

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

Sam Peter JONES

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.

Two helicopters from heavy lift and aerial support helicopter company Kāhu NZ had flown to the island to provide assistance to those caught in the eruption. The Kāhu NZ crew had begun loading casualties into their helicopters prior to the arrival of another helicopter from Rotorua-based scenic flight company Volcanic Air.

The combined crews of Kāhu NZ and Volcanic Air worked in shin-deep ash drifts to reach the casualties, who were covered in thick ash, had extensive burns and were in various stages of consciousness. Ash fell on the crews as they moved about and the acidic air made breathing difficult. The Kāhu NZ helicopters lifted off, each with five casualties onboard, flying to Whakatāne Hospital.

Mr Sam Jones and Mr Callum Mill arrived on the island in the last Volcanic Air helicopter. They assisted with loading an injured person into the other Volcanic Air helicopter, which then took off to Whakatāne.

With acidic air a present issue for the helicopter engines, the pilots had left their engines on and rotors turning once landed to improve their chances of taking off again. 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.

Mr Jones, Mr Mill and one of the Kāhu NZ crew stayed on the island and undertook another sweep to ensure there were no remaining survivors. They then carefully grouped the deceased closer together, with the intention of retrieving the bodies when the helicopters returned. A St John rescue helicopter arrived and a report was given of the survivors and deceased who had been located.

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.