

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

### Graeme HOPCROFT

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 Tim Barrow, director and chief helicopter pilot of Rotorua-based scenic flight company Volcanic Air, became aware of the eruption at 2.20pm. Mr Graeme Hopcroft lifted off with Mr Barrow from Rotorua at 3.05pm and contacted the pilot of a fixed wing aircraft operating in the area, who was relaying messages from Mr Mark Law of aerial support helicopter company Kāhu NZ from the crater of the island, providing an idea of what to expect when they arrived.

The Kāhu NZ crew had already begun loading casualties into their helicopters prior to the arrival of Mr Hopcroft and Mr Barrow. Hopcroft and Barrow touched down and made their way through the ash to assist. With acidic air a present issue for the helicopter engines, the pilots left their engines on and rotors turning once landed to improve their chances of taking off again.

The casualties were covered in thick ash, had extensive burns and were in various stages of consciousness. Ash fell on the men as they moved about and the acidic air made breathing difficult. Hopcroft and Barrow carried a man on their shoulders back to their helicopter, before returning to help casualties onto Mr Law's helicopter. Mr Law then took off with five casualties, flying to Whakatāne Hospital.

Mr Sam Jones and Mr Callum Mill arrived on another Volcanic Air helicopter. Mr Barrow, who had one casualty onboard, repositioned his helicopter for Mr Hopcroft, Mr Mill, and one of the Kāhu NZ crew to load one further injured person onboard. Mr Hopcroft and Mr Barrow then took off to Whakatāne.

The crews had faced difficulty in loading the casualties, who had no strength to lift themselves, into the high-level doorways of the commercial helicopters, requiring a combined effort from the rescuers.

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.