November 5, 2006, CAL FIRE joined thousands of firefighters from across the nation in Devore, California to remember the ultimate sacrifices of Mark Loutzenhiser, Jason McKay, Jess McLean, Daniel Hoover Najera and Pablo Cerda in service to their nation. Video of the event is posted at <http://www.engine57memorial.org>.

*Photos by Wes Schultz.*

