

## THE NEW ZEALAND BRAVERY DECORATION (N.Z.B.D.)

### Jason William HILL

Date of action: 9 December 2019

Date of award: 26 October 2022

#### *Citation*

On Monday 9 December 2019, at 2.11pm, an explosive volcanic eruption occurred on Whakaari/White Island in the Bay of Plenty, shooting a massive column of steam into the air and blowing a wave of hot rock, ash, and acid gas across the crater floor. 47 people were present on the island at the time of the eruption, which resulted in the deaths of 22 people, either in the explosion or from injuries sustained. A further 25 people suffered moderate to significant injuries, with the majority needing intensive care for severe burns. Dispatch orders from the New Zealand's Air Ambulance Service diverted rescue and paramedic helicopters to Whakatāne, as landing on the island was deemed too dangerous post eruption.

Mr Jason Hill and Mr Tom Storey of heavy lift and aerial support helicopter company Kāhu NZ became aware of the eruption and took off from Whakatāne at 2.50pm with the intention of assisting the injured on the island. They flew by the White Island visitors boat 'Phoenix' on its way back to Whakatāne. They hovered by the Phoenix, with the offer of airlifting the worst injured. After learning that the Phoenix would soon receive support from a coast guard boat with paramedics onboard, Hill and Storey were radioed by Mr Mark Law, CEO of Kāhu NZ who had flown ahead and landed on the island around 3.12pm, requesting they join him to assist on the ground.

With acidic air a present issue for the helicopter engines, the pilots left their engines on and rotors turning after landing to improve their chances of taking off again. After Mr Storey and Mr Hill had landed, Mr Law briefed them on what he had observed by scouting ahead to the crater, locating 20 casualties. With gas masks on, Law, Storey and Hill waded through shin-deep drifts of ash to the casualties.

The casualties were in various positions, covered in thick ash. Ash fell on the men as they moved about and the acidic air made breathing difficult. The crew moved from person to person, checking on the casualties who had extensive burns and were in various stages of consciousness. Mr Hill ran back to the landing platform and flew his helicopter up to the crater for casualties to be loaded onboard by the crew. He then lifted off with the maximum of five casualties aboard his helicopter at 3.48pm and flew them to Whakatāne Hospital.

The efforts of the commercial helicopter pilots and crew resulted in 20 casualties being found on the crater floor, with 12 injured being removed by the commercial helicopters over the course of 40 minutes, and eight deceased repositioned for later recovery. Of the 12 people helicoptered out, 10 died.