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TUESDAY, 10TH SEPTEMBER 1996

MINISTRY OF DEFENCE

HONOURS AND AWARDS

## AIR FORCE DEPARTMENT

Whitehall, London SW1A 2HB  
10th September 1996

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

### *Bar to the Air Force Cross*

Flight Lieutenant Henry William POTTLE (4233536).

### ROYAL AIR FORCE

On 16th November 1995, Flight Lieutenant Pottle was the duty pilot on C Flight, Number 22 Squadron. At 0345 hours the Irish Coastguard requested assistance with the rescue of the crew of a fishing vessel, which had gone aground north of Dublin, in heavy seas and gale force winds. Despite neither the Wessex being equipped nor the crew trained for night rescues over water, Pottle considered the vessel's crew to be in such immediate peril that he should attempt a rescue despite the risks; the aircraft was scrambled at 0415 hours.

Using the aircraft floodlights, the stricken vessel was located on the rocks adjacent to the harbour; the situation was desperate. A lifeboat was in attendance but was powerless to help. Pounding seas had broken the vessel in half, with the stern section listing severely, and being smashed against the rocks. Seas were breaking over the deck, threatening to capsize the boat at any time, and a sailor was trapped in a wheelhouse porthole.

Flight Lieutenant Pottle and his crew calmly and swiftly assessed the situation and, despite the danger to aircraft and crew, decided to commence winching operations. Pottle knew that failure to maintain a steady, precise hover would certainly result in the winch cable parting or being cut if it snagged on one of the many obstructions covering the deck. Moreover, he was also acutely aware that the loss of the winch cable would mean almost certain death for his winchman and the survivor as, separated from the aircraft, they would have been swept overboard onto the rocks. Nevertheless, Pottle demonstrated outstanding skill and determination by maintaining an accurate hover over the vessel despite the strong buffeting wind and the limited visibility of hover references caused

by the sea spray. Eventually, the winchman was able to secure the sailor in the rescue strop and recover him to safety.

Throughout the rescue Flight Lieutenant Pottle conducted himself with outstanding calm, and with exceptional determination and courage, in the best traditions of the Royal Air Force Search and Rescue Force.

### *Air Force Cross*

Flight Sergeant Alan George FALCONER (L8209285).

### ROYAL AIR FORCE

On 16th November 1995, Flight Sergeant Falconer was the duty winchman on C Flight, Number 22 Squadron. At 0345 hours the Irish Coastguard requested assistance with the rescue of the crew of a fishing vessel which had gone aground at Howth, north of Dublin. The weather in the area was appalling, with gale force winds and heavy seas. The situation was rapidly deteriorating, and the fishing vessel was beginning to break up with one member of the crew still trapped on board.

The crew was airborne at 0415 hours, and located the stricken vessel thirty minutes later using the aircraft floodlights. The vessel had broken in two, with the sections one hundred metres apart. The stern was listing severely to the port, and was being pounded against the rocks by the heavy seas. The deck was awash and rolling in the breakers. A sailor could be seen trapped in a porthole on the starboard side of the wheelhouse, and he was in imminent danger of drowning. The local lifeboat was in attendance but was powerless to help. The crew decided that they had no alternative but to extract the sailor by winch. However, there was a real danger of the winch cable being entangled with the numerous obstructions strung over the deck, and the vessel might have capsized at any moment. Either eventuality would have led to the winch cable being cut, leaving the winchman to fend for himself. Totally disregarding the personal danger, Flight Sergeant Falconer elected to be lowered to the deck. With waves breaking over and battering him, and with extraordinary courage and great coolness, Falconer managed to extract the sailor from the porthole, secure him in the rescue strop and lift him to safety. Given the atrocious weather conditions there is no doubt that

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this seaman owes his life to Flight Sergeant Falconer's outstanding skill, bravery and fierce determination.

Flight Sergeant Falconer's example of unselfishness and gallantry were of the highest order and in the best traditions of the Royal Air Force.

*Queen's Commendation for Bravery in the Air*

Flight Lieutenant Patrick Anthony THIRKELL (802764).

ROYAL AIR FORCE

For his outstanding display of courage, determination and professional skill during the rescue of a sailor trapped in a wheelhouse porthole of a fishing vessel.

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