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MINISTRY OF DEFENCE

HONOURS AND AWARDS

CENTRAL CHANCERY OF
 THE ORDERS OF KNIGHTHOOD

St. James's Palace, London S.W.1.
 8th March 1977.

The QUEEN has been graciously pleased to approve the award of the George Medal to the undermentioned:

Major Paul Nicholas COOKE (445823), 10th Princess Mary's Own Gurkha Rifles.

Major Cooke was a member of the six-strong British Vulcan Expedition reconnaissance team which went to investigate three volcanoes in Ecuador in August-September 1976.

Whilst climbing at 16,000 ft. on the first of these—the 17,500 foot Mount Sangay—the volcano erupted, showering all six climbers with hot volcanic rocks and knocking them from their footholds on the snow. Cooke, with the other five, slid 1,500 feet down the smooth, 35° slopes of the mountain. It was mid-day on 12th August 1976.

Although struck on the head and leg, Cooke had been least badly wounded of all and immediately took over control of the team. Two men were sent 4,000 feet down the mountain to the base camp to organise help and Cooke stayed with three survivors who had severe head injuries.

All afternoon Cooke tended the wounded. One died quite soon; the remaining two he placed in survival bags

and administered to their needs. As night fell he lay on the snow clutching the survival bags and flashing a torch to mark his position. The cold was intense and sleep virtually impossible.

Shortly after dawn he tied the survivors together and set off for the base camp—becoming as lost in a maze of near-vertical-sided ravines as had been the two who had gone down the previous day.

He reached camp in an enfeebled state, but immediately began to clean and dress the wounds of the two survivors now there. Some porters meanwhile went to fetch in the two men on the mountain, but one died on the way down. The other he placed in the drier of the two tents and began to clean, warm and feed him. The weather now deteriorated, the porters left, and Cooke, alone, struggled to prepare hot food and keep the wounded alive.

Two days of lashing rain and high winds ensued. Food supplies ran out, the survivors' wounds were becoming infected and Cooke realised he would have to try to reach the camp of a French expedition which he knew to have been placed a mile to the north, across a river.

But the river, once placid, was now swollen and impassable. Cooke nevertheless, secured a rope from his waist to a large boulder and waded in. He was bowled over by the force of icy water. After a second attempt he thought it more prudent to return. Rescue came later that night.

Major Cooke acted with the greatest selflessness and courage to keep the injured going throughout the five days which followed the eruption.

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