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MINISTRY OF DEFENCE

HONOURS AND AWARDS

AIR FORCE DEPARTMENT

Whitehall,  
 London, SW1A 2HB.  
 8th February 1977.

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

*Bar to the Air Force Medal*

V4220298 Flight Sergeant John DONNELLY, A.F.M.,  
 Royal Air Force.

On the evening of 23rd October 1976, Flight Sergeant Donnelly was the winchman of the duty Search and Rescue helicopter crew of No. 22 Squadron at Valley, Anglesey, when a call for assistance was received from Her Majesty's Coastguard at Formby. A 30 foot yacht was in serious difficulties in heavy seas on a sand bank near Formby in the Mersey approaches. The yacht was stranded on the sand bank in 35 to 40 knot winds, in broken 6 foot seas and there was serious concern for the safety of the vessel and the lives of her crew of 3. All previous attempts by local lifeboats to render assistance to the vessel had been unsuccessful and with the onset of darkness the situation had become grave. The helicopter arrived at the reported position but the crew could not see the unlit yacht in the total darkness and in heavy rain. However, by flying very slowly along a known bearing from the Crosby Lightship the yacht was eventually sighted in the light of the helicopter landing lamp. It was clear that winching from the yacht would be very difficult. The pilot would have no hover references and a steady hover would be impossible. Moreover, the yacht was moving wildly and she was constantly changing position. A further complication lay in the yacht's rolling mast and twin backstays which would pose a considerable risk to Flight Sergeant Donnelly. However, the seriousness of the situation demanded that a rescue attempt be made. The crew agreed that a precise hover would be impossible in such conditions. Flight Sergeant Donnelly suggested that if one end of the 120 foot rope were tied to the winch hook and the other to himself he would have a means of helping to control the swing that would certainly occur during the winching sequences. Furthermore, he would be able rapidly to retrieve the empty hook after each survivor was safely aboard the helicopter. This was a new and imaginative use of the rope which proved to be the

solution to their difficult problem. The pilot positioned the helicopter over the yacht's stern and Flight Sergeant Donnelly was winched down. He passed the rope to the survivors and was hauled aboard the yacht. Then by paying out the rope which was still attached to the winch hook, he made it possible for the helicopter to stand off in a safer hover position while he briefed the survivors. With the first survivor safely in the rescue strop, Flight Sergeant Donnelly signalled the helicopter to the overhead position and by pulling in on the rope he grasped the winch hook and attached the first survivor to it. A massive swing occurred as the survivor was being winched in but Flight Sergeant Donnelly was able to reduce markedly the oscillation by hauling in the rope. The remaining 2 survivors were winched into the helicopter in a similar manner. Flight Sergeant Donnelly did not have the benefit of the rope to stabilise the swing during his lift and the winch operator was forced to place him in the water to damp out the oscillation before recovering him to the helicopter. The survivors cold but uninjured were landed at Speke Airport. Flight Sergeant Donnelly displayed outstanding professionalism and his imaginative use of the rope was the single most important factor in this extremely difficult rescue operation. Without such ingenuity the rescue would have been impossible. However, the concept had not been proved in training, and furthermore, in disconnecting himself from the winch hook Flight Sergeant Donnelly placed his own life at risk, for if he had had to let go of the rope there would have been no means of retrieving him or the survivors. Nevertheless, Flight Sergeant Donnelly, realising that there was no other way to effect the rescue, coolly accepted the risk and in doing so displayed personal courage well beyond that which could be expected of him. Flight Sergeant Donnelly's determined and brave actions were in the highest tradition of the Royal Air Force.

*Queen's Commendation for Valuable Service in the Air*

Flight Lieutenant John Shearme GARNONS-WILLIAMS  
 (2619640), Royal Air Force.

For his action on 23rd October 1976, as pilot of a Wessex helicopter, sent to rescue three people from a yacht in serious difficulties, stranded on a sand bank in the Mersey approaches, in 35 to 40 knot winds and in broken 6 foot seas. It was dark, with driving rain. The violently moving yacht was unlit and could only be seen by the helicopter landing lamp. Flight Lieutenant Garnons-Williams ensured the success of the rescue by his cool courage and judgement and by his professionalism.

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