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MINISTRY OF DEFENCE

HONOURS AND AWARDS

NAVY DEPARTMENT

Whitehall, London S.W.1.
 28th November 1978.

The QUEEN has been graciously pleased to approve the following awards:

Air Force Cross

Lieutenant Glen James TILSLEY, Royal Navy.
 Lieutenant Robert George DAVIDSON, Royal Navy.
 Lieutenant Anthony James EAGLES, Royal Navy.
 Lieutenant Paul CRUDGINGTON, Royal Navy.

On the evening of Wednesday 1st February 1978 at the height of a Force 10 storm the oil drilling rig *Orion* with a maintenance crew of 33 men on board broke away from its tow and began to drift towards Guernsey where it subsequently grounded on the rocks on the west coast of the island. In response to a call from Brixham Coast-guard, Sea King 592 of 706 Naval Air Squadron was launched from the Royal Naval Air Station Culdrose at 2255, followed by Sea King 594 shortly afterwards.

Lieutenant Glen James TILSLEY, Royal Navy.
 Lieutenant Robert George DAVIDSON, Royal Navy.

Lieutenants TILSLEY and DAVIDSON were the pilot and observer respectively of Sea King 592 which arrived on the scene to find the rig hard aground. The rig's four support legs were raised and towered more than 200 feet above sea level. Waves were breaking through and over the helicopter landing platform which was the only practicable winching area and which was almost at sea level. 592 approached the rig and established a hover over the platform close to the support legs and 80 feet above sea level. In 60 knot winds, considerable turbulence and with only the rig lights for visual reference Lieutenant TILSLEY held 592 in position whilst Lieutenant DAVIDSON was lowered onto the rig's platform to effect the rescue using the double lift method. Davidson had to dispel the rig's crew's fear of the breaking waves and dense spray before he could start carrying out the rescue. In all he was winched down 11 times in the most appalling conditions to pick up 11 of the *Orion's* crew.

Having landed the survivors safely at Guernsey Airport it was found that the other Sea King had experienced a primary hydraulics failure and had had to be shut down.

Consequently 592 returned alone to the rig to attempt a further rescue. On arrival it was discovered that the rig had yawed on the rocks through nearly 180 degrees and a cross wind hover with minimal visual references, was the only possible method of approaching the platform. In the same atrocious conditions and with very small clearances for the main and tail rotors, Lieutenant Tilsley again held 592 in position whilst Lieutenant Davidson was lowered, rescuing two more survivors before further movement of the rig made hovering impossible. During the second lift Lieutenant Tilsley experienced considerable difficulty in controlling the helicopter in the violent cross wind and at one point, with Lieutenant Davidson and a survivor swinging 60 feet below the aircraft in the rescue strop, he ran out of tail rotor control and lost all visual references. Only excellent crew co-operation saved the situation. At 0240 rescue attempts were abandoned for the night.

At 0940 with weather conditions almost as bad as the previous night, Lieutenant Tilsley and his crew returned to the scene to recover the last survivors from the rig.

Throughout the rescue Lieutenant Tilsley displayed professional competence of the highest order. Moreover, as the senior aircrew officer of the two helicopters he accepted responsibility for the conduct of the entire mission, going virtually without sleep from the time he was scrambled until both helicopters returned to Culdrose some 15 hours later. He not only executed the rescue in daunting and extremely dangerous conditions but also kept himself personally at readiness throughout the rest of the night at Guernsey Airport, where he could supervise the safety of his aircraft and be available immediately if needed. His great courage, supreme flying skill and devotion to duty during this hazardous rescue were of a wholly exemplary nature.

Lieutenant Davidson also displayed professional competence of the highest order. His great courage and devotion to duty in performing a total of 17 double lift rescues under appalling conditions were in the finest traditions of the Service.

Lieutenant Anthony James EAGLES, Royal Navy.
 Lieutenant Paul CRUDGINGTON, Royal Navy.

Lieutenants Eagles and Crudgington were the pilot and observer of Sea King 594. When 592 had completed the rescue of the first 11 survivors Lieutenant Eagles moved 594 into position and, in the same atrocious conditions, Lieutenant Crudgington was lowered onto the rig's platform.