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TUESDAY, 8TH APRIL 1997

MINISTRY OF DEFENCE

## HONOURS AND AWARDS

## ROYAL NAVY

Whitehall, London S.W.1

8 April 1997

The Queen has been graciously pleased to approve the award of the Air Force Cross to the undermentioned:

## AIR FORCE CROSS

Acting Leading Air Engineering Mechanic (M)  
Nicholas Gary OWEN D207898F

On 7 January 1996 HMS NORTHUMBERLAND was tasked to proceed to the aid of the Romanian cargo vessel COVASNA wallowing in heavy seas 330 miles south west of Cape Finisterre. HMS NORTHUMBERLAND arrived at the scene at 0500 to find COVASNA listing 40 degrees to starboard and being lashed by 10 metre seas. The master requested his crew be transferred from the COVASNA to NORTHUMBERLAND and a Lynx helicopter was launched for an emergency lifesaving mission. After a reconnaissance run, it was decided to attempt a winch transfer from a very small area on the port quarter of COVASNA. As winchman, it was OWEN's job to be lowered on the wire to effect the rescue.

The 10-12 metre swell and wind speeds averaging 45-50 knots were causing COVASNA to rise and fall up

to 50 feet. As OWEN was lowered for the first winching, he almost came in contact with the superstructure of the violently pitching vessel. This method was assessed as too dangerous and OWEN was recovered. A 5-man liferaft was lowered but was unfortunately lost during inflation by the cold and tired COVASNA crew. OWEN was again lowered with a length of rope to retrieve the liferaft. Once in the water OWEN, oblivious of his own safety, unhooked himself from the wire so that he could enter the liferaft to recover the drogue. This done, and once again attached to the wire, he was raised out of the liferaft holding the recovery line. The recovery line became tangled in a squall and the liferaft broke free; OWEN was retrieved into the aircraft and the liferaft option discarded. Once-only suits and lifejackets were lowered to the 5 crew members and a rescue attempted, using a double-lift technique. OWEN courageously tried to reach the first man but soon found that he was in danger of drowning, 40 feet clear of the water at one moment and under it the next. Double lifting was proving too dangerous and OWEN was recovered to the aircraft. The 5 COVASNA crew were finally rescued using a single lift technique.

Despite this being his first ever rescue since training, OWEN did not hesitate when faced with a highly dangerous situation. He was in grave danger of striking COVASNA's superstructure but remained undaunted and in detaching himself from the winch wire to enter the sea in a 10 metre swell and 50 knots of wind, he demonstrated complete disregard for his own safety.