

Motor Vessel Finneagle transmitted a Mayday message from its position fifty miles north west of Orkney. The vessel had suffered an explosion and was on fire amidships, with twenty-two persons including three women and two children on board. The first standby had already been scrambled and although 'D' Flight has no requirement to maintain a second standby helicopter during the hours of darkness, it was decided to assemble an off duty crew to assist. Flight Lieutenant Lakey volunteered to captain the second crew and took off at 2350 hours to go to the assistance of the stricken vessel. The conditions at the scene of the incident were appalling, with a mean wind speed of fifty knots gusting to seventy knots and a very high sea state giving wave heights of sixty feet. The first Sea King had been forced to abandon its attempts to put a line on the vessel's deck and a civilian S61 helicopter, after making several similar attempts, was also forced to withdraw from the scene. The Finneagle's captain had assembled the crew and passengers on the vessel's foredeck. He was forced to maintain an into wind course because of the severe weather conditions and to prevent the fire and resulting fumes from reaching those on board. Flight Lieutenant Lakey had no choice other than to attempt to position his helicopter for winching from the vessel's port bow despite the fact that this would require him to manoeuvre very close to a foremast and a high forward superstructure. The Finneagle had lost electrical power and the only illumination available was from the helicopter's own lights and the glow of the fire. An attempt was made to lower the winchman on to the foredeck but because the vessel was pitching and rolling extremely violently, Flight Lieutenant Lakey's efforts to maintain a steady hover caused the winchman to swing through a dangerously wide arc. Flight Lieutenant Lakey therefore decided to employ the Hi-line winching technique which obviates the necessity for the helicopter to maintain an absolutely precise overhead position. The prevailing conditions were so bad that it took twenty minutes to achieve an accurate positioning of the Hi-line on the Finneagle's deck. Two rescue strops were attached to the winch hook and as the first survivors were about to be lifted a massive wave pitched the ship so close to the aircraft that immediate evasive action was necessary. By his exceptional skill not only the aircraft but also two female survivors, each clutching a child, were saved. After lifting eight survivors Flight Lieutenant Lakey learned that the vessel's cargo was highly dangerous and included a consignment of carbide. The vessel was well on fire, with intermittent explosions taking place, and the remaining fourteen survivors were experiencing difficulty in breathing due to the fumes from the burning cargo. At this moment the Finneagle's captain radioed that he considered the vessel to be in imminent danger of sinking. Flight Lieutenant Lakey rapidly assessed the situation and having discussed it together with his crew decided to carry on with the rescue, undeterred by the obvious dangers. The remaining fourteen crew members were then successfully winched to safety, despite the necessity of renewing and repositioning the Hi-line twice during the winching period. Continuing to display inestimable skill, Flight Lieutenant Lakey flew his aircraft to safety with twenty seven persons on board. Although he had been on duty for over nineteen hours Flight Lieutenant Lakey, with outstanding coolness, courage and exceptional flying skill remained in a close hover position with the violently pitching and rolling vessel for a period of one and three quarter hours. He inspired and led his crew by his magnificent example throughout the operation, displaying personal gallantry in the very highest traditions of the Service.

Whitehall, London SW1A 2HB
14th April 1981

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

Air Force Cross

Flight Lieutenant Thomas William McRoberts CAMPBELL (4231142), Royal Air Force.

Flight Lieutenant Campbell is a radar and winch Operator of "D" Flight 202 Squadron at Royal Air Force Lossiemouth. During the night of the 2nd October 1980 the captain of the Motor Vessel Finneagle broadcast a Mayday message from a position fifty miles north-west of Orkney reporting that the vessel was on fire amidships

and requesting immediate assistance. There were twenty-two persons on board the Finneagle and the "D" Flight first standby helicopter was scrambled to attempt their rescue. Realising the seriousness of the incident and considering the likely number of people to be rescued, Flight Lieutenant Campbell assembled a second helicopter crew from off-duty personnel and volunteered to join it himself as the Radar and Winch Operator. At the scene of the incident, the crew were advised that the first Sea King had been forced to abandon its rescue attempt, due to the prevailing conditions. The wind was blowing at a mean speed of fifty knots with gusts of seventy knots and there was a very high sea state giving wave heights of sixty feet. The captain of the Finneagle had assembled his crew and passengers on the foredeck and was maintaining an into-wind course in order to give them the maximum possible protection from the effects of the fire and its associated fumes. A civilian S61 helicopter which had been scrambled from its Sumburgh base in an attempt to make winching contact with the vessel had also been forced to abandon its rescue attempts. Together with his aircraft captain and other crew members, Flight Lieutenant Campbell decided to try to lower the winchman on to the stricken vessel. The only feasible winching position was off the vessel's port bow requiring a constant and highly accurate hover to be maintained in accordance with Flight Lieutenant Campbell's verbal directions. Because of the very close proximity of the vessel's high forward superstructure and foremast and the vessel's violent motion, it proved impossible to place the winchman on deck and he was recovered to the cabin. The helicopter crew then decided to adopt the Hi-line winching technique which does not require the helicopter to maintain a precise overhead position. From his position at the rear of the helicopter Flight Lieutenant Campbell was fully aware of the hazardous nature of this undertaking. Below and slightly to his right the vessel continued to burn fiercely with intermittent explosions, whilst the foremast followed an erratic path close to, and frequently at the same height, as the rear fuselage of the helicopter. Flight Lieutenant Campbell directed his captain with unflagging determination for twenty minutes before it was possible to position the Hi-line on the Finneagle's deck. With two rescue strops on the winch hook the first survivors were just about to be winched up when a huge wave pitched the ship perilously close to the aircraft. Whilst calling to his captain to take evasive action he skillfully operated the winch thereby saving the first survivors, both women, each of whom was clutching a child. Winching continued until eight survivors had been lifted safely from the vessel. Then it was learned that the Finneagle's cargo was highly dangerous and included a consignment of carbide. The vessel was well on fire and the remaining fourteen survivors on board were experiencing difficulty in breathing due to the fumes from the burning cargo. At this moment the Finneagle's captain radioed that he considered the vessel to be in imminent danger of sinking. However, the rescue was continued, regardless of the obvious dangers, and Flight Lieutenant Campbell resumed his tasks of talking his pilot into the overhead position and supervising the stowage of survivors. The remaining fourteen survivors were successfully winched to safety, despite the fact that the Hi-line required renewing and repositioning twice during the winching period. With complete disregard for his personal safety Flight Lieutenant Campbell ignored the effects of the fire's intense heat, the intermittent explosions and the possibility that he was breathing dangerous fumes during the entire winching operation which lasted for a period of one and three quarter hours. Regardless of the imminent danger to his own life and by his skill, courage and determination, Flight Lieutenant Campbell carried out a vital role in the rescuing of twenty-two people from a perilous situation. His gallantry was in the highest traditions of the Service.

Air Force Medal

D8140974 Sergeant Richard John BRAGG, Royal Air Force.

Sergeant Bragg is a winchman of "D" Flight Number 202 Squadron at Royal Air Force Lossiemouth. During the night of the 2nd October 1980 the Motor Vessel Finneagle transmitted a Mayday message from its position fifty miles north west of Orkney. The vessel had suffered an explosion and was on fire amidships with twenty-two persons, including three women and two children on board. Although "D" Flight has no requirement to maintain a second standby during the hours of darkness,