

# Members Join Team That Faces The Oregon's Annual Forest Fires



Photos by Peta Tinda

them.

Most of the Grand Ronde team are "(Class) B fallers," said Kuust, meaning they are certified to cut down trees two feet across, and the crew willingly shifted gears time and again throughout the fire's life, doing whatever job was required at the moment.

Over the course of the fire, crew members also filled in as strike team leader, task force leader and dozer boss, said Wakeland.

"I'm often quick to write letters when a crew is not doing its job, but not this crew," said Poet. "I'd have them back any time I can get them." He called them his "utility crew."

Though it is easy and tempting and often accurate to describe danger as the business of these and all the young men and women who fight our nation's forest fires, Shane Harmon said that any firefighter who finds himself in trouble in a fire is doing something wrong. The protocol is very specific and includes measures to keep firefighters safe, even as they sometimes find themselves face to face with a "wall of flames," in the words of crew member Chuck Chapin.

Working with the Grand Ronde crew for part of this season was 32-year-old Lew Mendez, Incident Commander Trainee for this fire, working in the field while Poet handled the overall organizing responsibilities.

An employee of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Mendez also is Assistant Superintendent of the Mescalero Hot Shot crew, a man near the top of the forest firefighting pecking order. He is a 'smoke jumper,' meaning that he parachutes into fires, and said that while fighting a fire in Washington last summer, he "lived on wild grouse and fish for 11 days." He grabbed a pack of Winterfresh gum and held it up. "I used this for bait," he said.

In describing his respect for forest fires, he recalled one of his earliest experiences. He was looking at a fire a safe distance off and think-



**Team Effort**— When the Clark Fire was all but out, this Grand Ronde Crew along with Incident Commander Trainee Lew Mendez, stuck around for the less-than-dramatic but vitally important rehabilitation work. Those pictured included, from left, top row: Mendez, Shane Harmon, Jeff Kuust, Jennifer Orlowski Robertson, Chuck Chapin; bottom row: Lawney Havranek, Oscar Frias, Craig Van Scoyk and Tribal member and Natural Resources Manager Pete Wakeland.

ing, "Oh my God. You can feel the heat through your clothes."

Mendez is a Mescalero Apache Indian from New Mexico, and has worked before with members of Grand Ronde crews — "We were down on their reservation in 1997," said Wakeland, and worked together last year on the Carizzo Mountain Fire in Arizona — and it turns out that the closeness of this community is one of the things that makes fighting forest fires so gratifying.

"The fire community is really large," said Wakeland, "but you see faces you know — 'Hey, I know you!'"

Crew member Jennifer Orlowski

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~ Pete Wakeland

Robertson met her husband, Tribal member Lynn "Bear" Robertson, also a veteran forest firefighter, at the Oakridge Fire in 2001. This trip, Bear stayed home with their baby.

To hear Robertson tell it, however, her work in the forest might as well be on a cruise ship. "It's a great job," she said. "You meet different people. You go different places." Crew members also have the opportunity to learn and grow. This was her first time on an engine crew, for example.

Harmon and Orvie Danzuka, a NR Forester, earned their engine-boss certifications this year, joining six others in the Grand Ronde crew with this certificate.

Although the firefighters this time encountered cougar, bear and poison oak, the memorable face-offs came courtesy of hornets and

bees. "I don't know how many bee stings I got," said Jeff Kuust.

The worst of the forest's ills, however, was neither plant nor animal, but bad attitude. "You either love (the work) or you hate it," said Kuust.

The work is demanding and "we're all thinking the same thing," said Wakeland. "Griping and whining will spread through a crew like cancer. It only takes one person to bring a crew down. Of course, the other way, it only takes one person to motivate us."

"It's a mental challenge in a way," said Robertson. "Sometimes it's physically strenuous, hiking 1,000 feet vertically, packing hoes and polaskis and 35-pound saws, day in and day out."

"We're down to twelve-and-half-hour days," said Harmon. "We were doing fifteens."

"It wears on you. It's a challenge," he added, "but there's a sensation of being part of something good. No other job is like it, regardless of pay."

Fighting fires throughout Oregon is not only good work on its own, but also keeps the crew in shape for potential fires at home, said Wakeland. "We (Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde) have 10,000 acres (of our own) to protect. This work challenges you to think very quickly. You got to figure how you're going to do it, and mitigate for safety concerns. The worst thing that can happen is to get somebody hurt."

The best, he said, is that "somebody will come by and say, 'Wow, you got a lot done,' or when they look at the job ahead of you and say, 'Those poor bastards.'"

When *Smoke Signals* staffers arrived for this story, the crew had done the rehabilitation work for two to three miles. They had 15 miles to go.

