

Message from the Chief

Chief's Memo – April 20, 2007

***CAL FIRE Mourns the loss of Bryan Zollner,
Northern Region Operations Staff Chief***



This week's memo is from my comments at the tribute to the life of Bryan Zollner yesterday in Redding:

We are here today to honor and to pay tribute to the life of Bryan Zollner. As the Chief of CAL FIRE, I considered myself fortunate to have had the opportunity to get to know Bryan. Bryan was one of CAL FIRE's best and brightest leaders. He was a bright and shining star and an important part of the future of this organization. In the last year alone, I had the opportunity to consider Bryan for promotion on three separate occasions. He was offered two of those jobs.

Last year, after an Incident Command Team meeting, I sat down at dinner with Bryan. Pam, his wife, also joined us. It was an enjoyable evening getting to know both of them. The things I remembered most about Bryan from that evening were his big, disarming smile. His smile could brighten a room, and would always make you feel at ease. He had a great sense of humor, an ability to lighten the mood in any situation. He was passionate about being a good firefighter, and he loved all the challenges that go with the job. He was very proud of CAL FIRE and our mission, and he was optimistic about our future. He had a contagious optimism.

Often, you learn more about a person's character during times of disappointment and challenge. When Bryan was not selected for the Unit Chief's position in Riverside, he was not discouraged. He remained positive, upbeat, and optimistic. Shortly thereafter, he was offered and accepted the Staff Chief of Operations position in the Northern Region.

Bryan was a proven fire ground commander. He loved being an Incident Commander. He was not afraid of a challenge. He was the deputy Incident Commander at the 2003 Cedar Fire, the largest wildfire in California's history. He was a Governor's Medal of Valor recipient. In 1998, while off-duty, he entered a burning building, at great risk to his own life, to save a young child before help could arrive.

Bryan did whatever it took to get the job done. But, Bryan was not in this job for the glory. He worked hard at being the best. He had high standards, and he lived up to those standards. He was a mentor to others, giving freely of his time and his knowledge. If getting the job done meant getting up before sunrise to drive 5 hours for a three hour meeting, Bryan did it, and he did it with a positive attitude.

It is always difficult to learn of the loss of an employee, but learning of the loss of one of your best and brightest leaders, someone who was destined to do great things is even more troubling. I had recently offered Bryan a Unit Chief's position. I was awaiting his answer when I learned of this tragic accident. His passing will affect our organization for a long time to come.

This is a difficult time for family, friends, co-workers, and the entire fire service community. When unexpected and tragic events such as this occur, it strikes at all of us. It is at times like these that we pull together. It is at times like these that we stand side by side as a fire service community and support the family of our lost firefighter...and each other.

To Bryan's wife, Pam, and his children, Alexia and Ty, and to the rest of the family, I want to express the sincere condolences of all the men and women of CAL FIRE. I want to assure you that we will be here with you today, tomorrow, and in the future. You are part of the CAL FIRE family forever. CAL FIRE is a big family. Bryan was an important part of that family.

I know that the next few days, weeks, and years ahead will be difficult for all of you. There are no words that can be said to comfort you. Just know that we are all here for you. The grieving process is natural, and necessary, to cope with the reality of this tragic loss of our loved one who gave his life in the service of others.

Bryan will live on, forever, in the hearts and memories of his family, friends, and loved ones and he will never be forgotten by his CAL FIRE family.

Regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'R. Grijalva', written in a cursive style.

Ruben Grijalva, Chief
Director