



IMO Award for Exceptional Bravery at Sea 2015

The Great Pacific Race was always supposed to be a supreme test of strength and endurance. But what four competitors didn't know was that, for them, it would turn into a gruelling test of survival that would literally place their lives in the hands of one brave rescuer.

It was with a mixture of optimism and respect for the ocean that Fraser Hart and his crew of Sam Collins, Colin Parker and James White set out from Monterrey, California, on Wednesday 18 June 2014, to row the 2,100 miles to the finish in Honolulu, Hawaii.

Yet just 77 miles and three days later, their Pacific dream was in tatters and their lives were hanging by a thread.

Soon after departure, their small rowing boat began to take on water. Hours later, with the weather deteriorating and the crew unable to stop the leak, it became clear they had to evacuate. The race support yacht was dispatched but, by now, the weather was so bad it could not reach the stricken rowing boat and its crew. There was nothing for it but to summon the US Coast Guard.

At 23.30, a rescue helicopter from San Francisco arrived on the scene. By now it was pitch dark, the wind had risen to 30 knots and 15 to 20-foot waves were crashing over the boat, which had almost submerged.

Aviation Survival Technician Christopher Leon was winched down from the helicopter into the darkness— a welcome sight for the survivors below. But as he entered the frigid waters to manoeuvre the first survivor into a rescue basket, they were immediately swept away by the swift currents. Yet with extraordinary strength and stamina, maintaining a firm grasp on the shocked survivor and swimming hard to keep them both afloat, AST Leon managed to lift the survivor into the swaying basket, enabling the flight mechanic to hoist him to safety.

The boat itself had now been swept some distance from the helicopter and was obscured by the high waves. With fuel running low, the crew decided to hoist two survivors simultaneously, directly from the sinking vessel.

The fuel level was now critical and the helicopter crew made the difficult decision to evacuate the scene and leave AST Leon and Fraser Hart, the remaining survivor behind. The helicopter's only liferaft was deployed but was instantly swept away by the gale force winds, leaving AST2 Leon and Fraser Hart no choice but to remain aboard the swamped vessel.

For more than two hours, AST Leon and Fraser Hart huddled in the tiny bow portion of the swamped vessel that remained above water, protecting each other from the breaking waves and freezing temperatures.

After delivering the first three survivors to emergency services ashore, the helicopter refuelled and flew back to the drifting rowing boat. Amid still raging seas, and in pitch darkness, the crew performed two more demanding hoists to recover the two men from the boat. Fraser Hart was finally delivered to Monterey Airport, to awaiting emergency medical services.

The aircrew returned to Air Station San Francisco, mentally and physically exhausted, after six taxing hours of flight time.

Due to his bravery, persistence and disregard for his own safety, **Aviation Survival Technician Christopher Leon** helped save four lives, and is the worthy recipient of the 2015 IMO Award for Exceptional Bravery at Sea; and his colleagues on the rescue helicopter, Lieutenant Scott Black, Lieutenant Jesse Keyser and Aviation Maintenance Technician Michael Spraggins, will receive Certificates of Commendation.

Certificates of Commendation

- **Vicente Somera** from the Philippines, crew member of the container ship **Lars Maersk**, nominated by Australia for his role in rescuing a stricken yachtsman in heavy weather in the Tasman Sea, some 70 nautical miles from the nearest land. The container ship had responded to a distress alert received by the Joint Rescue Coordination Centre, Australia, from the stricken yacht **Enya II** with a solo yachtsman on board, who ended up in the water. . The **Lars Maersk** battled for three hours to reach the man, throwing ropes and lifebelts, but he was repeatedly swept away before finally managing to grab hold of a rope. Crew member Somera, with little regards for his own safety, climbed down an accommodation ladder to grab the yachtsman, using his own body to shield him from being crushed by the swinging ladder.
- Skipper **Jean-Claude Van Rymenant and the crew** of the rescue launch SNS 129 **Notre Dame de la Garoupe**, volunteer rescuers based in the French Caribbean island of Saint Martin, were nominated by France for the rescue of a woman, her husband and a baby on board the yacht **Voyage II**, as Cyclone Gonzalo hit the island in October 2014. Winds were blowing at 55 knots, waves reached 4.5 to six metres high and visibility was down to just a few metres. The rescue crew battled wind and waves to swim across to the **Voyage II**, which had struck a reef, and managed to bring the family to safety. The crew went on to assist people from around 20 more ships and boats which had been grounded in the cyclone.
- **Father Ilia Kartoza** (posthumously), Abbot of the Monastery of Saint David the Builder, Patriarchate of Georgia, who was a passenger on the **Norman Atlantic** ro-ro ferry, which was carrying nearly 500 passengers and crew when its car deck caught fire in heavy storms during a crossing from Greece to southern Italy. Survivors reported that Father Ilia had encouraged them during the rescue and had refused opportunities to save himself. One survivor said Father Ilia gave up his place in a lifeboat to make room for a Greek woman and her baby. Despite the best efforts of rescuers, Father Ilia fell into the sea and sadly drowned. His body was found on the Italian shore, his rucksack loaded with icons. Father Ilia Kartoza was nominated by Georgia.
- **Lieutenant John Hess, Lieutenant Matthew Vanderslice, Aviation Maintenance Technician Derrick Suba and Aviation Survival Technician Evan Staph**, crew

members of the rescue helicopter CG-6033, US Coast Guard Air Station Cape Cod, were nominated by the United States for rescuing a father-son team aboard the yacht **Sedona**, who had set sail for Australia but had been stranded some 150 nautical miles from the nearest land during a powerful winter storm. Freezing temperatures, high seas and strong winds hampered efforts to reach the stricken yacht and seven difficult and dangerous hoists were needed to rescue the two men.

Letters of Commendation have been sent to the following individuals:

- **Captain Lai Zhixing**, Master of the rescue vessel **Nan Hai Jiu 111**, Nanhai Rescue Bureau, nominated by China, for a rescue during Typhoon Kalmaegi.
- The crew of the **Xinfa Hai**, nominated by China, for saving the cargo vessel **Thor Commander** near the Great Barrier Reef; and
- **Petty Officer William Hubert** and two crew members of the helicopter Rescue Tango, Detachment of 35F flotilla at Tahiti-Faa'a, French Navy, nominated by France for rescuing 10 crew members of a fishing boat.

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