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HONOURS AND AWARDS

NAVY DEPARTMENT

CENTRAL CHANCERY OF THE ORDER OF KNIGHTHOOD

St. James's Palace, London S.W.1.
1st December 1987

The QUEEN has been graciously pleased to approve the award of the Queen's Gallantry Medal to the undermentioned:

Leading Aircrewman Ian PENHALIGON, D153773Y.

On 6th August 1986, Leading Aircrewman Penhaligon was the duty diver of a dedicated Search and Rescue Wessex scrambled to assist two boys swept into the sea from Mullion Harbour wall.

Weather conditions on the scene were appalling: the cloud base was frequently 300 feet, low visibility, torrential rain with sea state 6, wind gusting to 50 knots. Both sea and wind were bearing directly against the harbour wall throwing waves to a height of 20 feet into the harbour, beyond where a heavy and confused ground swell was running. Quickly establishing that one of the boys was still missing within the confines of the harbour, Leading Aircrewman Penhaligon immediately prepared for an underwater search. Fully aware that the aircraft could not remain in close proximity because of the severe conditions, with great courage he dropped from the aircraft into the harbour.

After an initial dive of 3 minutes, Leading Aircrewman Penhaligon surfaced to indicate that underwater visibility was zero. However, he continued with the sub-surface search for some 20 minutes in extremely dangerous conditions, surfacing periodically to re-establish his position and to indicate that he was safe. Shortly after, a Coastguard patrol sighted an item of the boy's clothing washing in and out of a sea-cave outside the harbour. This cave lay at the base of a steep chimney-like gully. Conditions in the cave can only be described as a maelstrom with waves breaking to a height of almost 70 feet. Because of the wind direction, the aircraft was forced to reverse into the gully under the calm and expert direction of the aircrewman. With the tail rotor within feet of the cliff Leading Aircrewman Penhaligon was lowered to just above wave height. Despite severe buffeting of wind and waves, he guided the pilot by radio link to control the aircraft movement to a position from where he could see into the cave. This exacting manoeuvring continued for almost 10 minutes.

Subsequently, it was reported from the harbour that a body had been washed ashore and once again Leading Aircrewman Penhaligon was winched down to assess the situation. He immediately started external heart massage, placed the boy on a portable ventilator and called for rapid evacuation. The casualty was stretcher lifted with the diver who, incredibly, managed to continue heart massage from his double lift harness during the ascent. Unfortunately the boy was later pronounced dead.

Throughout this protracted rescue, Leading Aircrewman Penhaligon unselfishly exposed himself to severe danger. He was neither attached to the helicopter by wire nor was there a back-up diver in the helicopter. His exceptional fearlessness and great professional expertise reflect the highest traditions of the Service.

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