

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

### **Thomas Sandford (Tom) STOREY**

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 Tom Storey and Mr Jason Hill 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, Storey and Hill 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, Storey, Law 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 Storey and Mr Law loaded casualties onto Mr Hill's helicopter, who departed for Whakatāne.

Mr Law then retrieved his helicopter and flew up to the crater while Mr Storey readied the next five casualties. Mr Storey picked up a young woman, who died before he reached the helicopter with her.

As Mr Law and Mr Storey were lifting casualties onto Law's helicopter, two helicopters from the Rotorua-based scenic flight company Volcanic Air landed on the island and the four crew made their way through the ash to assist. Mr Law then took off with five casualties, flying to Whakatāne Hospital.

One of the Volcanic Air helicopters, which had one casualty onboard, was repositioned for Mr Storey and two other crew to load one further injured person onboard, before taking 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.

Mr Storey, and two Volcanic Air 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. Wherever they found phones, Mr Storey placed them with the deceased to help with identification. A rescue helicopter with St John personnel eventually 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.