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MINISTRY OF DEFENCE

HONOURS AND AWARDS

AIR FORCE DEPARTMENT

Whitehall, London, SW1A 2HB.
6th December 1977.

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

Air Force Medal

J4271341 Flight Sergeant Robert Alan GATRELL, Royal Air Force.

On 4th September 1977 Flight Sergeant Gatrell of "C" Flight No. 22 Squadron, who has been stationed at Royal Air Force Valley since September 1976, was winchman of the duty search and rescue helicopter crew scrambled to go to the assistance of a 26 feet bermuda sloop reported lost in heavy seas and gale force winds. The weather was atrocious with the wind blowing at 50 knots and gusting to 60 knots, the cloud base was 200 feet and lower in heavy rain and the average visibility was 400 metres. The sea state was severe with a violent swell of 35 feet. After a search lasting more than an hour the sloop was located broadside on to the wind, tossing and rolling badly in the heavy seas. A 40 feet high mast, running rigging and twin backstays made a winching operation even more hazardous since it reduced the area available for landing the winchman to some 2 feet square. The skipper of the sloop was concerned about the condition of a woman member of his crew who was injured and suffering from exposure, severe sickness, shock and exhaustion. It was decided to attempt to rescue her. In spite of the dangers of the operation Flight Sergeant Gatrell had no hesitation about undertaking it. The crew discussed the method of winching and agreed that he should be lowered to the stern of the yacht then make his way around the side under the backstays and into the small aft cockpit. On the first attempt Flight Sergeant Gatrell reached the stern rail but the yacht fell away about 30 feet into a deep trough and he had to be moved swiftly away to avoid being struck as the yacht rose on the next wave. A second run was made and Flight Sergeant Gatrell was positioned as before. Although alternately struck by the rigging and submerged in the wave

crests he succeeded in reaching the cockpit. He had a split second in which to place the strop around the woman before they were both pulled out of the cockpit by the boat's falling into another deep trough. Flight Sergeant Gatrell was struck on the head, arm and leg by the hull and rigging, his arm was severely bruised, his visor shattered and his helmet damaged. Nevertheless he was able to prevent any injury occurring to the survivor. Flight Sergeant Gatrell displayed determination, skill and courage of the highest order. He was undeterred by the obvious dangers of winching in such hazardous conditions and coolly accepted the high risk of injury to himself in order to effect a successful rescue. Flight Sergeant Gatrell's resourceful and brave actions were in the highest traditions of the Royal Air Force.

Queen's Commendation for Valuable Service in the Air
Flight Lieutenant John Campbell STIRLING (507979), Royal Air Force.

For his sound professional judgment as a pilot and his inspiring leadership in the face of danger during the rescue on 4th September 1977 of an injured woman from a small yacht adrift and out of control in heavy seas and gale force winds. Weather conditions were atrocious and winching was made extremely hazardous by the high seas running and the violent and unpredictable behaviour of the yacht's mast and top hamper. Flight Lieutenant Stirling's outstanding captaincy and consummate skill as a pilot made possible the successful outcome of a difficult and dangerous rescue attempt.

Flight Lieutenant Christopher GIBBONS (4233294), Royal Air Force.

For his coolness, courage and outstanding professionalism on 4th September 1977 when he was navigator of a search and rescue helicopter sent to the assistance of a small yacht, adrift and of which the exact position was unknown. Weather conditions were atrocious but his outstanding navigation resulted in location of the craft after more than an hour's searching. Flight Lieutenant Gibbons's judgment in control of the winch then enabled the winchman to board the yacht in very adverse conditions and effect safely the rescue of an injured and distressed crew member.

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